

BUILD THE HOUSE OF GOD!

An introduction to the Book of Ezra

Text: 2 Chronicles 1-36; Ezra 1:1-4

Introduction:

1. In this introductory message we will seek to do a brief overview of the Book of Ezra that will help prepare us for a fruitful study of the Book.
2. Ezra is one of the historical Books of the Old Testament and deals with the end of the Babylonian captivity with the return of the exiles to the land. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther record God's dealings with the Jews after their going into captivity and then returning to Palestine. God raised up three prophets among His people during the post-exilic period: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. So there are six post-captivity (restoration) books in the Old Testament – Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.
3. A suggested outline for Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther is:
 - Ezra – Restoration.
 - Nehemiah – Reconstruction.
 - Esther – Preservation.
4. Denis Lyle notes, "There are two "exodus" movements in the Old Testament. The first was from Egypt to Canaan and the second was from Babylon to Canaan – with almost a millennium lying between the two events. Both these exiles and returns were the subject of prophecy, the first in Genesis 15:13-14 and the second in Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10-11."
5. M.K. Hall in the "What the Bible Teaches" commentary series provides a helpful introductory overview: "The book of Ezra continues the history of the nation of Israel by following on from the immediately preceding Second Chronicles. The last two verses of that book (36.22-23) are then virtually repeated in the opening verses of the book of Ezra (1:1-3). Ezra having closed his book (10:44), the account of the nation's history is then continued in the book of Nehemiah, which is the last historical book in the Old Testament. The events of the book of Esther, which follows Nehemiah in the English Bible, fall chronologically between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra. Old Testament history closes with Nehemiah and was followed by the 400 years of the Intertestamental Period during which there was no further Divine written revelation. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Jews in Jerusalem and Judah with positive results as Ezra records in his book (5:1; 6:14). It is generally agreed that the prophecy of Malachi was given in the time of Nehemiah."
6. We will consider the introductory material under 3 main headings:

I. THE PENMAN OF THE BOOK

A. The Title of the Writer

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1. The Book bears the title of its author – Ezra. The name ‘Ezra’ means “help, aid”. Indeed, Ezra would be wonderfully use of God to be a spiritual help and aid to the people of God.
2. Ezra was a descendent of Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5) and was therefore of the priesthood. In Babylon, he was not able to fulfill his priestly function without the temple but he gave himself to the study of the Word.
3. Robert Boyd in his “World’s Bible Handbook” provides a helpful summary of the writer of Ezra. It is “generally accepted by Jews and Christians that Ezra was the author of the book which bears his name. He was a descendant of Hilkiah, the high priest (7:1), who found a copy of the Law during the reign of Josiah (2 Chr. 34:14). As a priest, Ezra was not able to serve during the captivity, but gave his time to a study of the Word of God – “a ready scribe in the Law of Moses” (7:6). He was a great revivalist and reformer. He was the writer of the Chronicles. It is also suggested that he wrote Psalm 119 which exalts the Word of God itself. He also organized the synagogue, was the founder of the order of Scribes, helped settle the canon of Scripture, and arranged the Psalms.”

B. The Time of the Writing

1. Ezra likely wrote Ezra sometime after his arrival in Jerusalem so an approximate date for the writing of Ezra would be 458 B.C. (H. Richard Hester)
2. Ezra is also the likely author of the Chronicles (compare similarity of Ezra 1:1-3 & 2 Chr. 36:22-23).

C. The Text of the Writing

1. The Book of Ezra is similar to Daniel in that it contains some sections in the Aramaic language.
2. M.K. Hall summarizes, “The Book of Ezra shares with the Book of Daniel the distinction that some sections of these books were written in the Aramaic language, sometimes referred to as Chaldee. The Aramaic passages in Ezra are 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26. These sections largely, but not entirely, consist of letters written to and by the Persian kings, Darius and Artaxerxes.”

D. The Testimony of the Writer

If there was one word that could summarize the life and character of Ezra it would be the word ‘Scripture’. The reason God used Him so mightily was because of his relationship to God and God’s Word. Ezra was:

1. A Studier of the Scriptures (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:”
 - a. The word ‘ready’ means “skillful, diligent”.

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- b. 2 Timothy 2:15 “**Study** to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Interestingly the word ‘study’ here literally means “to give diligence, make haste, exert one’s self, be earnest”.
 - c. Do you want to be used of God? Be a Studious Scripture-soaked Saint!
 - d. True success is determined by our relationship to the Scriptures. There is much talk about ‘success’ today but interestingly, the only time the word appears in the Scriptures is in Joshua 1:8 – “This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good **success.**”
2. A Lover of the Scriptures (Ezra 7:10). “For Ezra had prepared his heart to **seek the law of the LORD...**” Ezra studied God’s Word diligently because He loved the Word of God and most importantly the God who gave the Word. “If you love God for who He is, you will love Him for what He says.”
 3. A Doer of the Scriptures (Ezra 7:10). For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and **to do it...**” Ezra was not just a hearer of the Word, he was a Doer of the Word (James 1:22-25).
 4. A Teacher of the Scriptures (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.”
 - a. Ezra had a zeal to impart the truths of God’s Word to others. Each believer seek the learn the Word of God, not only for their own benefit but that they might be a channel of blessing to others also.
 - b. Hebrews 5:12-14 “For when for the time **ye ought to be teachers**, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”
 5. A Defender of the Scriptures (Ezra 9-10). Ezra was prepared to take a stand for the Word of God against the compromise and disobedience that was taking place amongst God’s people. Jude 1:3 “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and

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exhort *you* that ye should **earnestly contend for the faith** which was once delivered unto the saints.”

II. THE PERIOD OF THE BOOK

Let's consider a number of background facts so we can contextualize the Book of Ezra in Biblical History:

A. The Captivity of Judah (2 Chr. 36:1-23; See also 2 Kings 24-25)

Ezra deals with the conclusion of the 70-year Babylonian Captivity and the beginning of the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. It follows on chronologically from the last chapter of 2 Chronicles. Consider four truths about the captivity:

1. The Stages of the Captivity (Vs. 1-20)

The captivity of Judah transpired in 3 stages with three deportations of Judah:

a. Stage 1: Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim (Vs. 1-8; 2 Kings 23:6-24:7)

- i. This was in 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land and took away Jehoiakim and the leading nobles (See Dan. 1:1-4).
- ii. He also took some of the temple vessels (compare with Vs. 10 & 18-19; Also, Daniel 1:1-2).
- iii. Daniel and his three godly friends were among those taken in this first raid. Daniel 1:1-4 “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god. And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring *certain* of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes; Children in whom *was* no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as *had* ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.”

b. Stage 2: Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiachin (Vs. 8-10; 2 Kings 24:8-17)

- i. This deportation took place in 597 B.C. when Babylon came and besieged Jerusalem for a second time.

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- ii. This time the Babylonians took Jehoiachin, his mother, the palace officials and the majority of the remaining population, leaving only the poorest in the land.
- iii. 2 Kings 24:8-17 explains this second deportation in detail:

(8) “Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. And his mother's name was Nehushta, the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. (9) And he did *that which* was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father had done. (10) At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. (11) And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, and his servants did besiege it. (12) And Jehoiachin the king of Judah went out to the king of Babylon, he, and his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his officers: and the king of Babylon took him in the eighth year of his reign. (13) And he carried out thence all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the LORD, as the LORD had said. (14) And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, *even* ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land. (15) And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon, and the king's mother, and the king's wives, and his officers, and the mighty of the land, *those* carried he into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. (16) And all the men of might, *even* seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths a thousand, all *that were* strong *and* apt for war, even them the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon. (17) And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah his father's brother king in his stead, and changed his name to Zedekiah.”

- c. Stage 3: Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah (Vs. 10-20; 2 Kings 24:18-25:21)
 - i. This siege and subsequent deportation took place in 586 B.C. This would be the final destruction of Jerusalem.
 - ii. The Babylonians brutally slew many, including Zedekiah's sons in front of him before they put out his eyes.
 - iii. They took what remained of the temple vessels, treasures and resources.
 - iv. They then burnt the house of God and the city and broke down the wall of Jerusalem.
- 2. The Sins that led to the Captivity (Vs. 11-14)

This brings us to the root of the problem. There was:

 - a. Sin in the Palace – Judah's Sovereign was wicked (Vs. 12-13). Zedekiah, the final Judean king, is illustrative of the spiritual condition of the final kings of this period. We can summarize Zedekiah's spiritual condition in four words:
 - i. Wickedness – “he did that which was evil” (Vs. 12a).
 - ii. Pridefulness – “humbled not himself” (Vs. 12b).
 - iii. Rebelliousness – “he also rebelled” (Vs. 13a).
 - iv. Stubbornness – “stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart” (Vs. 13b).

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- b. Sin in the Priesthood – Judah’s Spiritual leaders were wicked (Vs. 14a). We get a bit of a window into the wickedness of those who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders of Judah through Jeremiah’s prophesy.
 - i. Jeremiah 5:30-31 “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love *to have it* so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” Why are compromised leaders rewarded with loyalty from the people? Because such leaders will indulge rather than reprove the lusts of the people.”
 - ii. Jeremiah 23:9-11 “**Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets**; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine hath overcome, because of the LORD, and because of the words of his holiness. For the land is full of adulterers; for because of swearing the land mourneth; the pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up, and their course is evil, and their force *is* not right. **For both prophet and priest are profane; yea, in my house have I found their wickedness, saith the LORD.**”
- c. Sin in the Populace – Judah’s Society was wicked (Vs. 14b). Not surprisingly, the wickedness of Judah’s leadership led to the wickedness of her citizens. Proverbs 29:12 warns, “If a ruler hearken to lies, all his servants are wicked.” Both the leadership and the laity of Judah were involved in:
 - i. The abominations of the heathen. Rather than being a distinct and holy people in the midst of heathen nations, Judah had slid down to the depraved level of those nations. Sadly, this was not an occasional engagement in the depraved perversions of the heathen. The text highlights that they “**transgressed very much** after the abominations of the heathen.” They were sold out to commit abominable wickedness.
 - ii. The pollution of the house of God. The temple which was supposed to be the center for the worship of the One true God had been polluted with the evil practices of its priests and attendees. The house of God had degenerated with the times rather than standing in purity and faithfulness against the tidal wave of wickedness that had swept the land. How true this is of the New Testament “house of God”, the local church (1 Tim. 3:15) in the wicked and apostate hour we live in. Sin and error is openly tolerated, or worse still, endorsed and promoted.

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- iii. Note: Praise God there was a godly remnant which had not bowed the knee to idolatry and its associated perversion. There were men like Daniel, his three friends and Ezekiel who were still standing for godliness in a time of spiritual apostasy. They were burning lights at a time of great spiritual and moral darkness in their nation.
3. The Seers that warned of the Captivity (Vs. 15-16)
 - a. The Summary of the Prophets Warnings (Vs. 15)
 - i. The timeliness of the warnings (Vs. 15a). The word 'betimes' means "early, seasonably, in a short time; before it is too late." (D. Cloud) A meaning of the word is highlighted in Genesis 26:31 "And **they rose up betimes** in the morning, and swore one to another: and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace."
 - ii. The tenderness behind the warnings (Vs. 15b). The compassion of God was what moved the heart of God to move the lips of His messengers to warn the people. Always remember that God's judgment is always preceded by an abundant display of His forbearance, longsuffering, mercy and grace. God is not a capricious, bloodthirsty and cruel God like the false gods of the heathen. He is Just nonetheless and will mete out perfect judgment if His offers of mercy are repeatedly refused.
 - b. The Spurning of the Prophets Warnings (Vs. 16)

Sadly, the majority had an unrepentant response to the godly warnings. The people:

 - i. Mocked God's messengers (Vs. 16a).
 - ii. Misused God's messengers (Vs. 16b).
4. The Season of the Captivity (Vs. 20-23)
 - a. The timeframe of the captivity (Vs. 20-21)
 - i. The captivity would last for 70 years according to the prophecy of Jeremiah (See Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-11).
 - ii. The reason for the number of 70 years is also given. It was so the land could "enjoy her sabbaths". This is a reference to the law found in Leviticus 25:1-7. Evidently this was also another area of disobedience on the part of God's people. Over the years this law had been neglected and the land was now owed a total of 70 years.
 - b. The termination of the captivity (Vs. 22-23). The 70-year period terminated just as God had predicted with the end of the Babylonian Empire and the decree of Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their land.

B. The Chronology of the Period

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1. A suggested timeline of the main events of this period by Wiersbe is as follows:
 - a. 605 BC – First Jewish exiles deported to Babylon.
 - b. 597 BC – Second deportation to Babylon.
 - c. 586 BC – Jerusalem destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar – Third deportation to Babylon.
 - d. 539 BC – Cyrus, King of Persia, conquers Babylon.
 - e. 538 BC – Cyrus issues his decree to the Jewish exiles.
 - f. 537 BC – About 50,000 Jews return to the land, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua.
 - g. 536 BC – Foundation of the temple laid.
 - h. 536-520 BC – Work interrupted because of official opposition.
 - i. 520 BC – Work resumed; ministry of Haggai and Zechariah.
 - j. 515 BC – The temple completed and dedicated.
 - k. 476 BC – Esther becomes queen of Persia.
 - l. 458 BC – Ezra the scribe arrives in Jerusalem.
 - m. 445 BC – Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem; walls rebuilt; gates restored.
2. The Book of Ezra divides into two distinct sections with a gap of fifty-seven years between the parts¹.
 - a. CHAPTERS 1-6: The return of some of the captives of Judah from exile IN Babylon to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, and the re-building of the House of God (536-515 BC).
 - b. CHAPTERS 7-10: The return of further Jews under Ezra, and the expulsion of the heathen wives (454-457 BC).
 - c. Note: Chronologically the story of Esther occurs between Ezra 6 and 7 during that 57-year gap.

III. THE PLAN OF THE BOOK (OUTLINES)

A. A Suggested Outline

- I. The Return of the Saints (Chap. 1-2)
 - A. The Raising up of the Saints (1)
 - B. The Registry of the Saints (2)
- II. The Rebuilding of the Sanctuary (Chap. 3-6)
 - A. The Work Commenced (3)
 - B. The Work Ceased (Opposed) (4)
 - C. The Work Continued (Resumed) (5)
 - D. The Work Completed (6)
- III. The Reformation of the Saints (Chap. 7-10)
 - A. The Reformer (7-8)
 - C. The Reformation (9-10)

B. A Simple Outline

¹ Details from M.K. Hall's commentary.

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- I. The Building up of the Sanctuary (Chap. 1-6)
- II. The Building up of the Saints (Chap. 7-10)

C. Some Supplemental Outlines

1. Wiersbe's Outline

- I. The Nation is Restored (Ezra 1-6)
 - A. A Remnant returns with Zerubbabel and Joshua (1-2)
 - B. The Temple is rebuilt (3-6)
- II. The People are Rededicated (Ezra 7-10)
 - A. A second group arrives with Ezra (7-8)
 - B. Confession of sin (9)
 - C. Cleansing of sin (10)

2. Hester's Outline

- I. The Return to the Land (1-2)
 - A. Cyrus' Proclamation (1:1-4)
 - B. Temple Treasures returned (1:5-11)
 - C. The people who went (2)
- II. The Rebuilding of the Temple (3-4)
 - A. Altar established first (3:1-6)
 - B. Foundation put in place (3:11-13)
 - C. Facing enemies (4)
 - D. Compromise (4:1-3)
 - E. Political interference (4:4-5)
- III. Temple work resumed after long delay (5)
- IV. Temple work completed (6)
- V. Ezra's visit to Jerusalem (7-8)
- VI. Sins of people confessed (9)
- VII. Cleansing and revival (10)

3. Boyd's Outline

- I. Return under Zerubbabel (Chap. 1-6)
 - A. Restoration of the Jews (1-2)
 - B. Opposition to the Word (3-4)
 - C. Dedication of the Temple (5-6)
- II. Return under Ezra (Chap. 7-10)
 - A. Proclamation of Artaxerxes (7)
 - B. Liberation of the Jews (8)
 - C. Intercession of Ezra (9)
 - D. Reformation of the People (10)

IV. THE POINT OF THE BOOK (THEME)

A. The Key Text: The key verse appears to be Ezra 1:5. The key word is 'build' occurring 13 times in the Book.

B. The Key Theme: The Book deals with the restoration of the Temple and Temple worship. It therefore teaches us God's method of restoring His people to a place of fellowship and blessing (Robert T. Boyd)

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C. The Key Thoughts

1. Ezra teaches us many lessons about spiritual revival and reformation.
2. Ezra teaches us many helpful principles for doing the work of God effectively.
3. Ezra reminds us of God's Providence and Sovereignty. God is still on the throne! "The book demonstrates the truth that God is in control, and the actions of rulers cannot thwart His overall purposes for this world." (M.K. Hall)
4. Ezra reminds us that God's work done in God's way will not lack God's supply.

Conclusion: Are you a builder up or tearer down of God's work? Are you seeking to build your own life on the Word of God?

Stirred to Serve

Text: Ezra 1:1-11

Introduction:

1. The first two chapters of Ezra deal with the return of the remnant. In chapter 1 we have the raising up of the saints and in chapter 2 the registry of the saints. In this message we will consider the raising up of the faithful remnant to return and rebuild.
2. From start to finish this work was of God. God and His sovereign rulership occupy center stage in this passage. We see God moving in the heart of a heathen king and in the hearts of his people to accomplish His plan.
3. The theme of Ezra deals very much with the restoration of the House of God in Jerusalem. The “house of the LORD God of Israel” is mentioned five times in this first chapter alone.
4. We will divide the chapter into four sections for our study.

I. A PROPHECY ACCOMPLISHED (VS. 1)

Several strands of prophecy intersect at this pivotal moment in Biblical history in a most amazing way. The accuracy of Bible prophecy is breathtaking and a powerful testament to the truth of the Scriptures. We are reminded of the fulfillment of:

A. Isaiah’s Prophecy (Is. 44:28-45:13)

This is an amazing prophecy, written some 175 years earlier. This prophecy even names Cyrus before he was even born!

1. Note two key verses from this section of Isaiah.
 - a. Isaiah 44:28 “That saith of **Cyrus**, *He is* my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.
 - b. Isaiah 45:13 “I have raised him up in righteousness, and **I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward**, saith the LORD of hosts.”
2. From Isaiah’s prophecy in about 712 BC the story continues in the year 606 BC, a critical year in the history of the nation in the purposes of God. For the nation of Judah, it was the year when Nebuchadnezzar carried away to Babylon the first captives and the Temple vessels. Also, this was probably the same year in which Jeremiah uttered the prophecy that the captivity would run for seventy years. Those seventy years expired in 536 BC, the year of the return of the first captives to Jerusalem.

B. Daniel’s Prophecy (Dan. 2:31-45)

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1. Remember the image in Daniel's dream? The head of gold represented the kingdom of Babylon. The breast and arms of silver represented the Medo-Persian Empire.
2. Daniel 2:32 "This image's head was of fine gold, his **breast and his arms of silver**, his belly and his thighs of brass,"

C. Jeremiah's Prophecy (Vs. 1a; Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-11)

1. This is the prophecy that is referenced specifically in Ezra 1:1. This is a reference to the fulfillment of the 70-year prophecy of Jeremiah.
 - a. Jer. 25:11-12 "And this whole land shall be a desolation, *and* an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon **seventy years**. And it shall come to pass, when **seventy years are accomplished**, *that* I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations."
 - b. Jer. 29:10 "For thus saith the LORD, That after **seventy years** be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place."
2. This proclamation was given in the "first year of Cyrus", a reference not to the first year he was king, but rather to the first year Babylon had been under his rule. This is the Cyrus known in history as "Cyrus the Great".
3. The seventy-year captivity began in 606 BC and in 536 BC Cyrus issues this amazing proclamation, allowing the Jews to go back to their homeland to rebuild the temple. The decree of Cyrus was the fulfillment of prophecy.

II. A PROCLAMATION ANNOUNCED (VS. 1B-4)

A. The Motivating of the Proclamation (Vs. 1b)

1. Moved by a Providential Stirring – "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus". God moved in the heart of this heathen king to ensure His plan was carried out. Someone defined Providence this way; "Providence is that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures, is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end." (Cited by Denis Lyle)
 - a. We are reminded of the truth of Proverbs 21:1 "The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."
 - b. We are reminded of the oft repeated truth in the Book of Daniel that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21).
 - c. We are reminded of the truth of 2 Chronicles 20:6 "And said, O LORD God of our fathers, *art* not thou God in heaven? and rulest *not* thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in

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thine hand *is there not* power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?”

- d. Thomas Watson said, “God can make a straight stroke with a crooked stick” and that’s what He did with Cyrus.
2. Moved by a Praying Saint
 - a. Daniel’s study of Jeremiah’s prophecy moved Him to pray a heartfelt prayer of confession, seeking God for the fulfilment of His promise. The decree of Cyrus was God’s answer to Daniel’s prayer! It is a reminder that God has included the prayers of the saints in the outworking of His purposes. What a marvelous thing!
 - b. Some even suggest that since Daniel continued unto the first year of Cyrus (Dan. 1:21) and occupied such a high position in the affairs of Babylon, it is even possible that Daniel shared Jeremiah’s prophecy with king Cyrus and helped draft the documents for the release of the Jewish people.
 - c. Harry Ironside writes, “People are often stumbled as to the relations of prayer and the purpose of God. If God has counselled, shall He not bring it to pass, whether we pray or not? The answer is that prayer is a part of God’s purpose. He has willed to act when His people pray; and one of the first evidences that He is about to perform a certain thing is that the spirit of prayer and supplication is poured out upon His people in regard to that particular work. Here He moves the heart of a king in his palace to accomplish His Word, after Daniel made it a matter of prayer.”

B. The Magnitude of the Proclamation (Vs. 1c)

1. This proclamation was made throughout the Persian Empire and also formalized in writing. Heralds would have been dispatched throughout the empire to proclaim the news and public notices posted in key locations.
2. What a testimony in that day to One True God of Israel and the truth of His Word. Look at the Revelation of God’s Person in the proclamation that went out (Vs. 2). God always provides the light of truth in every generation.

C. The Mandate for the Proclamation (Vs. 2)

Verse 2-4 contain the contents of the proclamation. This heathen king made this proclamation with a sense that he was acting under at the direction of Almighty God. He acknowledges:

1. The Reign of Almighty God (Vs. 2a)
 - a. The Supremacy of God – “the LORD God of heaven”. The title “God of heaven” is used some seventeen times in Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel.
 - b. The Sovereignty of God – “hath given me all the kingdoms”.

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- c. A wise ruler will recognize the supreme authority and sovereignty of God.
 - d. Illustration: Australia's Parliamentary Prayer – "Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouch safe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia."¹
2. The Rulership of Almighty God (Vs. 2b). A wise ruler will submit to God's supreme authority in his governance of a people. While Cyrus was a heathen king, he wisely submitted himself to God's authority in this matter.

D. The Mission in the Proclamation (Vs. 3-4)

We now get to the heart of the proclamation that was made. Since God was the one who stirred king Cyrus to write this proclamation, this was His Word for His people, communicated through the instrumentality of Cyrus. There is a two-fold exhortation to God's people. There is:

1. An Exhortation to Go (Vs. 3)
 - a. Go with the Presence of God – "his God be with him".
 - b. Go to the Place of God – "go up to Jerusalem".
 - c. Go for the Purpose of God – "build the house of the LORD God of Israel".
2. An Exhortation to Give (Vs. 4)
 - a. There is a sense where we are all called to give and go as God's people in the New Testament church. However, we should remember that so far as a specific ministry calling is concerned, some are called to be pioneers and leaders of God's work. Others are called to be supporters of God's work.
 - b. One is not more important the other. The important thing is that we all play the part God gives us in His grand and glorious work.

III. A PEOPLE AWAKENED (VS. 5-6)

These verses record the response of God's people to the king's proclamation.

A. The Stirring up of the Remnant (Vs. 5)

1. Again, we note the hand of the Lord moving in the situation to accomplish His plan. First, we saw the Lord stirring the heart of a heathen king. Now we see Him stirring the heart of His covenant people. The word 'raised' is from the same Hebrew word translated "stirred up" in Vs. 1.

1

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/Powers_practice_and_procedure/Practice7/HTML/Chapter8/Acknowledgement_of_country_and_Prayers Viewed 16/7/22.

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2. Is not this an example and definition of true revival when God stirs the hearts of the saints to a deeper consecration to Himself? We note two features of a genuine revival:
 - a. Divine Sovereignty – true revival cannot be manufactured; it comes when God moves. A work that is of God has its source in Him and must be initiated by Him. Return, recovery, restoration and revival all begin with God and His Word.
 - b. Human Responsibility – true revival involves a response on our part to the moving of God. We have no power to produce a revival but we can endeavour to be a prepared and yielded people, ready for God to stir. Someone put it this way, “we cannot send the wind but we can hoist the sails”.
3. You will notice that four groups of people are mentioned as being touched by the Lord. It highlights that every level of Jewish society was affected.
 - a. The chief of the fathers – these would be the heads at that time of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In any work of God leadership is as essential today as it was then. It is so vital that those in positions of leadership be submitted to the Lord’s stirring.
 - b. The priests – the descendants of Aaron and spiritual leaders of the temple worship. “They represented the people in the presence of God and their key activity was worship. The house of God today requires priestly men and women.” (M.K. Hall)
 - c. The Levites – the rest of the tribe of Levi apart from Aaron’s family who also had vital service roles in relation to the temple worship. “Levi had three sons Gershon, Kohath and Merari. Their descendants were responsible for the care of the Tabernacle and all its parts (Num. 3:17-37). If worship characterised the priestly family of Aaron, service was the hallmark of the rest of the tribe of Levi. Every believer needs to be of Levite character, engaged in the service of the assembly.” (M.K. Hall)
 - d. The people – “all them whose spirit God had raised”. This is a beautiful description of all the ordinary people who went up.

B. The Support of the Remnant (Vs. 6)

1. The actual number who responded to Cyrus’ decree was very small, in all about fifty thousand people. The journey involved a four-to-five-month journey and a distance of almost 1,000 miles. This was likely one reason why many chose not to make the trip.
2. But to their credit, those who remained behind were stirred to participate in a ministry of support for the pioneers of faith. They “strengthened the hands” of those going to do the work. Every venture for the Lord needs a support team. They say that behind

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every soldier on the battle field there are at least 10 people at home working to support that soldier in the battle. God does not call everyone to be a pastor, missionary or evangelist but every one can be in the Lord's service by fulfilling the role God has given them, whatever that may be.

3. In this example, not only were there those prepared to sacrifice to do the work, there were those prepared to sacrifice to support the work. This is why a strong home base is vital if we are going to support the advancement of the Gospel at home and abroad.
4. Those who remained supported the work through their giving. We are reminded of the timeless principle seen throughout the whole Bible that God's primary method for providing for His work is through the freewill offerings of His people. There are five principles of giving we can learn from their example. Their giving was:
 - a. Universal – they "all" contributed to the work. A strong church is one where all its members are contributors to the work of God in some way as opposed to what is often the case where a small percentage tithes and gives while the others freeload.
 - b. Purposeful – they gave for both the support of God's workmen and God's work. Note Vs. 4. They were to give to help the workers as well as "the freewill offering for the house of God".
 - c. Practical – they gave items that would meet the needs of the pioneers of faith. Some people give their junk to the work of God which ends up being a burden rather than a blessing to the servants of God.
 - d. Plentiful – their giving was generous and sacrificial. The term "precious things" refers to things which are choice and costly.
 - e. Volitional – their giving was done voluntarily; they "willingly offered". True giving is a matter of liberty, not law. 2 Cor. 9:7 "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, *so let him give*; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for **God loveth a cheerful giver.**" Remember, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

IV. A PROVISION AFFORDED (VS. 7-11)

A. The Prince responsible for the Temple Treasure (Vs. 8, 11)

1. Cyrus entrusted the temple treasures to one named Sheshbazzar. He is noted as "the prince of Judah". One thing we see in Ezra is the Lord providing leadership for His work. Who was this Sheshbazzar? We believe he is Zerubbabel.
2. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The older commentators and Jewish writers through the centuries (including Josephus) were correct in identifying Sheshbazzar as Zerubbabel. Both are

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described as governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14; Hag. 1:1; 2:2). Both are credited with laying the foundation of the house of God (3:8-11; 5:16). Sheshbazzar appears to be his Babylonian name. It would have been the official name used in Persian and Babylonian court circles. He is described in this chapter as “the prince of Judah” (Vs. 8). He was also the rightful heir to the throne of Judah as the genealogy of the Lord in Matthew 1:12 makes clear. Jechonias is Jehoiachin, the last but one king of Judah (1 Chr. 3:16; 2 Chr. 36:9). Salathiel’s (Zerubbabel’s father) alternative name is Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2, 8; 5:2). It is consistent with this that Sheshbazzar is called the “governor” (5:14), having been appointed by Cyrus. He has the stamp of royalty and authority about him. The name Sheshbazzar is used in the context of chapter 1 because of the official connection between him and Mithredath in respect of the recovery of the vessels.”

B. The Precious things in the Temple Treasure (Vs. 7-11)

1. The temple vessels were all that remained of value from Solomon’s glorious temple. God in His grace ensured they were preserved and returned.
2. David Sorenson provides a helpful summary of the temple vessels, “Because of their sacred as well as monetary value, careful record was made of exactly how many vessels were to be sent back to Jerusalem. The reference to the charges of gold and silver may have been used at one time as the containers of water of purification at the Temple. The gold and silver basins may have been used in collecting the blood of the sacrifices which was to be sprinkled on the altar. The gold and silver knives likely were those used in the ceremonial slaying and dressing of the sacrificial animals. Altogether, 5,400 sacred vessels were directed to be sent with Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) back to Jerusalem.”
3. A New Testament application would be that the temple vessels are a picture of the believer God can use. “Emptied that Thou shouldest fill me, a clean vessel in thine hand” (Mary E. Maxwell).

Conclusion: Any genuine work is a work that is initiated, empowered and blessed by God Himself. Our job is to remain yielded and surrendered to allow Him to work in and through us. We could summarize it by saying that a genuine work of God is:

1. Initiated by God’s Providence.
2. Supplied by God’s Provision.
3. Defended by God’s Protection.
4. Accomplished by God’s Power.

Are you available for the Lord to use?

The Record of the Remnant

Text: Ezra 2:1-70

Introduction:

- This chapter provides a record of the faithful remnant that returned to the land. So important is this record to God Almighty, it is also included in the Book of Nehemiah 7:6-73. “An important feature of the book of Ezra is the writer’s extensive use of historical documents and records. The decrees and proclamations of monarchs are recorded (1:1-4; 6:8-12). Letters are referred to (4:6-10), or are quoted in full (4:11-22). Ezra’s own genealogy appears in 7:1-5.” (M.K. Hall)
- 1. At first glance, we might be tempted to think “this is just a list of names, how can it possibly help me in my Christian life?” We need to always remember that nothing is in the Word of God by accident and that every part of the Scriptures is profitable to us.
- 2. Harry Ironside describes this chapter as “a sample page from the books of eternity...A leaf out of God’s memorial record is spread before us for our inspection. Similar specimen lists are given us in other parts of the book of God...God shows how carefully He was taking note of each individual, each family, and the work they accomplished for Him...There is something peculiarly solemn about records such as these. Many, yea, most of the names in them are for us only names, but God has not forgotten one of the persons once called by these names on earth, and “in that day” He will reward according to the work of each. Some too must “suffer loss” for opportunities neglected or half-hearted service. Nothing of good or ill shall be overlooked by Him who sees not as man sees, who looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart.”
- 3. As we study this chapter, keep in mind the principle of a remnant and let us endeavour to be those who are a part of a godly remnant in our day even as these saints were in theirs. The record first focuses on the people in general, then moves to outline those with specific roles in the nation. For us, we can learn a spiritual lesson from each division of the remnant we can apply to our Christian walk. We will note **7 lessons** we can draw from a study of this sacred record of a saintly remnant.

This remnant was...

I. A STIRRED REMNANT (VS. 1-35)

This section records the **people in general**. This remnant was raised up by God (Ez. 1:5) from amongst the exiles. This part of the record divides naturally into two parts:

A. The Leaders of the Remnant (Vs. 1-2)

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We are reminded that a work of God requires godly leadership and oversight and when God is stirring up the people of God to do a work for Him, He will also raise up men to lead His people in the carrying out of His plans. We suggest a two-fold division within this leadership team:

1. The Principal Leaders – Zerubbabel and Jeshua are mentioned first and as the Book unfolds, it becomes clear that they were the primary leaders of the rebuilding of the temple (See Ez. 3:2).
 - a. Zerubbabel was the National leader – he was a descendant of the line of David through Jehoiachin (see 1 Chr. 3:17) and is therefore given the role of leading the nation.
 - b. Jeshua was the Spiritual leader – he was the high priest and is referenced in 3:2, 8; 4:3 & 5:2. He is also called “Joshua the high priest” in Haggai 1:1 and Zechariah 3:1.
2. The Supporting leaders – another nine names are mentioned along with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. We do not know much about them but evidently, they also played a role in the leadership of the remnant. They were likely “the chief of the fathers” who are mentioned 7 times in Ezra (1:5, 2:68, 3:12, 4:2, 3, 8:29, 10:16).
3. Principle: Godly leadership is required to lead a remnant of God’s people in a work of rebuilding. God’s way is to raise up a leader or two and also a team of men to aid and support them in their leadership. We see this principle in the New Testament. Pastors are God’s primary overseers and leaders of the New Testament assembly with Deacons raised up of the Lord to support and help them in their role as leaders. God also puts his hand on “chief” men within the assembly to lead their families, set a good example and help the forward direction of the work of God.

B. The Laymen of the Remnant (Vs. 3-35)

In this section are listed all the people apart from the special categories which follow later. They are in two groups – those who are recorded according to their families (Vs. 3-19) and those who are recorded according to their native towns and villages (Vs. 20-35).

1. The people recorded by family names (Vs. 3-19).
 - a. Notice for the majority of the remnant, they are not named specifically. In this section they are grouped under family names but each individual is not listed. The point is that while the majority are unknown to us, they were known to God and noted by Him. God allows some of His servants to be named and used as public examples (i.e., heroes of the faith past and present) but this is not the case for most. The most important thing is that we are faithful to serve in God’s remnant and that we are known of Him.

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- b. This list of family names is a reminder of how God can stir whole families for His cause. What a blessing when a family group is yielded to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Let us pray for whole households to come to know Christ! (See Acts 16:31)
2. The people recorded by place names (Vs. 20-35).
 - a. There is some debate about whether the name in verse 20 (Gibbar) is a place name or a family name. Some suggest it is another name for Gibeon. Either way, after verse 20 it becomes clear that the people are being numbered according to geographical origin rather than by family groups.
 - b. It becomes apparent that a certain geographical order is being followed in the record. Fensham explains, “It starts in the south with Bethlehem and Netophah, moves to the north with Anathoth and Azmaveth, then to the northwest to the old Gibeonite confederacy with Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, to the far north of Judah with Michmas, Bethel, and Ai, to the southwest with Nebo, Magbish, Elam, and Harim, then to the vicinity of Joppa with Lod, Hadid, and Ono, and finally to the northwest with Jericho and Senaah.”
 - c. This list is a reminder of how God can do a work amongst a people from a specific locality. Revivals of history are a reminder of how God can and often does sovereignly move in particular nations, cities, towns, villages and neighborhoods according to His eternal wisdom.

II. A SACRED REMNANT (VS. 36-39)

This section contains details of the **priests**.

A. The Teams within the Priesthood (Vs. 36-39).

1. In the days of King David, the descendants of Aaron, the priests, were divided into twenty-four orders. It appears in Ezra 2 that four of these orders were represented in those who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. (M.K. Hall)
2. The children of Jedaiah (Vs. 36) were the second group named in 1 Chronicles 24:7. The children of Immer (Vs. 37) were the sixteenth group (24:14). Pashur (Vs. 38) is not mentioned in the list in 1 Chronicles 24. The children of Harim (Vs. 39) were the third order mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24:8. These priests were all descended from either Eleazar or Ithamar, the two surviving sons of Aaron after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (1 Chr. 24:2, 5-19).

B. The Teaching from the Priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10)

In the New Testament, unlike the Old Testament dispensation, every believer is a priest. 1 Peter 2:9-10 “But ye *are* a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; **that ye should shew forth the praises** of him who hath called you out of darkness

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into his marvellous light: Which in time past *were* not a people, but *are* now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.” To be a priest of God is to be in:

1. A privileged position – a priest is one who has access to God and His presence. We have direct access to God through Christ our Mediator and High Priest.
2. A separated position – a priest is set apart by God for special, consecrated service. In like manner, we are God’s peculiar treasure, separated from sin and the world for our God.
3. A sacred position – a priest’s primary function was in things relating to worship. How the church of God needs priestly men and women today who will worship God in spirit and in truth.

III. A SERVING REMNANT (VS. 40-57)

There are five groups listed who all had important servant roles to play in relation to the house of God.

A. The Levites (Vs. 40)

1. The priesthood was comprised only of those direct descendants of Aaron. The Levites were the remainder of the tribe of Levi. The Levites would therefore far outnumber the priests in Israel.
2. However, there is a striking contrast between the number of priests and the number of Levites who returned with the remnant. There were only 74 Levites who returned at this point whereas there were over 4,000 priests. It should be noted that the singers (Vs. 41) and the children of the porters (Vs. 42) were also Levites. “Verse 40 speaks of the Levites proper, who were those who personally assisted the priests in the ministry of the worship in the Temple.” (M.K. Hall)
3. Whereas the predominant thought connected with the priesthood is worship, the predominant thought connected with the Levites is that of service. Like Ezra’s day (see Ez. 8:15), there is often an abundance of worshippers but few servers!
4. There was a wide variety of service available to the Levites and so it is with us in the age of grace. It is for each of us to seek to discern what the Lord would have us do for Him in the local church and then seek to do it with His help and blessing. God wants us to be **both** worshippers and servants in His house.

B. The Singers (Vs. 41)

1. This traces back to 1 Chronicles 25 where David appointed singers from the tribe of Levi for the house of God which his son Solomon was to build. They were to “prophesy with harps, with psalteries and with cymbals” (1 Chr. 25:1).
2. Every New Testament believer is to be a singer in the house of God. May we be a singing remnant!

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- a. Eph. 5:19 “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing** and making melody in your heart to the Lord;”
- b. Col. 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing** with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

C. The Porters (Vs. 42)

1. The Hebrew word used means a gatekeeper or doorkeeper. 1 Chronicles 26:1-19 lists the porters. They were “the keepers of the gates of the tabernacle” (Vs. 19). They “had the oversight of the gates of the house of the Lord” (Vs. 23). They “were over the chambers (storehouses) and treasuries of the house of God” (Vs. 26), and were responsible every morning for the opening of the Temple (Vs. 27). (M.K. Hall)
2. The work of God needs gatekeepers in the sense of godly men who are watchful to refuse entry to wolves who would seek to enter in and devour the flock (See Acts 20:28-31).
3. The work of God needs doorkeepers in the sense of servant hearted men who will aid the people of God as they come to the place of worship and who take care of the offerings in a responsible manner. Serving on the door is a very important ministry in the local church.

D. The Nethinims (Vs. 43-54)

1. Of the Nethinims M.K. Hall comments, If the Levites assisted the priests, the Nethinims, in turn, were those who assisted the Levites. The word means “those given” – that is, given to the Levites as Temple servants.
2. The word first occurs in 1 Chronicles 9:2, where the first inhabitants of Jerusalem on the return from the exile were the “Israelites, the priests, Levites, and the Nethinims”. In Ezra 8:20 it is stated that David and the princes appointed the Nethinims for the service of the Levites. The origin of these people is not precisely known but it is generally accepted that they are the Gibeonites. (See Josh. 9:23)
3. We could say these dear saints served the servants! It is a reminder that we are all servants no matter what place of service we occupy in the work of God and we are to serve each other.
4. The Nethinims remind us that the most humble and menial acts of service are precious to God. Look at the large section of verses dedicated to them in this record!

E. The Servants of Solomon (Vs. 55-58)

1. It appears there is a close association between the children of Solomon’s servants and the Nethinims.
2. They were descendants of the peoples of the land whom Joshua and his successors had failed to conquer and destroy (See 1 Kings 9:21).

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3. Note: A key principle in all of the above is this: the work of God needs lots of servant hearted men and women if it is going to succeed. If Christ, the Son of God and Lord of glory is called “my servant” by the Father in the Word of God (compare Is. 42:1-3 & Matt. 12:18-21), how much more should we all be servants for God’s glory?

IV. A SEPARATED REMNANT (VS. 59-63)

Not everyone qualified to be a part of this godly remnant. Evidence of one’s lineage was required to qualify and not all did. The purity of the remnant was of great importance. Notice that two groups are noted as not meeting the qualifications:

A. The People who were Separated from the Remnant (Vs. 59-60)

1. There were 652 people who tried to attach themselves to the returning remnant who were disqualified as they “could not shew their father’s house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel.” It is interesting to note that unlike the people in Vs. 20-35 who are listed by their place of origin in Judah, these were listed according to five locations in the Babylon area. They professed to be of Judah but in reality, they were of Babylon.
2. It is not unusual when there is a movement of God for the false to be caught up with the genuine. In the first great Exodus movement of the children of Israel out of Egypt, “a mixed multitude went up also with them” (Ex. 12:38).
3. God is in the business of separating His people apart for Himself in purity and that sometimes means that there is a departure of those who are not truly of the people of God. 1 John 2:19 “**They went out from us**, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”
4. Drawing a New Testament application, we are to strive for the purity of the local assembly. All are welcome to come and hear the Gospel but only those who have a sound testimony and show evidence of the New Birth are to be admitted to the membership of the local church with its attendant privileges.

B. The Priests who were Separated from the Remnant (Vs. 61-63)

1. The language is even stronger for the priesthood and with good reason. The priests were to be the spiritual leaders of the nation.
2. These priests were to be removed until they could seek God’s guidance by way of the Urim and Thummim (Vs. 63). The Hebrew words mean “lights” and “perfections” (Newberry). They were in the breastplate of the high priest and were consulted when an answer to a problem was required.
3. Ironside wisely remarks, “Some there were who could not show their genealogy. These (the priests) were not declared positively to be laying false claim to the priestly title. They were simply set to one

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side because they could not prove it, until an inspired priest should rise up who could speak with authority. So, we may well treat some now, who cannot trace their genealogy, but nevertheless insist on the Christian place as rightfully theirs. We dare not say they are not born of God – and those who do so essay to speak are guilty of gross presumption, but we cannot own them as such until they can give clear evidence of being indeed of the priestly company and partakers of the Divine nature.”

4. As there are people who claim to be a part of the company of the saints who are not, so there are also those who claim to be leaders of God’s people who in reality are “polluted” and should be removed from leadership positions.
5. Sadly, today in the realm of “Christendom” broadly speaking, the majority of “leaders” are imposters, false shepherds, agents of Satan to lead the sheep astray. Bible believing churches must take care not to elect leaders unless they are saved and sound in doctrine.

V. A SUMMED-UP REMNANT (VS. 64-67)

These verses contain the total figures of the returnees and their animals.

A. The Totals of the People (Vs. 64-65)

1. The saints – 42,360 (Vs. 64)
2. The servants – 7,337 (Vs. 65a)
3. The singers – 200 (Vs. 65b)
4. Note: God is a God of detail and order. The early church also knew the number of its members (Acts 1:15). We are also reminded that God takes account of all who are faithful to him. No one is overlooked or forgotten.

B. The Totals of the Animals (Vs. 66-67)

1. Horses – 736 (Vs. 66a)
2. Mules – 245 (Vs. 66b)
3. Camels – 435 (Vs. 67a)
4. Asses – 6,720 (Vs. 67b)

VI. A SACRIFICIAL REMNANT (VS. 68-69)

This was a sacrificial, giving remnant of people. Comparing this record with Nehemiah’s we learn that not only did the chief of the fathers set the example by giving but the people in general also participated in this offering (See Nehemiah 7:70-72). Note five important truths about their giving which we can learn from:

A. They Gave Willingly (Vs. 68a)

1. The word ‘freely’ is the same word translated “willingly offered” in the previous chapter (Ezra 1:6).
2. 2 Cor. 9:7 “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, *so let him give*; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

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B. They Gave Purposefully (Vs. 68b)

1. They gave “for the house of God to set it up in his place”.
2. As the Lord leads us as a church, we should back the projects in the will of God with sacrificial giving.

C. They Gave According to Ability (Vs. 69a)

1. This is a very important principle of giving in the Bible. We give according to our ability. This takes us beyond the tithe to see how else we might be used of God in the area of giving. It also takes the pressure of us from fretting over what we can't give and focuses us rather on joyfully contributing what we can give.
2. The principle is stated well in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first *day* of the week **let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him**, that there be no gatherings when I come.”
3. How are we to give as believers? Very simply. As God has “prospered” us. One pastor put it well when he said “When God increases your finances, don't increase your standard of living, increase your standard of giving.” Obviously, it is not wrong to enjoy the fruit of our labours and to provide for our families but there is a lot of wisdom in that statement. If God entrusts you with wealth, be prayerful as to how God might lead you to help the furtherance of the Gospel.
4. 2 Cor. 8:12 states it well, “For if there be first **a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.**”
5. “The rule laid down in 1 Corinthians 16:2 is one that seldom claims a second thought with many. At the weekly gathering a coin is dropped in the box, often with no previous forethought, and certainly not as a result of a prayerful laying by at home according as God has prospered the giver during the past week. Were this generally acted upon, there would be no dearth of means to carry on the work of the Lord in the home and foreign fields, nor any lack of provision for the poor among the saints.” (H.A. Ironside)

D. They Gave Generously (Vs. 69b)

1. Remember that this remnant returned to a burnt-out, broken-down Jerusalem. Much material and manpower would be needed to not just raise the temple but also to rebuild their homes. If any group of people had an excuse not to give to God's work, it would be this group of people. And yet, we find them generously and sacrificially giving to God's work.
2. My mother taught me growing up that you “can never out give the Lord”. When we honour the Lord with our finances and put Him first, we can trust that he will supply our needs (Phil. 4:19).

E. They Gave Practically (Vs. 69c)

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1. They also contributed “one hundred priests’ garments”. This was an act of faith as the temple was not even constructed yet.
2. They had an eye to discern not only the immediate needs of the work of God but also the needs that would arise in the future. May we give in like manner!

VII. A SETTLED REMNANT (VS. 70)

A. They Settled where God had Placed them

B. They Stayed where God had Placed them

1. Make sure you STAY exactly where God has placed you in His will and don’t move unless He clearly leads you elsewhere! How we need a faithful remnant of godly people who will “dwell” and abide where God has placed them.
2. Stay with sound doctrine, stay with your local church, stay with the Lord!

Conclusion: What kind of godly remnant do we need to be in our day? Let us strive to be a remnant like this remnant of old, a revived, worshipping, serving, singing, separated, consecrated, giving, abiding remnant.

Are you available for the Lord to use?

The Work Begins

The Altar is Rebuilt

Text: Ezra 3:1-6

Introduction:

1. In this chapter the work of re-building the temple gets underway starting with the altar of worship and then moving to the laying of the foundation. So, the chapter divides fairly neatly in two sections:
 - Vs. 1-6 – The rebuilding of the altar.
 - Vs. 7-13 – The relaying of the foundation.
2. One preacher's¹ outline for the chapter is as follows:
 - Worship was Restored (Vs. 1-6)
 - Work was Resumed (Vs. 7-9)
 - Witness was Recorded (Vs. 10-13)
3. In this message we will study the first section (Vs. 1-6) that deals with the rebuilding of the altar and the lessons we can learn in the area of worship. We will note **7 lessons** about biblical worship in these verses.

I. THE PRIORITY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 1A)

Their priority for worship is seen in:

A. The Season for the Altar (Vs. 1a)

1. This was the seventh month in the year since they had returned. Evidently the first six months had been spent getting re-settled and preparing. Their choice of the seventh month is significant as the seventh month contained several significant feasts in the worship life of the nation.
2. Of the seventh month, Wiersbe writes, "The seventh month would be Tishri, our September-October, a month very sacred to the Jews (Lev. 23:23-44). It opened with the Feast of Trumpets; the Day of Atonement was on the tenth day; and from the fifteenth to the twenty-first days, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles."
3. The seventh month was therefore a good time to commence worship.

B. The Sequence for the Altar (Vs. 2b)

1. The altar was the very first thing to be constructed in the order of the rebuilding work. The altar was therefore the first priority to the returned remnant.
2. Revival always involves a return to worship as a priority. We see this illustrated in the life of Abraham. In Canaan, Abraham built an altar and "called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 12:8).

¹ D. Lyle Northern Ireland.

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Interestingly, during Abraham’s Egypt sojourn, there is no reference to an altar. But when he returned out of Egypt, the first thing he did was go back to the altar (Gen. 13:4) and again “called on the name of the LORD.”

3. Do you have an altar of worship in your life?
 - a. The altar of personal worship (daily devotional life).
 - b. The altar of family worship.
 - c. The altar of public worship (local church). Is it the Lord’s Day for you on a Sunday or the Lord’s half day?!
 - d. When God’s people get revived and stirred of the Lord, they get back to the Word and prayer in their daily lives and they get back to the house of God. When you are spiritually stirred, you won’t need the preacher to constantly beg you to come to church. You will be there because in your heart that is what you desire!
4. Our worship is distinct from the old dispensation in that it is primarily spiritual in nature. We do not offer blood sacrifices as Christ offered Himself as the once for all sacrifice for sin. But we do offer spiritual sacrifices such as the sacrifice of praise. Heb. 13:15 “By him therefore let us offer **the sacrifice of praise** to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” We worship God by giving our time, talents, treasure and tongues.

II. THE UNITY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 1B)

This chapter is a wonderful testament to the unity of the remnant. Their unity was a unity in the truth, not outside of the truth as we will see. These godly folk had been stirred by the Spirit of God to return to the Word of God and this brought about a oneness of heart and purpose. Note the word ‘together’ in relation to this remnant.

A. They Assembled Together (Vs. 1b)

1. Their unity is described in the words “as one man”. An assembly of people is not necessarily unified. You can have a congregation assembled in one place that is full of division. They are in one place but are not unified. Pastor Hester in his Old Testament Bible History course gave the illustration of putting a cat and a dog in the same cage. They might be in the same place but they certainly aren’t unified!
2. The mark of the early church was that they were **both** “in one accord and in one place” (Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25). Interestingly the word “one accord” is made up of “together” and “passion”. To be of “one accord” is to be of one passion together!
3. The standard of unity God wants for the local church is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 1:10 “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of

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our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak **the same thing**, and *that* there be **no divisions among you**; but *that* ye be **perfectly joined together in the same mind** and in **the same judgment.**”

B. They Served Together (Vs. 9)

1. Their oneness of heart in the Word of God found expression in harmonious service together in building up the house of God.
2. A divided church will accomplish very little in the area of Christian service. For the work of God to go forward, the people of God must first be of one heart and mind in the doctrines of the Word of God and the direction for the work of God.

C. They Sang Together (Vs. 11a)

1. Their unity was also expressed in song. They were united in one heart, one purpose and in one song. It was a unified sound.
2. Does our singing as a church bear witness to our unity in the Lord? Carnal strife and division dampen the singing in the house of God. It is like trying to light a fire with wet wood (a lot of smoke, a few sparks but not much life).

D. They Stood Together (4:3)

1. Their unity found expression in standing together against the enemy. We will talk more about this when we study chapter 4.
2. If the devil can get a church divided on the inside it makes it a lot easier for him to then destroy it from the outside.

III. THE TYPOLOGY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 2a, 3, 4a, 5a, 6a)

Observe that the emphasis was upon the burnt offerings. The altar was the place of sacrifice and speaks to us of Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. Consider:

A. The Specialness of the Burnt Offering

1. The burnt offering is the first offering detailed in the Book of Leviticus.
2. The burnt offering was wholly offered to the Lord. With some other offerings, the priests were entitled to take a portion but not so with the burnt offering. It was offered in its totality to the Lord.
3. Of the Burnt Offering, M.K. Hall writes, “It speaks of what Christ and His sacrifice on Calvary mean to God. It is the first offering. It is the core of the offerings. It is the central offering. All the other offerings are based upon it and often could not be offered without an accompanying burnt offering.”
4. How beautifully this pictures our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who offered up His total Person as an offering on the cross for our redemption.

B. The Sweetness of the Burnt Offering

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1. Eph. 5:2 “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us **an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.**”
2. This verse points us back to the “sweet savour” offerings described in Leviticus. They were the first 3 of the 5 offerings described in the first part of Leviticus. They are:
 - a. The Burnt offering (Lev. 1:1-17) which depicted Christ’s total devotion to God in giving His very life to obey and please His Father.
 - b. The meat (meal, grain) offering (Lev. 2:1-16) which depicted Christ’s perfection.
 - c. The peace offering (Lev. 3:1-17; 4:27-31) which depicted His making peace between God and man.
3. The central thought is that of an offering that is well pleasing to the Father.
4. The lamp on the altar was the focal point of their worship. In like manner, Christ and His sacrifice for us on the cross needs to be the central focus of our worship.

IV. THE AUTHORITY FOR THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 2B-4)

The worship of the remnant was in strict conformity to the Written Word of God. This is the kind of worship revival produces! The obedience of their worship is demonstrated by:

A. The Precepts governing their Worship (Vs. 2b, 4, 10b)

1. Notice the reoccurring theme.
 - a. “as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God” (Vs. 2).
 - b. “as it is written” (Vs. 4)
 - c. “according to the custom” (Vs. 4)
 - d. “after the ordinance of David king of Israel” (Vs. 10)
2. Obedient worship is focused on God. Disobedient worship is focused on self. There is so much talk about worship today in Christendom but in reality, most people come to “worship” for themselves and it has little to nothing to do with God. It is all about coming to church to get an emotional high. The modern “worship” movement has actually done a tremendous disservice to genuine, biblical worship as people have been conditioned to think of worship in terms of a rock concert with darkened auditoriums, smoke machines and sensual performers.
3. A revived remnant will seek to worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). A rebellious people will offer a “strange fire” (Lev. 10:1), “new cart” (2. Sam. 6:3), “golden calf” (Ex. 32) kind of worship. The “worship” we are seeing in much of Christendom is not the soundtrack of revival but the soundtrack of apostasy.
4. Just as this revived remnant of old was concerned to uphold the Old Testament standards of worship, so should we seek to uphold the

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New Testament standards of worship set out in Scriptures such as Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

B. The Place of their Worship (Vs. 3a)

1. The faithful remnant did not sit the altar anywhere. They set the altar “upon his bases”, meaning they located the place where the altar used to be in the ruins of the temple. Again, it highlights their attention to detail stemming from a desire to be obedient to God’s revealed will. They understood that at that time in Biblical history, the temple was the place God had ordained for the sacrifices to take place.
2. Note: No doubt they would have needed to clear the debris and rubbish to find the base for the altar. What a picture of spiritual recovery! Returning to the Lord after a period of captivity (backsliding) involves removing rubbish and putting the basics back in their proper place in your life.

V. THE URGENCY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 3A)

They understood:

A. The Danger of the Enemy

1. They were conscious of the threats and dangers that were around them as the people of God – “for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries” (Vs. 3a).
2. It wouldn’t take long for the enemy to attack as we will see in chapter 4.

B. The Defender against the Enemy

1. An understanding of the danger of the enemy gave the people of God a sense of urgency to seek the Lord.
2. In like manner, when we understand the battle we are in as builders on God’s construction site, we will be a praying people.

VI. THE REGULARITY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 3B-6)

There was:

A. Daily Worship (Vs. 3B)

1. They offered burnt offerings “morning and evening”. This is also referred to as “the continual burnt offering” (Vs. 5a).
2. We note the principle of starting and finishing the day with the Lord. This is a great practice to establish in the area of daily devotions. Start the day with the Lord, finish the day with the Lord and endeavor to walk with the Lord in between.

B. Special Worship (Vs. 4-5)

1. Not only was there the regular, daily offerings and the weekly Sabbath Day offerings but there were also special periods set aside for the feasts of the Lord.

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2. The “feast of tabernacles” is mentioned as this was a feast held in the seventh month. There were daily offerings to be given during the feast of tabernacles. The instructions are found in Numbers 29:12-38.
3. The seventh month was a month of considerable significance in the Jewish year. Three Feasts fell within the seventh month.
 - a. The feast of trumpets (first day).
 - b. The Day of Atonement (tenth day).
 - c. The Feast of Tabernacles (fifteenth to twenty-second day).
4. As New Testament believers, not only do we need daily worship in our personal lives and weekly worship in our local church but it is also a Scriptural principle to set aside special seasons for spiritual edification such as Bible conferences, camps and extended seasons of prayer.

VII. THE GENEROSITY OF THEIR WORSHIP (VS. 5B)

Opportunity was also available for worshippers within Israel to bring God an offering. Look at:

A. The Freewill nature of the Offering

The offering is described by two phrases, both which again emphasize the voluntary nature of the offering.

1. “willingly offered”
2. “freewill offering”

B. The Focus of the Offering

1. The Lord Himself is the focus of the gift. The offering was offered “unto the LORD”.
2. We can bring God our freewill tithes and offerings as a part of our worship in the local church but we shouldn’t limit our worship to giving only. We can also offer our God the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15) and worship Him by being a “living sacrifice” in our lives (Rom. 12:1-2).

Conclusion: How important is worship to you? Does it occupy a special place in your daily life? Are the public worship services of your local church a priority in your weekly schedule? How passionate are we about obedience to God?

Back to the Foundation

Text: Ezra 3:7-13

Introduction:

1. In this chapter the work of re-building the temple gets underway starting with the altar of worship and then moving to the laying of the foundation. So, the chapter divides fairly neatly in two sections:
 - Vs. 1-6 – The rebuilding of the altar.
 - Vs. 7-13 – The relaying of the foundation.
2. In this message we will study the second section (Vs. 7-13) that deals with the relaying of the foundation. Spiritual revival involves getting back to the right foundation for the Christian life.

I. THE WORK ON THE FOUNDATION (VS. 7-10A)

Note several key points that relate to the laying of the foundation.

A. The Supplies for the Work (Vs. 7)

1. The manpower for the work (Vs. 7a)
 - a. The skilled workers on the temple site – the masons and carpenters.
 - b. The procurers of the raw materials – those of Tyre and Sidon.
 - c. Note: It is not unusual on a church building site for there to be a need to hire some skilled labor. There will often be a mix of volunteer and paid labor. The point is that God's work requires funding which requires sacrifice on the part of God's people.
 - d. Spiritual Principle: The work of God needs the right kind of workers.
2. The materials for the work (vs. 7b)
 - a. The hand of God upon this work is again highlighted by the fact King Cyrus gave the remnant a grant allowing them to import the cedar trees from Lebanon they needed for the temple construction.
 - b. The Book of Ezra is a testament to the truth that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord" (Ezra 7:27). God is able to move in the hearts of even unsaved rulers to support His work.
 - c. Spiritual Principle: **The work of God needs the right kind of materials if it is to be a lasting work.** We are reminded of this in 1 Corinthians 3 where particularly those in church leadership are reminded that the future judgment seat of Christ will reveal whether they built God's work in gold, silver and precious stones or wood, hay and stubble (See Vs. 11-15). We can either build God's work in perishable materials or precious metals!

B. The Season for the Work (Vs. 8a)

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1. The second month was a logical start date for the work to commence as the first month was busy with the “set feasts” of Passover, Unleavened bread and First Fruits.
2. The second month was a significant date for the work commence as it was the same month Solomon commenced the work of the original temple (See 1 Kings 6:1). It is not likely that this was a coincidence. With the remnant’s attention to detail we have seen already so far, they were likely seeking to closely follow the pattern of the original temple construction. The same is true of the procurement of the materials from Lebanon.
3. This is a good reminder of the truth of not removing the ancient landmarks (Prov. 22:28). Our job is not to reinvent the methods for doing God’s work but to return to the tried, tested, and proven methods in the Word of God.

C. The Servants for the Work (Vs. 8-9)

God not only provided the supplies for His work but also the servants for His work. God used these willing servants to:

1. Set forward the work of God’s house (Vs. 8)
 - a. Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel – the representative of the Davidic line and the civil ruler of the returned remnant. He leads the work of laying the foundation of the temple.
 - b. Jeshua the son of Jozadak – the representative of the priestly line and the spiritual ruler in the house of God as High Priest.
 - c. The Levites – these were given responsibilities from the age of 20 years and above (See also 1 Chr. 23:27 & 2 Chr. 31:17). The men were also numbered for war from the age of 20. This is a repeated theme in the Book of Numbers (e.g., Num. 1:3). It is a reminder that positions of leadership need to be occupied by those who have reached a certain level of maturity.
 - d. The people in general – “all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem”.
2. Set forward the workmen in God’s house (Vs. 9)
 - a. These men evidently had an important role in overseeing the other workmen on the temple project. The need for godly oversight of God’s work is a principle that runs throughout the whole Bible. Helpers need helping!
 - b. The blessing of families serving God together is again highlighted.
 - i. Jeshua with his sons and his brethren.
 - ii. Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah together.
 - iii. The sons of Henadad with their sons and their brethren the Levites. Here you have Henadad, his sons and his grandsons so three generations are mentioned.

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- iv. The word ‘together’ is a reminder that their labors were characterized by a spirit of unity. Remember, “we are labourers together with God” (1 Cor. 3:9). May that word ‘together’ be the spirit of our local church. Together in supplicating, together in singing, together in serving, together in soul-winning and together in suffering.

D. The Starting point for the work (Vs. 10a)

As we have already mentioned, the foundation was the first major part of the re-construction of the temple. The foundation is mentioned four times in this chapter (Vs. 6,10,11,12). In any construction, the foundation is critical. Get the foundation wrong and the whole building will be affected (Psalm 11:3). Just as the foundation for the physical temple of the Jews was critical, so also the foundation for the spiritual house of the church is vitally important. There are two New Testament texts that draw our attention to the foundation for the local church.

1. Christ is the Foundation (1 Cor. 3:11) “For other **foundation** can no man lay than that is laid, which is **Jesus Christ.**” (1 Cor. 3:11)
2. Christ is the Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20)
“And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*,” (Eph. 2:20). In the foundation we have:
 - a. The support stones – “the apostles and prophets” (Vs. 20a). The church is built upon the foundation of Apostolic doctrine as found in the Epistles. It is interesting to note that the Apostles names are in the 12 foundations of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:4).
 - b. The Supreme Stone – “Jesus Christ Himself” (Vs. 20b)
 - i. The Cornerstone (as explained by Harold Hoehner): In ancient times it was the **first** stone laid. The builder was very careful to properly set this stone. “The cornerstone is the primary foundation-stone at the angle of structure by which the architect fixes a standard for the bearings of the walls and cross-walls throughout.” (Lloyd)
 - ii. The cornerstone was the most important stone in the whole building. All the other stones were to be in line with it. It was that stone by which every other stone in the foundation and the superstructure was measured. Thus, the building of the new person, the church, must be in conformity with the cornerstone, Christ Jesus. The Apostles and prophets were to be correctly aligned with Christ and the same applies for the saints which form the walls of the building.

II. THE WORSHIP AT THE FOUNDATION (VS. 10B-11)

The remnant greatly rejoiced at the completion of the foundation. Their joy found expressing in two ways. There was:

A. The Song of Joy (Vs. 10b-11a)

1. The Singers of the Praise Song (Vs. 10b)
 - a. The garments of the singers – “the priests in their apparel”. The New Testament believer is a priest of God, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Without the garments of salvation and the Mediatorial ministry of Christ, our praise would never be accepted by a Holy God. We have been clothed for worship.
 - b. The goal of the singers – “to praise the LORD”. Remember our singing in church is for each other and for the Lord (See Eph. 5:19 & Col. 3:16). It is so important that we learn from our hearts to “sing to the audience of One”. It is very easy for carnal motives to get tangled up in any form of service for Christ but particularly in up the front ministry like choir and orchestra. For those in music ministry it would be very wise to pray two things before you minister:
 - i. “Lord, please empty me of self”.
 - ii. “Lord, please fill me with Thyself”.
 - c. The guide for the singers – “after the ordinance of David king of Israel”. God had used David to put structure in place for the temple singers so that the worship of God would be conducted in an orderly and God-honoring fashion. It highlights the truth that the singing in God’s house is to be kept sacred and pure within the Divine boundaries of the Word of God.
2. The Sounds of the Praise Song (Vs. 10b)

Two instruments are mentioned as accompaniments to the singing:

 - a. The Trumpets – these were the silver trumpets blown by the priests. Ellicott writes, “The trumpets belonged to the priests, the cymbals to the Levites, in the ancient ordinances of worship.”
 - b. The Cymbals – these were instruments of brass and represented some form of percussion. Not all percussion is wrong if it is supportive of the Melody as the dominant, leading element in the music (See Eph. 5:18-19). The rock beat is autonomous and does not qualify! ¹
 - c. Note: Musical instruments are found all through the Bible and even in heaven itself (Revelation). Godly instrumentation can be a beautiful aid and accompaniment to the singing of God’s people.
3. The Structure of the Praise Song (Vs. 11a)

¹ Refer series by Pastor S. Western entitled “Measuring the Music”. Visit www.baptistexpositor.com

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- a. They sang “by course”. This either means there were groups that took it in turns singing or more likely it describes a form of antiphonal singing where you have the singers split into two groups with one group taking up a phrase of the song and the other replying. John Gill says it means “they sang by turns in responses, and answered one another, as the word signifies; when one company had performed their part, another took theirs.”
 - b. So, it might look something like this:
 - i. Group 1 sings “Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good”.
 - ii. Group 2 replies “for His mercy endureth forever”.
4. The Subject of the Praise Song (Vs. 11a)
- The theme of the song was fitting for the occasion. It was:
- a. A song of praise and thanksgiving – “in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD”.
 - b. A song concerning the goodness and mercy of God – “because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel.” Evidently, they were singing from the Psalms. These words are often repeated in Psalm 136. Note: Repetition of key themes is not wrong in itself so long as it is not vain repetition without substance. In Psalm 136 this is the repeated theme but it is connected to a lot of other truth.
 - c. We have so much to thank and praise the Lord for in song. We too can rejoice in the foundation for our faith we have in Christ. If you rest on that foundation, you are safe and secure for all eternity!

B. The Shout of Joy (Vs. 11b; Also, 12b & 13)

1. The Motivation for the Shout – Joy over the completion of the foundation. With Christ as our foundation, we have something to shout about too! There is nothing wrong with godly enthusiasm and excitement in the Christian life for all the glorious truths that underpin our faith. If the world can get excited about the temporal things of this life, how much more should we get excited about the eternal things of the next life!
2. The Might of the Shout – Look at the volume and reach of this shout.
 - a. “a great shout” (Vs. 11)
 - b. “many shouted aloud for joy” (Vs. 12)
 - c. “the people shouted with a loud shout” (Vs. 13)
 - d. “the noise was heard afar off” (Vs. 13)
 - e. Does our testimony for the Lord speak volumes to the world around us? Paul could say of the Thessalonian church, “For from you **sounded out the word of the Lord** not only in

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Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.” (1 Thess. 1:8)

III. THE WEEPING AT THE FOUNDATION (VS. 12-13)

A. The Category of those Weeping (Vs. 12a)

1. Among the priests, Levites and chief of the fathers, there were many “ancient men” and they were the ones who were weeping. There were both the old and the young in this returned remnant.
2. Someone wisely commented that older men tend to mainly look back whereas younger men tend to mainly look forward. In reality we need both. We can look back and learn from the past and thank God for His faithfulness back then but we also need to look forward to what God is doing now and what He will do in the future.
3. The younger you are, the more you feel there is to laugh about, the older you get the more you find out there is to cry about!
4. Harry Ironside offers some words of wisdom for the young and old based on this passage,

“Youth is the period of enthusiasm and exuberance of spirit, while age is the time of sobriety and serious contemplation. Young men are apt to be over sanguine (optimistic) looking on to the future; aged men, on the other hand, are likely to be reminiscent and unduly occupied with the past. It is often difficult for youth to comprehend the fears of the old and experienced regarding any new work in which they are involved. It is equally hard, frequently, for the elder men to recognize any special work for God entrusted chiefly to the young and in which they cannot share for long. They are too apt to forget their own youth, and as they think of ruined hopes would put the brake on any who do not now occupy their standpoint. Hence much patience is ever needed in a movement such as we have been tracing. The young need grace to profit by the godly, sober counsels of the fathers, who, in their turn, need grace to rejoice in what God is doing through those as yet immature. Critical, fault-finding old men, even though devoted saints, may be a great hindrance to young brethren, ardent in faith and love until chilled by continual carping or objecting on the part of their elders. On the other hand, cheery, fatherly brethren, who are ever ready to see God’s leading in any fresh work of His Spirit, who have grown old gracefully, and are “mellowing for heaven”, as one has put it, can be both helpers and counsellors of great value to their younger brethren.”

5. The Bible gives instructions that will help both the younger and the older men in their relationship one to another. Younger men are not to disrespect older men (1 Tim. 5:1) but at the same time, older men are not to despise younger men of God (1 Tim. 4:12).
6. Illustration: A dear elderly brother shared an article with me recently which addressed the sad state of affairs in our day compared with his earlier years in Australia. I agreed with the majority of what he shared except one statement where he said, “the day of godly pastors and Evangelists and the faith Missionary societies has ended.” Part of my reply was as follows:

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“Thank you brother _____ for the excellent article.

May I ask what you meant by this statement? **"The day of Godly pastors and Evangelists and the faith Missionary Societies has ended..."** I assume you mean this in a general sense? Obviously, there are still godly pastors, evangelists and missionaries in our day who have not bowed the knee to Baal. God always has a remnant! I agree with what your article presents about the state of affairs in our day but would respectfully suggest it might be better worded to say something like "While there are exceptions, sadly the day of godly pastors and evangelists has generally ended." There are still Philadelphian churches shining the light of truth in a Laodicean age.

One observation I would make as a young pastor earnestly seeking to remain faithful to the old paths (Jer. 6:16) is that the problem in our day is not just my generation. Sadly, many of the "oldies" have chosen not to take a stand against apostasy and have gone down with the ship. Worse still, I have found that some older men seem to be more interested in attacking and discouraging younger pastors who are seeking to stand for what's right rather than having a ministry of encouragement to strengthen their hands for the battle we face in our generation! So, we have the problem of much compromise in the younger generation but there are also "old prophets" (1 Kings 13) who have compromised with sin and error and are active in seeking to lead young men astray. One thing I have gotten rather weary of is the politics that exists in some circles where it becomes all about "the club" you are in as opposed to standing for the truth.

I am very thankful for the few older men who have sought to encourage me as a young pastor but sadly, they are very few in my experience to date.

Just a few musings to share for what it is worth.”

7. Wiersbe writes, “These godly old men longed for “the good old days”, but it was the sins of their generation that had caused the fall of the kingdom to begin with! Had their generation listened to the prophet Jeremiah and obeyed God’s Word, Jerusalem and the temple would still be standing.”

B. The Cause of their Weeping (Vs. 12b-13)

Were these tears of joy or sadness?

1. The text itself indicates the weeping was in contrast to the shouts of joy – “But”. The contrast is further highlighted in verse 13.
2. Haggai the prophet also reveals the inner thoughts of this group of older men concerning the temple project which no doubt led them to cry in this way. They were comparing the second temple to the first temple (Solomon’s). See Haggai 2:1-5.
3. They were in danger of being discouraged as they compared the present temple structure in comparison with that of Solomon’s day (the first temple). Solomon’s temple was possibly the most glorious structure on earth at that time. It is described as “exceeding magnificent, of fame and of glory throughout all countries (1 Chr. 22:5) The queen of Sheba, who herself ruled a wealthy kingdom with its own glorious palaces and temples, was overwhelmed at the sight of Solomon’s kingdom and temple to where “there was no more spirit in her” (See 1 Kings 10:4-5). Compared to Solomon’s

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temple, the second temple was “as nothing” (Hag. 2:3) but God, through his prophets Haggai and Zechariah to not “despise the day of small things” (Zec. 4:10) and to “be strong...and work” (Hag. 2:4) knowing that the Lord was with them.

4. David Cloud comments,

“There were some among the remnant in Haggai’s day who had seen Solomon’s temple, but God instructed them not to “despise the day of small things” (Zec. 4:10). It is not wise to compare one’s situation with that of other people, places, and times. A church in America or England in the 21st century would do well not to compare itself to former times. God’s work in a day of national apostasy will not be the same as in a day of national revival, but God is the same in every time, and His people can be encouraged in Him and in whatever He is doing...The work of Christ’s Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) appears small and insignificant in comparison to the great things of this present world. The progress is slow and the difficulties are great. Most New Testament churches are insignificant. Most New Testament believers are “the weak things of the world” (1 Cor. 1:27). In most places and times, the response to the gospel has been small. But in truth, the work of Christ’s churches, if done faithfully according to God’s Word, is the most important business on earth, and the lowly saints of this present age will rule and reign with Christ in His glorious eternal kingdom (Rev. 5:10).”

5. Whether the work is big or small, it rests upon the same foundation – Jesus Christ and in that we rejoice. Whether God ordains that our ministry be large or small rests in His hands. Any work of God, small or large, owes its existence to the power of God. Left to ourselves and our own resources we would produce nothing of eternal value (John 15:5). This temple was smaller than the first one but it represented a fresh move of revival for Israel. They had come out of captivity as a revived remnant and were now restoring biblical worship in the nation. This project had God’s blessing! I would rather be a part of a small work with separated, “remnant minded”, saints who know something of the blessing and presence of God than be in a Laodicean church that is rich materially but bankrupt spiritually. These thoughts are timely given our anniversary next weekend. As we look back and ponder God’s goodness and give thanks, let us also look forward with anticipation, believing that God is also at work in our day as we remain submitted and surrendered to Him.

Conclusion: What foundation is your life and ministry being built upon?

The Adversaries Attack

Text: Ezra 4:1-5

Introduction:

1. Up until this point, the work has gone on unhindered. In the last chapter, the altar of worship and the foundation was established. There was great joy and celebration at the laying of the foundation. Everything was going so well. The construction work was now underway. Then we encounter the word 'now' in 4:1, introducing an abrupt intrusion upon this happy scene. The enemy will not stay neutral to the work of God forever!
2. This chapter is full of helpful instruction on the character of the enemy we face. Behind the human instruments we detect the sinister movements of the Devil, seeking to bring God's work to an end.
3. The opposition came from the Samaritan peoples. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The origin of these "adversaries" went back to the time when, because of their idolatry, the Lord allowed the king of Assyria to capture Israel, often known as Samaria, and carry the people away into Assyria in the period 740-722 BC (2 Kings 17:6). Subsequently Esarhaddon, a later king of Assyria, colonised the cities of Samaria with people from Assyria and Babylonia (2 Kings 17:24). The "adversaries" are their descendants, known as Samaritans. Samaria was some forty miles (64 kilometres) from Jerusalem."
4. We will note four lessons about the enemy's attack in the chapter. We will cover the first two in this message and the final two in the next message.
 - The Stimulation of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 1-2a)
 - The Strategies of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 2b-5)
 - The Slander of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 6-16)
 - The Success of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 17-24)

I. THE STIMULATION OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (Vs. 1-2A)

What was it that aroused the enemy's opposition? The enemy was aroused by:

A. The Revival of the Remnant

- a. Let's remember the context. This group of people has been stirred up by the Spirit of God (Ez. 1:5) and delivered out of captivity.
- b. So long as a believer stays captive in the world (Babylon) in a place of spiritual defeat, the devil isn't too worried about him but let a believer respond to the stirring of the Spirit and begin to experience revival and all of a sudden, the devil gets interested.
- c. While you are in bondage to the world and the flesh, you are little threat to the devil's kingdom but if you get back to freedom and liberty in Christ and become concerned about God's ways

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and God's work, then you become a direct threat to Satan's kingdom.

B. The Return of the Remnant

The revival in the hearts in the remnant lead to the return of the remnant. They had returned to:

1. The land.
2. The altar.
3. The foundation.
4. The truth. This was a back to the Bible movement!

C. The Rebuilding of the Remnant (Vs. 1-2a)

1. Note the 'when' (Vs. 1) and 'then' (Vs. 2a). No doubt the enemy was unsettled by the presence of the revived, returned remnant in the land but it wasn't until the rebuilding work commenced in earnest that the enemy was moved to action. In this section the thought of building is mentioned five times (Vs. 1, 2, 3 (twice), 4). This suggests that they began to build on the foundation which had been laid (3:10).
2. The house of God constituted a direct threat to the enemy. So long as the temple lay in ruins, the enemy wasn't too worried, even though singing and worshipping was going on there. But a rebuilt house was too much for the enemy and he sprang into action. The house of God represented the place of gathering and the place of testimony.
3. The New Testament house of God is not a physical building but the assembly of God's people, the local church (1 Tim. 3:15, Eph. 2:19-22). You may experience a measure of personal revival but so long as you forsake the assembly life of God's house, the devil won't be too worried about you but let a revived remnant come together with the resolve to work and witness together for the Lord and watch how the fury of hell is stirred up.

II. THE STRATEGIES OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 2B-5)

Ephesians uses the word 'wiles' to describe the tactics of the devil. The word 'wiles' comes from the Greek word 'methodeia' from which we derive our English word method. It means "procedure, process, method, strategy or scheme" (Hoehner). The English word 'wiles' expresses the meaning well as it means "A trick or stratagem practiced for ensnaring or deception; a sly insidious artifice." (Webster) They are "lying strategies". The Apostle uses the word 'devices' in 2 Cor. 2:11 meaning "thoughts, schemes". The enemy's strategies can be grouped under two main headings. He comes as:

A. A Serpent to Deceive (Vs. 2-3)

The enemy's first approach is subtle.

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1. The Invitation of Ecumenism (Vs. 2)
 - a. The offer is one of friendship and collaboration and on the surface sounded attractive. This would mean greater numbers, more resources and more labourers, or so it seemed. H.L Rossier wisely wrote, “Let us beware of the favours of the world even more than of its threats.”
 - b. Two false claims are made in the attempt to bolster their ecumenical invitation.
 - i. We also seek God as you do.
 - ii. We also sacrifice to God.
 - c. These claims were clearly false for the following two reasons:
 - i. The Holy Spirit clearly identifies them as the “adversaries” of Judah and Benjamin in verse 1.
 - ii. The Word of God reveals that in reality the Samaritan peoples were idolaters who mixed the worship of God with the worship of idols. Read 2 Kings. 17:24-41 (particularly Vs. 32-41).
2. The Rejection of Ecumenism (Vs. 3)
 - a. The Identity of those who Refused (Vs. 3a)
 - i. It was the leaders of the remnant who refused this invitation. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were the primary overseers supported by the chief of the fathers. These men were faithful shepherds and overseers of God’s people who refused to allow the wolves to get among the sheep.
 - ii. It reminds us of the high responsibility upon those who hold the New Testament office of Pastor, Bishop (Shepherd-Overseer) and those who hold the office of Deacon in support of the pastoral office. If the leaders of God’s people won’t take a clear stand against the attempts of the enemy to infiltrate the flock, the sheep will be left in a very dangerous place and most won’t survive the onslaught.
 - b. The Spirituality of those who Refused (Vs. 3b)

The godliness of these men is highlighted in their:

 - i. Discernment. These men were not fooled by the deceitful approach of the enemy.
 - ii. Directness. These men were clear and bold in their stand. There was no fleshly railing against the enemy but they were straightforward and unequivocal in their refusal of the invitation. In short, these men knew how to say “no”! Be thankful if you have godly leaders prepared to use the word “no”.

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- iii. Separation. Affirming the separation of the remnant was the response of these men to the invitation – “but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD”.
- iv. Unity. Note the word ‘together’. They were united in their stand. The unity we need is not a false unity with the enemy but a true unity against the enemy as God’s people.
- v. Determined. They declared their resolve to build for the Lord in accordance with the decree of king Cyrus.

B. A Lion to Devour (Vs. 4-5)

We have another ‘then’ in verse 4 introducing the response of the adversary to the rejection of their offer. The deception having failed, the enemy quickly removes the mask and reveals his true colors. If deception will not work, he will unleash the roars of intimidation in the hopes of striking fear into the saints so that they will give up the work. The enemy moves from an undercover operation to an all-out frontal assault on the people of God and the work of God.

1. He Weakened their Hands (Vs. 4a). Keil and Delitzsch state that “To weaken the hands of any one, means to deprive him of strength and courage for action”. Hall adds, “The word means to weaken or enfeeble to the point where those so weakened become discouraged and disheartened.” Exactly how the enemy did this is not stated but in may well have involved mockery as it did in the case of Nehemiah.
2. He Troubled their Building (Vs. 4b). This word may give us clue as to what the enemy was doing as the word ‘troubled’ means “to trouble by means of a sudden calamity, and so to terrify. It suggests some kind of actual interference with the building work” (M.K. Hall). No doubt the enemy threatened and attempted attacks against the work.
3. He Frustrated their Purpose (Vs. 5). The word ‘frustrated has the sense of “to break, defeat.” They hindered the work by hiring counselors against them. This probably involved some sort of legal representation to the king’s court. The devil loves to take the position of prosecuting attorney against God’s people. The determination of the adversaries is seen in their willingness to pay money to try and stop God’s work and also their persistence in attacking God’s people from the reign of Cyrus to Darius.
4. All of the above reminds us of the principal brought out in the Book of Nehemiah of the sword and the trowel. God’s people must be both workers and warriors, both builders and soldiers. Nehemiah 4:17 “They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, **every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other *hand* held a weapon.**”

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To be continued...

Conclusion: Which side of the conflict are you on? Are you aiding the work of the slander or being a builder/soldier in the service of God?

The Adversaries Accuse

Text: Ezra 4:6-24

Introduction:

1. Up until this point, the work has gone on unhindered. In the last chapter, the altar of worship and the foundation was established. There was great joy and celebration at the laying of the foundation. Everything was going so well. The construction work was now underway. Then we encounter the word 'now' in 4:1, introducing an abrupt intrusion upon this happy scene. The enemy will not stay neutral to the work of God forever!
2. This chapter is full of helpful instruction on the character of the enemy we face. Behind the human instruments we detect the sinister movements of the Devil, seeking to bring God's work to an end.
3. The opposition came from the Samaritan peoples. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "The origin of these "adversaries" went back to the time when, because of their idolatry, the Lord allowed the king of Assyria to capture Israel, often known as Samaria, and carry the people away into Assyria in the period 740-722 BC (2 Kings 17:6). Subsequently Esarhaddon, a later king of Assyria, colonised the cities of Samaria with people from Assyria and Babylonia (2 Kings 17:24). The "adversaries" are their descendants, known as Samaritans. Samaria was some forty miles (64 kilometres) from Jerusalem."
4. We note four lessons about the enemy's attack in the chapter. In our last message we covered the first two. We will briefly review then continue with the final two.
 - The Stimulation of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 1-2a)
 - The Strategies of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 2b-5)
 - The Slander of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 6-16)
 - The Success of the Enemy's Attack (Vs. 17-24)

I. THE STIMULATION OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (Vs. 1-2A)

What was it that aroused the enemy's opposition? The enemy was aroused by:

- A. The Revival of the Remnant
- B. The Return of the Remnant
- C. The Rebuilding of the Remnant (Vs. 1-2a)

II. THE STRATEGIES OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 2B-5)

The enemy's strategies can be grouped under two main headings. He comes as:

- A. A Serpent to Deceive (Vs. 2-3)
 - The enemy's first approach is subtle.
 - 1. The Invitation of Ecumenism (Vs. 2)
 - 2. The Rejection of Ecumenism (Vs. 3)

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3. H.A. Ironside writes, “Their words sounded friendly, but their true character is given in the opening clause – they were *adversaries*. They sought the ruin of the little company to whom they had made fair protestations. These were indeed “the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Had they once gotten a foothold in the city of God they would have destroyed everything that bore the sign of His approval. To have received and encouraged them would have made the remnant company numerically stronger, but actually much weaker. It would have been admitting the enemy within the fortress. The safety of the people of God was in separation. They were set apart to Him whose name they bore. To mingle with the nations could but insure ruin and disaster.”

B. A Lion to Devour (Vs. 4-5)

1. He Weakened their Hands (Vs. 4a).
2. He Troubled their Building (Vs. 4b).
3. He Frustrated their Purpose (Vs. 5).

III. THE SLANDER OF THE ENEMY’S ATTACK (VS. 6-16)

In reality this represents another one of the enemy’s strategies/devices but due to its lengthy treatment in the passage, we will consider it under its own heading. It is interesting that the word ‘accusation’ is used. Satan is called the “accuser of the brethren” (Rev. 12:10). In fact, the name ‘Satan’ means “accuser, adversary” and the name ‘devil’ means “slanderer”. We shouldn’t therefore be surprised that false accusation and slander is one of the devil’s chief weapons he uses against the work of God. It appears more than one letter was written but the Spirit of God includes the contents of the pivotal one that contributed to the cessation of the work. The letter that was written was a clever concoction of lies, truth and allegation. Letters are powerful tools for good or evil!

A. The Coalition behind the Letter (Vs. 6-10)

1. These verses document the large coalition of Samaritan nobles and peoples who were united in their opposition against the returned remnant and their rebuilding of the temple.
2. It appears that they wrote more than one letter over a period of time but the Holy Spirit selects the letter that was instrumental in stopping the work to be included in the biblical record.
3. The Ahasuerus of verse 6 is “likely the king of Persia otherwise known as Cambyses. The ‘Artaxerxes’ of verse 7 is likely the same individual. Actually, the name ‘Artaxerxes’ is more of a title given to Persian kings than a name similar to the tile of Caesar of the later Romans.”

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4. The records of history show that the kings of Persia from the conquest of Babylon in 538 BC were:¹
 - a. 538-529 BC Cyrus the Great.
 - b. 529-522 BC Cambyses (son of Cyrus).
 - c. 522-521 BC Pseudo-Smerdis (also known as Gomates) – only reigned for seven months.
 - d. 521-485 BC Darius I
 - e. 485-465 BC Ahasuerus (Xerxes, son of Darius)
 - f. 465-425 BC Artaxerxes I (Longimanus)
 - g. Note: These dates in some instances the best estimates.
5. We are reminded of the truth expressed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:9 “For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are **many adversaries.**” A genuine work of God has many enemies pitted against it. It is amazing how many people will unite against the truth! We are reminded that just because a large group of people agree together on something does not automatically make their cause just and right. People can be united together in the cause of unrighteousness just as those united in the cause of righteousness.

B. The Contents of the Letter (Vs. 11-16)

1. The Falsehoods in the Letter (Vs. 11-13, 16)

The letter contained several blatant lies. However, they reflect the cunning, manipulative ways of the enemy. They knew what buttons to press with a heathen king and made accusations that were calculated to arouse his opposition to the work. Three lies are told as follows:

 - a. Lie # 1 – The city and the walls are being rebuilt! (Vs. 12) This was a total and outright lie. The remnant’s focus was on the building of the temple, not the city and the walls at this time. The walls would not be built until much later under Nehemiah. For the Persian king, this accusation had strong political and military overtones. A city wall in ancient times was a major military defensive system and could allow a city to revolt politically. Notice also how the slanderers use name calling, labelling the city of Jerusalem ‘rebellious’ and ‘bad’. Slanderers love to use labels in their smear campaigns even though very often they are guilty of the very things they accuse others of.
 - b. Lie # 2 – the revenue of the kings is under threat! (Vs. 13) This is a clever and manipulative lie. If there is one thing kingdoms and governments are concerned about it is tax revenue! Governments will tolerate and even support all sorts of gross sins but the unpardonable sin as far as a government is

¹ M.K. Hall commentary.

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concerned is not paying tax. This lie was built on the first false claim that the city was being re-fortified. The devil is a master at weaving together a tapestry of lies as are those who engage in his work of slander.

- c. Lie # 3 – the king’s jurisdiction is under threat! (Vs. 16) Notice the strong legal language they employ – “We certify the king”.
2. The Façade in the Letter (Vs. 14)
 - a. They feigned heartfelt appreciation for the king – “now because we have maintenance from the king’s palace”. It was as if they said, “because you have been so kind and generous to us oh king, we want to return the favor as a token of our thankfulness and appreciation for you.”
 - b. They feigned concern for the honor of the king. They lie about their motive, presenting it as a selfless and honorable concern for the king’s position. Slanderers not only fabricate their own “facts”, they lie about their motives to mask their true intent. In reality, the remnant of God’s people were the ones who were the true and loyal subjects of the Persian Monarch.
 - c. The flatterer has a secret, sinister agenda behind his flattery. Consider the following warnings from Proverbs:
 - i. Prov. 26:24-25 “He that hateth dissembleth with his lips, and layeth up deceit within him; When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for *there are* seven abominations in his heart.”
 - ii. Prov. 29:5 “A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet.”
 - iii. Webster (1828) defines flattery as, “False praise; commendation bestowed for the purpose of gaining favor and influence, or to accomplish some purpose.”
 3. The Facts in the Letter (Vs. 15)
 - a. The facts about the past were true. Slander is not necessarily all lies. It often has truth mixed with the lies to make it more credible. The history of Judah’s rebellions was a documented fact which added weight to the accusation they would rebel again if given the chance to do so.
 - b. Satan loves to dredge up past sins and failures to discourage and hinder you from serving God.
 - c. The application to the remnant was unjust. The facts from history were right. The inferences they drew from those facts were wrong. It is not right to blame and punish people for the wrongs of others committed in the past. Divine Law is clear on this point. Deut. 24:16 “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.”

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- d. Note: This biblical principal exposes the error of the woke movement today that constantly uses the past failings of a nation to seek to punish and divide people in the present who are not responsible for things that took place prior to their lifetime.

IV. THE SUCCESS OF THE ENEMY'S ATTACK (VS. 17-24)

Sadly, the letter achieved the diabolical outcome for which it was intended and caused the work to stop for approximately 15 years. Never underestimate the destructive power of slander to undermine the progress of God's work.

A. The King's Decree (Vs. 17-22)

The slanderous letter clearly had the desired effect on the Persian king who was clearly concerned that the returned remnant posed a threat to his revenue and rulership in that region of the empire. The Persian king made at least two mistakes with his decision:

1. He failed to verify if the allegations in the letter were true or false. An accusation does not constitute evidence. A biblical principle of justice is that the accused be afforded an opportunity to answer the accusations made. Also, the accuser must furnish evidence to back the claims being made. This biblical principal has found its way into our justice system where the accused is to be afforded the presumption of innocence. That is, he is innocent until proven guilty. Sadly, many unwisely accept a slanderous report and don't bother to check the facts for themselves.
2. He failed to uphold the higher law in the situation. Under the Persian legal system, a decree of the king, signed into law, could not be abrogated (See Dan. 6:8, 12, 15). Cyrus had made a decree that the temple be rebuilt and therefore the opponents of the work had no authority to stop it from going ahead. Interestingly, the decree of Cyrus would be appealed to in the next chapter as a basis for continuing the work. We need to remember that Divine Law, the law of the King of kings, is supreme over every decree of man and if an evil law is passed, we can appeal to the higher law as a basis for continuing in the work God has called us to do. The Apostles are a good example on this point (Acts 5:29).

B. The Enemy's Delight (Vs. 23)

1. The king's reply was just what the enemies of God's work wanted. Their delight is seen in the haste with which they travel up to Jerusalem to stop the work from proceeding. Wicked men are slow when it comes to righteousness but are quick when it comes to furthering their wickedness!

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2. The fact they had to make the work cease “by force and power” tells us the remnant, to their credit, were very reluctant to stop the work.

C. The Saints’ Discouragement (Vs. 24)

1. “The opposition eventually lead to the cessation of the work as recorded in Vs. 24. This is generally considered to have occurred in 535 BC. The work ceased for a period of around fifteen years until the resumption in 520 BC.” (M.K. Hall)
2. The remnant clearly became discouraged through all the attacks of the enemy as they give up the rebuilding work and turn their attention to building their own houses. Haggai (mentioned in next verse) would later reprove them for prioritizing their own comfort over the house of God.
3. H.A. Ironside writes, “During the interval a period of apathy came in, so that the first energy for what was of God declined, and each one began to think rather of his own comfort and the comforts of his family. They turned to building their own ceiled houses, to storing up goods, and to attending carefully to their own interests. Of this the prophet Haggai accuses them... There is no hint of any suffering inflicted by the adversaries of the Jews while they were attending to their own interests. It was what was of God these wicked workers hated. To behold those gathered to His name devoting their time and strength to building for themselves excited no enmity, and the enemies’ purpose to stop the building of the house of God succeeded.”
4. The devil has not changed his tactics all these years later. His attacks against God’s people and God’s work are relentless and if we are not careful, we can be inclined to throw in the towel and give up. For the Jewish remnant of old, it meant the attacks died down. The enemy didn’t mind them building their own houses, just so long as the work on God’s house lay dormant and defeated.
5. It is a reminder that the sense of peace and success experienced by those who opt out of being an integral part of God’s work is not evidence of God’s blessing. Rather, it is a sad reminder that they pose so little threat to the devil that he isn’t worried enough about them to cause them any trouble.
6. The solution to the attacks is not to give up in discouragement and despondency but to stand firm, shelter under God’s Divine orders, and continue with the work.

Conclusion: Which side of the conflict are you on? Are you aiding the work of the slander or being a builder/soldier in the service of God?

Awakened out of Apathy

Text: Ezra 5:1-5

Introduction:

1. In the last chapter (Ezra 4), we studied the fierce resistance and opposition that came against the people of God as they began construction upon the foundation that had been laid. First the enemy tried the subtle approach and extended an invitation to “work together” on the temple. Of course, the real motive of the enemy was to “creep in unawares” (Jude 1:4; 2 Tim. 3:6) and damage the work of God from within. That having failed due to the spiritual vigilance of the leaders of the remnant, the enemy throws the mask off, shows his true colours and commences a full, frontal assault against the work.
2. The enemy tried multiple tactics to stop the work but finally it was the weapon of accusation and slander against the remnant that achieved the diabolical objective.
3. Ezra 5 is a wonderful encouragement that setbacks in the Christian walk do not have to remain permanent if we will but submit to a fresh, reviving move of the Spirit of God in our lives. Ezra 5 is the record of how God reversed the damage of the enemy and the work was resumed.
4. Our outline for the chapter will be:
 - The Apathy of the People of God (Vs. 1; 4:24)
 - The Awakening of the People of God (Vs. 1-2)
 - The Antagonism to the People of God (Vs. 3-5)
 - The Appeal against the People of God (Vs. 6-17)

I. **THE APATHY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1; 4:24)**

Let's briefly refresh our minds on how the people of God came to this state of apathy. The people of God had become:

A. **Discouraged in the Work**

1. Clearly the people, including the leadership, became disheartened on account of the relentless attacks of the enemy. The stinging accusations of the enemy were the knockout blow that brought the work to a grinding halt.
2. It is easy to get discouraged, despondent and downcast when faced with the constant battles that come to a revived, returned and rebuilding remnant.

B. **Distracted from the Work**

1. Haggai 1 points out that the people had given up on working on the house of God and instead put their time and attention into their own houses. We will talk more about that under the next point.
2. When discouraged, it is so easy to divert our energies into things that brings us personal satisfaction but which count little to nothing for eternity.

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C. Delayed in the Work (4:24)

1. Their discouragement and distraction lead to the work being delayed for approximately 15 years. For 15 years, the temple construction site lay dormant!
2. The people of God were still in the right position in the land of promise but there was a loss of power and a loss of zeal for the work of God. To their credit, the returned remnant didn't go back to Babylon. Their position was still right but they needed a fresh reviving from the Lord.
3. How true this is for so many who may occupy a sound doctrinal position, which is right and commendable, but who have forsaken their first love or become lukewarm in their zeal for the Lord.

II. THE AWAKENING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1-2)

God's answer to this sad state of affairs was to do a fresh work of revival in the returned remnant. The nature of revival is that we need it more than once in our lives. It is a repeated work – Psalm 85:6 “Wilt thou not **revive us again**: that thy people may rejoice in thee?” God had done a work of revival in the remnant to bring them back to the land eighteen years before in 538 B.C. but now fresh revival is needed in the returned remnant to stir them afresh to refocus on what was important to the Lord. To that end, God raised up two prophets to preach His Word to the people and through their ministry, the work was resumed. Never underestimate the power of the Word of God to stir and revive a discouraged, distracted people!

A. The Men used for the Preaching (Vs. 1a)

God used two men named Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy to the people. What was it that made these men vessels God could use in this way? The answer is found in the fact that these men were:

1. Submitted Men
 - a. Little is known about these men and their background. They appear abruptly in the Biblical record with a message stamped with the authority and unction of heaven. Whoever they were, it is clear they were available to God for Him to use as His mouthpiece and messengers to deliver His Word.
 - b. How we need men in our day who will be available for God to take and use to declare His Word, not only to a church that is in desperate need of revival, but also to a lost and dying world that desperately needs the life giving, life transforming power of the Gospel.
2. Set Apart Men (Vs. 1a). These men are referred to as ‘prophets’. The thought behind the word is “one who speaks the mind of God”. The first time the word occurs is in Genesis 20:7 where God tells Abimelech that Abraham is a prophet and that he will pray for him.

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This conveys the thought that a prophet is in touch with God and has power with God. (M.K. Hall)

3. Spirit anointed Men (Zech. 4:1-14)
 - a. Zechariah 4 presents a powerful picture of the ministry of the Word that was taking place at that time. The passage has both a near and far fulfillment. The immediate reference is to the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah but it also looks forward to the ministry of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who will prophesy during the first 3 ½ years of the tribulation.
 - b. The picture is of two olive trees from which golden oil is flowing through two golden pipes into a bowl atop the seven-branch candlestick. From that bowl, the oil flows through a further seven pipes to the seven lamps, keeping them alight and shining brightly.
 - c. The pure, golden olive oil is a clear picture of the Holy Spirit. Verse makes it clear that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is in view. The two prophets are described here as the “two anointed ones” and are pictured in the two olive trees and the two golden pipes through which the golden oil was flowing unhindered.
 - d. What a picture of men who were full of the Holy Spirit and clean channels (pipes) through which the Spirit of God could work in might, power and blessing. May the Lord give us such men for the work of God today!
4. Scriptural Men (Vs. 1b)
 - a. These men preached with authority “in the name of the God of Israel”. They were there to deliver heaven’s message to the remnant! They spoke God’s mind with God’s authority on God’s behalf.
 - b. The phrase “thus saith the LORD” or “saith the LORD” appears no less than 19 times in the small, two-chapter Book of Haggai.
 - c. The same phrases occur 42 times in the Book of Zechariah (14 chapters).
 - d. Haggai and Zechariah were not there to deliver their own ideas and opinions but the pure, unadulterated, unmodified Word of the Living God. How we need men of God like that today who will shun their own opinions and the powerless philosophies and ideas of the world and simply declare the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God.

B. The Message of the Preaching (Vs. 1b; Hag. 1)

Haggai was the first one to preach and it appears that it was his message of rebuke that commenced the stirring in God’s people. Haggai commenced preaching “in the sixth month, in the first day of the month” (Hag. 1:1) whereas Zechariah commenced approximately two months later “in the eighth month” (Zec. 1:1). We do not have time

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to review all the messages of Haggai and Zechariah at this point but we let's consider that first sermon of Haggai that was used of God to begin the work of revival in the people.

1. The Rebuke of the People (Vs. 1-4)

They were rebuked for their:

- a. Excuses (Vs. 2). The Spirit of God strikes right at the heart of their problem. Their excuse was that it wasn't the right time for the house of God to be built.
 - i. Fifteen years had passed and they were still using the excuse that it wasn't the right time to build God's house. How often we are guilty of using the same excuse today! We excuse ourselves for our disengagement from the things of God by claiming it isn't the right time.
 - ii. It's not the right time to come on church membership. It's not the right time to be involved in a church ministry. It's not a convenient time to be involved in soul winning. It's not the time to start giving yet. And on and on the excuses come!
 - iii. Evangelist Billy Sunday called an excuse "the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie," and Benjamin Franklin wrote, "I never met a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else."
- b. Priorities (Vs. 3-4). Instead of building the house of God, they had turned their attention to their own houses (See Vs. 9). How inconsistent! It wasn't time to build the house of God, but it was time to build their own houses. It wasn't that they couldn't afford to contribute their time and treasure to the building up of God's house. It was just so much easier to put their time and resources into their own interests. The returned remnant had become distracted, discouraged and diverted from God's will. They needed to urgently re-evaluate their priorities.
 - i. The word 'cieled' according to the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown commentary means, "'wainscoted,' or 'panelled,' referring to the walls as well as the ceilings; furnished not only with comfort but luxury, in sad contrast to God's house not merely unadorned, but the very walls not raised above the foundations. How different David's feelings (2 Sam. 7:2)!" These were the kind of houses kings built for themselves (1 Kings 7:3, 7; Jer. 22:14).
 - ii. John Gill writes, "They could not only find time, leisure, and convenience to build houses to dwell in; but to wainscot them, and line them with boards of cedar, as the Targum; as bad as the times were complained of; and could sit in them, indulging themselves in luxury,

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ease, and sloth; and why then was it not a fit and convenient time as well to build the house of the Lord in?”

- iii. The real issue is not whether we have the time but that we have chosen to wrongly prioritize our time towards our own interests rather than God’s interests. We say we can’t contribute financially to God’s work but we manage to spend thousands on our homes. We say we can’t show up for church more than once a week but we can faithfully show up to work five days a week without fail, work overtime and bend our backs over for an earthly boss to make money. We say we can’t come out for soul-winning on a Saturday morning but we can hook the trailer on Saturday morning and do a run to the dump or to pick something up. We somehow find the time to meticulously clean and renovate our homes and manicure our gardens! We are too tired to come out for a Wednesday night prayer meeting but not too tired to burn the midnight oil up the ladder with paintbrush in hand. Our issue is not that we don’t have the time. The real issue is that our hearts are backslidden and in the wrong place!
 - iv. Wiersbe writes, “During nearly fifty years of ministry, I’ve noted that some professed Christians buy the best for themselves and give to the Lord whatever is left over. Worn-out furniture is given to the church and worn-out clothing is sent to the missionaries. Like the priests in Malachi’s day, we bring to the Lord gifts we’d be embarrassed to give to our family and friends (Mal. 1:6-8).”
 - v. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said it well in a sermon he preached on Haggai 1:4 many years ago: “Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb.”
2. The Re-evaluation for the People (Vs. 5-7, 9-11)
 - a. Twice the prophet Haggai calls upon the people to “consider” their ways (Vs. 5, 7). The word ‘consider’ literally means “set your heart upon; i.e., consider your conduct and lay it to heart” (Preacher’s Homiletical) They were to “lay to heart their previous conduct, and choose the way that is well-pleasing to God...direct your heart upon your ways.” (Keil and Delitzsch)

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They were to do some heart searching, self-examination and re-evaluation of their ways. How we need to pause at times and re-evaluate our priorities in the light of what really counts for eternity and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

- b. They might have been enjoying success with their house upgrades but the prophet points out that they were missing out on the blessings of God. For the Jewish people, God had given very specific promises regarding the fruitfulness of the land connected with their obedience (See Lev. 26:18-20; Deut. 28:38-40). Their disobedience and neglect of the house of God had led to a withdrawal of God's blessing. We could summarize their condition as one of:
 - i. Dryness (Vs. 6a, 9-11) – there was little water and therefore little fruit. Some believers are out there who are enjoying some success so far as the world is concerned but they are dry as dust in the inner man!
 - ii. Dissatisfaction – they were no longer a fed and satisfied people (Vs. 6b). This is the experience of the believer who has drifted from the separated, victorious life of service. They are sustained but not satisfied.
 3. The Remedy for the People (Vs. 8)
 - a. The remedy was very simple. Get back to the work on the house of God! Put God first in your life again! Return to your first love!
 - b. It is interesting that they would need to go and get wood from the forest to build the house of God. According to Ezra 3:7 the Jews had purchased wood from Tyre and Sidon just as Solomon had done when he built the original temple (1 Kings 5:6-12). What happened to the original supply of wood? Did the people use it to line their own houses instead of God's house? We wonder where the people got the wood for their panelled houses when no wood was available for God's house.
 - c. The ultimate end would be the glory of God. They were not constructing something for their own glory but for the glory and honour of God.
 4. The Response of the People (Vs. 12-15)
 - a. They obeyed God (Vs. 12a).
 - b. They feared God (Vs. 12b)
 - c. They served God (Vs. 14-15)
 5. The Re-assurance of the People (Vs. 13) In response to their obedience, God assures them that He is with them in the work.
- C. The Moving from the Preaching (Vs. 2)**
1. The leaders responded (Vs. 2a)

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- a. The two primary leaders of the work, Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest held some responsibility for the state of affairs. Clearly it wasn't just the people who had become discouraged in the work. Leaders can get discouraged and disheartened just as much as those who are under their care. In fact, sometimes they are more prone to discouragement on account of the fact they tend to bear the brunt of the enemy's attacks.
 - b. It is interesting that Haggai's prophecy is directed first to Zerubbabel and Joshua – "...in the first day of the month, came the word of the LORD by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest..." (Hag. 1:1) This makes sense. If the leaders of God's people won't submit to reviving work of the Spirit of God, then it will be very hard for the people who follow them to be revived.
2. The prophets helped (Vs. 2b)
 - a. They helped with their preaching primarily (Ez. 6:14). The work 'prospered' through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. The only way a work will prosper is if it is built on the Word of God.
 - b. They helped with their hands practically. These men of God were not afraid to roll their sleeves up and get involved in the work!
 3. The people followed (Hag. 1:12, 14)

III. THE ANTAGONISM TOWARDS THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 3-5)

Concerning this section, Bible commentator M.K. Hall writes, "The section of the book from 5:3 to 6:13 could well be entitled the "Tatnai Parenthesis" as it details the opposition which arose from Tatnai, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates province, and his associates, as soon as the building was resumed in 520 BC."

A. The Timing of the Attack (Vs. 3a)

1. Notice the phrase "At the same time". As soon as the work recommenced, the devil got busy again! H.A. Ironside writes, "And, as might have been expected, their insolent adversaries are once more immediately active. Hardly have trowel and hammer begun to be used in the work of rebuilding or completing the house, when Tatnai, the Samaritan governor, and Shethar-boznai (new names to us), and their companions appear, and indignantly enquire, "Who had commanded you to build this house?"
2. For 15 years, the enemy had largely left them alone while they were defeated and distracted with their own selfish pursuits. That's

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because a defeated, distracted, discouraged believer poses little threat to the devil!

3. But just as soon as they got revived and then reorientated towards the things of God, the enemy was stirred to renew his opposition. This is how the Christian life works. Those who do little to nothing for God have very little understanding of the battle that is faced by those who seek to do something for the cause of Christ.

B. The Tactic of the Attack (Vs. 3b-4)

1. The question (Vs. 3b)
 - a. The tactic of the enemy this time was to question who had given them the authority to undertake the work.
 - b. The people of God wisely appealed to the decree of king Cyrus as the authorization for the work. They appealed to the higher authority.
 - c. In like manner, when the world tries to stop us from carrying out the Great Commission and bring us under their authority, we stand under the authority of the King of kings and His command to preach the Gospel to every creature.

C. The Triumph over the Attack (Vs. 5)

1. The work was able to continue because it was under the watchful eye and Divine protection of God Almighty.
2. The thought of God's eye being upon His people is both comforting and convicting.
 - a. Comforting in the sense that it brings assurance to us that we are under God's gracious care and protection as we labour for Him.
 - b. Convicting in the sense that it makes us think about the spirit in which we approach our service. Do we serve with a consciousness that we are serving under the eye of our Heavenly Master and Lord?
3. "Oh, they had an earthly eye on them, but they had an eternal eye on them, they had a human eye on them but they had a heavenly eye on them, they had a wicked eye on them, but they had a watchful eye on them, they had a deadly eye on them, but hallelujah they had a divine eye on them." (Pastor Denis Lyle)

Conclusion:

1. Are you in the right position but with the wrong priorities?
2. Was there ever a time in your Christian life when you had greater passion for God and God's work than you do now?
3. Will you pause, consider your ways and allow the Spirit of God to stir you afresh for His service?

The Attack is Renewed

Text: Ezra 5:3-17

Introduction:

1. In chapter 4, the enemy tried multiple tactics to stop the work but finally it was the weapon of accusation and slander against the remnant that achieved the diabolical objective.
2. Ezra 5 is a wonderful encouragement that setbacks in the Christian walk do not have to remain permanent if we will but submit to a fresh, reviving move of the Spirit of God in our lives. Ezra 5 is the record of how God reversed the damage of the enemy and the work was resumed. No sooner had the work resumed and the enemy renewed his attack! This time it was questions rather than accusations that formed the new tactic of the enemy.
3. Our suggested outline for the chapter is:
 - The Apathy of the People of God (Vs. 1; 4:24)
 - The Awakening of the People of God (Vs. 1-2)
 - The Antagonism to the People of God (Vs. 3-5)
 - The Appeal against the People of God (Vs. 6-17)
4. In this message we briefly review what we covered in the first two points and then we will consider the renewal of the enemy's attack under the second two points.

I. THE APATHY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1; 4:24)

Let's briefly refresh our minds on how the people of God came to this state of apathy. The people of God had become:

- A. Discouraged in the Work
- B. Distracted from the Work
- C. Delayed in the Work (4:24)

II. THE AWAKENING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 1-2)

God's answer to this sad state of affairs was to do a fresh work of revival in the returned remnant. Never underestimate the power of the Word of God to stir and revive a discouraged, distracted people!

A. The Men used for the Preaching (Vs. 1a)

God used two men named Haggai and Zechariah to prophesy to the people.

B. The Message of the Preaching (Vs. 1b; Hag. 1)

Haggai was the first one to preach and it appears that it was his message of rebuke that commenced the stirring in God's people.

C. The Moving from the Preaching (Vs. 2)

1. The leaders responded (Vs. 2a)
2. The prophets helped (Vs. 2b)

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3. The people followed (Hag. 1:12, 14)

III. THE ANTAGONISM TOWARDS THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 3-5)

Concerning this section, Bible commentator M.K. Hall writes, “The section of the book from 5:3 to 6:13 could well be entitled the “Tatnai Parenthesis” as it details the opposition which arose from Tatnai, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates province, and his associates, as soon as the building was resumed in 520 BC.”

A. The Timing of the Attack (Vs. 3a)

1. Notice the phrase “At the same time”. As soon as the work recommenced, the devil got busy again! H.A. Ironside writes, “And, as might have been expected, their insolent adversaries are once more immediately active. Hardly have trowel and hammer begun to be used in the work of rebuilding or completing the house, when Tatnai, the Samaritan governor, and Shethar-boznai (new names to us), and their companions appear, and indignantly enquire, “Who had commanded you to build this house?”
2. For 15 years, the enemy had largely left them alone while they were defeated and distracted with their own selfish pursuits. That’s because a defeated, distracted, discouraged believer poses little threat to the devil!
3. But just as soon as they got revived and then reorientated towards the things of God, the enemy was stirred to renew his opposition. This is how the Christian life works. Those who do little to nothing for God have very little understanding of the battle that is faced by those who seek to do something for the cause of Christ.
4. We could easily get ourselves taken off the devil’s hit list as a church. Just down tools, turn the church into a social club, stop doing anything of real consequence for the Great Commission, focus on making people feel entertained and the devil would no doubt leave us alone. I would rather be in the trenches for the truth than at ease in error! Someone wisely observed, “It’s safer to be with God in the middle of war than it is to be apart from God in the middle of peace.”

B. The Tactic of the Attack (Vs. 3b-4)

The new strategy of the enemy was to:

1. Question the authorization of the work (Vs. 3b)
 - a. The tactic of the enemy this time was to question who had given them the authority to undertake the work.
 - b. The people of God wisely appealed to the decree of king Cyrus as the authorization for the work. They appealed to the higher authority.

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- c. In like manner, when the world tries to stop us from carrying out the Great Commission and bring us under their authority, we stand under the authority of the King of kings and His command to preach the Gospel to every creature.
2. Question the authorities over the work (Vs. 4)
 - a. Comparing this verse with verse 10 reveals that this was a second, follow up question asked of the godly remnant. The leaders of God's work are special targets for the enemy.
 - b. They replied to that question in a wise manner (See Vs. 11).

C. The Triumph over the Attack (Vs. 5)

1. The work was able to continue because it was under the watchful eye and Divine protection of God Almighty.
2. The thought of God's eye being upon His people is both comforting and convicting.
 - a. Comforting in the sense that it brings assurance to us that we are under God's gracious care and protection as we labour for Him.
 - b. Convicting in the sense that it makes us think about the spirit in which we approach our service. Do we serve with a consciousness that we are serving under the eye of our Heavenly Master and Lord?
3. "Oh, they had an earthly eye on them, but they had an eternal eye on them, they had a human eye on them but they had a heavenly eye on them, they had a wicked eye on them, but they had a watchful eye on them, they had a deadly eye on them, but hallelujah they had a Divine eye on them." (Pastor Denis Lyle)
4. 2 Chr. 16:9 "For **the eyes of the LORD** run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of *them* whose heart *is* perfect toward him."
5. Psalm 33:18 "Behold, **the eye of the LORD** *is* upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy;"
6. Psalm 34:15 "**The eyes of the LORD** *are* upon the righteous, and his ears *are open* unto their cry."

IV. THE APPEAL AGAINST THE PEOPLE OF GOD (VS. 6-17)

These verses provide a copy of the letter Tatnai and his companions sent to Darius the king. This is the second letter included by Ezra in the sacred record. The letter contains:

A. The Report of the Work (Vs. 6-10)

The report contains details of:

1. Their observation of the work's progress (Vs. 6-8)
 - a. They recognized that the work was prospering and advancing rapidly. The unsaved can recognise a genuine work of God.

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- b. They were not reporting this with joy but with concern and alarm. It grieves the enemies of the truth to see God’s work advance.
 - c. It is interesting that often the people who on the surface dismiss the Bible and Christianity as a “fairy tale” are the same people who dedicate so much time and effort to attacking the Word of God. If it is all a silly fairy story, why give it so much attention?
2. Their interrogation of the workers permission (Vs. 9-10)
- a. The devil’s attacks are relentless against the work of God and He is ready and willing to use many and varied “devices” (tactics) to stop God’s work.
 - b. The central focus of this renewed attack was to call into question the remnant’s authority to carry on the work. This can be intimidating and sow seeds of doubt in the heart. When Divine authority and human authority collide, wisdom, discernment and courage is needed to stand under God’s authority and continue the work.
 - c. Illustration: The recently passed, anti-Christian laws in Victoria.

B. The Reply of the Workers (Vs. 11-16)

Tatnai includes the courageous reply of the leaders of the work. They testified that they were working under:

1. The sanction of the Heavenly Sovereign (Vs. 11-12)
- Note the three parts to their reply:
- a. Their Confession of Almighty God (Vs. 11a)
 - i. “We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth” = they confess openly that they are servants of the God who is Sovereign over all the universe. The reference to “heaven and earth” emphasises God’s universal authority and dominion over the created universe. They appeal to the highest authority in the universe.
 - ii. When we are challenged as to who we are and what we are doing, we need to boldly confess ourselves as the people of God who are involved in a work that has the sanction of the Almighty. Remember, we have been authorized to carry out the work of the Great Commission by Christ who has been given “all power” in “heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18).
 - b. Their Conviction for Almighty God (Vs. 11b).
 - i. They were of the firm belief and persuasion that they were carrying out God’s Divine will in the rebuilding of the temple.
 - ii. Today we need to be prepared to confess that we are God’s servants and that the building up of the local New Testament church is the focus of God’s heart for this dispensation.

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- c. Their Chastisement by Almighty God (Vs. 12)
 - i. While they were bold and courageous in declaring themselves as God’s servants, this was coupled with a spirit of humility concerning their past failures. They not only testified as to who they were but also concerning where they came from.
 - ii. In like manner as believers our boldness is not to be a fleshly brashness and arrogance. We are to boldly declare our position in Christ but at the same time humbly testify of our past. This magnifies the grace and mercy of God in His dealings with us as a sinful people.
2. The sanction of an earthly sovereign (Vs. 13-16)

They now appealed to the written decree of Cyrus, the Persian monarch, as the justification of the work they were engaged in. Cyrus had decreed:

 - a. The rebuilding of the temple (Vs. 13).
 - b. The release of the temple vessels (Vs. 14-15).
 - c. Summary: When we are called into question as God’s people concerning our work and identity, we would do well to emulate the example of the godly remnant in Ezra’s day and boldly declare ourselves God’s servants operating under His Divine instructions.

C. The Request of the Writer (Vs. 17)

1. Evidently, Tatnai and his companions did not believe the claim concerning the Decree of Cyrus, hence his letter to Darius and his request that search be made for the decree. H.A. Ironside writes, “This letter, unlike the previous one, was not laced with so many outlandish claims and slanderous allegations. It seems that Tatnai and his companions were so full of disbelief that the Persian monarch (Cyrus) would give sanction to such an endeavour, wrote stating the simple facts, fully expecting the Jews claims to be repudiated and the work halted.”
2. No doubt they smugly expected that the Jewish remnant was lying and their work would be proven to be unlawful. It shows how God can bring the devices of the enemy to nought. God defends His interests and a work that has the sanction and blessing of God upon it cannot be stopped by the devil.

Conclusion:

1. How important is God’s work to you? What are your priorities? Your interests or God’s interests?
2. Do we earnestly seek to have God’s Divine favor and blessing on the work?

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3. Are we bold and unashamed to confess our allegiance and attachment to the King of kings?

Victory over the Enemy

Text: Ezra 6:1-22

Introduction:

1. Ezra 6 records the reversal of Tatnai's attempt to stop the work of God from going ahead. It is a wonderful testament to the power of God to give victory over the attacks of the enemy when God's people remain faithful at their post in the midst of the battle and keep on working for Him. Have a no retreat mindset as a believer!
2. The chapter also reminds us that God alone is the source of true victory. We are no match for the enemy with our own strength and resources but the power and Providential workings of God are more than enough to meet the challenge.
3. Concerning the structure of the chapter, M.K. Hall writes, "The first part of the chapter (1-12) is concerned with decrees – that of Cyrus, and three now made by Darius. The second section (Vs. 13-22) records the triumphant completion of the house of God and the joy which flowed from this and from obedience to the law of God in the celebration of the Passover."
4. We should also note that this chapter marks the end of the first main section in Ezra that deals with the rebuilding of the temple. Chapter 7-10 deals with the ministry of Ezra.
5. We will divide the chapter under 3 headings as we see God's hand work to bring about this victory.

I. THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORK (VS. 1-12)

All through Ezra we see God's hand moving in the hearts of the Persian kings to ensure His work can go ahead. It is a reminder of how "the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD (Prov. 21:1). God used two Persian decrees to preserve His work – one in the past from Cyrus and a new decree in the present from Darius. In fact, there are three decrees of Darius between verse 1-12. We could call them:

- The Decree to Search (Vs. 1-7)
- The Decree to Supply (Vs. 8-10)
- The Decree to Sentence (Vs. 11-12)

A. The Decree to Search (Vs. 1-7)

1. The Recovery of Cyrus' Decree (Vs. 1-2).
 - a. Where the roll was not found (Vs. 1). Search was made in the treasure house of Babylon but the copy of Cyrus' decree was not found.
 - b. Where the roll was found (Vs. 2). It was found at another palace in Achmetha which is noted as being in the province of the Medes.

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- i. Remember, the Persian Empire was made up of both the Medes and the Persians, the Persians eventually becoming the more dominant of the two groups.
 - ii. Achmetha was Cyrus' original capital, hence why the scroll was found there. Bible commentator M.K. Hall explains, "Greek historians of the period say that this city was the capital of the province of Media, and was Cyrus' capital city before the conquest of Babylon. It is also known that in 538 BC Cyrus, as was his wont, spent the summer in Ecbatana (Achmetha). Almost certainly, therefore, his decree charging the Jewish captives to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of the Lord was issued from this city, and it explains why the record was found in the palace at Achmetha."
 - c. Note: The discovery of the decree of Cyrus validated the claims of the godly remnant. It is important that when we are challenged as believers, we speak the truth so that when the world searches out our claims, our testimony is maintained when they find we spoke the truth. It reminds us of the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 4:1-2 "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have **renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully**; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." Don't lie to try and help out the cause of Christ! It will end in disaster. **The truth will always stack up to scrutiny!**
2. The Record of Cyrus' Decree (Vs. 3-5)
- We have encountered the content of Cyrus' decree earlier in the and it is quoted again here but now with some additional details. Cyrus decreed:
- a. The Rebuilding of the Temple (Vs. 3-4)
 - i. The place for the temple (Vs. 3a)
 - ii. The dimensions for the temple (Vs. 3b). "Its height and its width were each to be sixty cubits. No length is mentioned. Keil suggest this was because the length was assumed to be the same as that of Solomon's temple – 60 cubits. It is also interesting to note that the height and breadth of the first Temple were smaller than these dimensions in Zerubbabel's temple, being respectively thirty and twenty cubits (1 Kings 6:2). (Hall)
 - iii. The materials for the temple (Vs. 4a). The temple was to be made of great stones with timber supports. Peter picks up on this picture in the New Testament as he refers to

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believers as living stones in the church. “Ye also, as **lively stones**, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5) Christ is the Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20, 1 Pet. 2:6).

- iv. The provisions for the temple (Vs. 4b). The expenses of the project were to be covered out of the king’s treasury.
 - b. The Restoration of the Vessels (Vs. 5). There is an additional detail concerning the vessels in this verse. The king was concerned that each vessel be in its proper place – “every one to his place”. Every Christian needs to be in their proper place in the local church if it is going to run in a God-honouring fashion.
3. The Ratifying of Cyrus’ Decree (Vs. 6-7)
Darius’ instruction was clear, blunt and unambiguous.
 - a. Leave it be! (Vs. 6)
 - b. Let it be built! (Vs. 7)

B. The Decree to Supply (Vs. 8-10)

Darius now issues his own decree to aid the work. Under Persian law, he could not reverse Cyrus’ decree but he could add his own decree. God moved in his heart to ensure it was a favourable decree. Remember how Artaxerxes wrote a second decree as recorded in Esther that effectively dismantled the first.

1. The Materials (Vs. 8-9)
“God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply!”
(Hudson Taylor)
 - a. The construction costs of God’s house (Vs. 8).
 - b. The running costs of God’s house (Vs. 9-10).
2. The Motivation (Vs. 8b, 10)
The king was motivated to ensure:
 - a. The success of the project – “that they be not hindered” (Vs. 8b).
 - b. The supplications of the people – “and pray for the life of the king” (Vs. 10). This says something of Darius’ character as a heathen monarch. The Bible gives no indication that he became a true believer in the One True God of Israel but he evidently had a reverence for God and believed in the power of prayer. A good ruler will covet the prayers of God’s people. We are commanded to pray for those in positions of authority over us (1 Tim. 2:2).

C. The Decree to Sentence (Vs. 11-12)

A double warning is added by Darius to motivate obedience. There is a two-fold sentence against those who would disobey the king’s commandment and interfere with the work. There was:

1. A death sentence instituted (Vs. 11).

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- a. The command was not to be altered - “whosoever shall alter this word”. To tamper with or disobey the king’s command would be a most serious offense. If it was such a serious offence to alter an earthly king’s word, how much more serious is it to tamper with and disobey the Word of the King of kings! And yet the Word of God is being tampered with all the time in the modern version and by believers who try to twist the Word of God to say something it does not say (See Rev. 22:18). How many believers would not break certain laws of the land on account of the stiff penalties that would apply and yet think nothing of disobeying God Almighty.
 - b. The penalty was severe. The offender’s house was to be pulled down, then he was to be hung on timber from his own house. His house was then to be in ruins and never used again except for unclean purposes. Strong penalties for crime in a society is a good thing as it serves as a powerful deterrent to evil.
2. A Divine sentence invoked (Vs. 12)
- a. Darius further proclaims his desire that God Himself would destroy those who would try and damage and destroy God’s house.
 - b. It reminds us of the New Testament warning in 1 Cor. 3:17 “If any man **defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy**; for the temple of God is holy, which *temple* ye are.” The words ‘defile’ and ‘destroy’ come from the same Greek word ‘phtheiro’ which means to corrupt, ruin, destroy. Concerning this word A.T. Robertson writes, “God makes his home in the hearts of his people or the church in any given place like Corinth. It is a terrible thing to tear down ruthlessly a church or temple of God like an earthquake that shatters a building in ruins. This old verb ‘*phtheirō*’ means to corrupt, to deprave, to destroy. It is a gross sin to be a church-wrecker. There are actually a few preachers who leave behind them ruin like a tornado in their path.”

II. THE PROSPERING OF THE WORK (VS. 13-15)

The work went on, prospered and ultimately was completed. There were several things that helped bring about the success of the work.

A. The Defeat of the Adversary (Vs. 13)

1. The enemy’s opposition was paused by the Providential workings of God through Darius, giving the remnant space to complete the project.
2. This is the nature of the Christian life. There are times of intense battle followed by seasons of respite before the attack is renewed.

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Luke 4:13 “And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him **for a season.**”

3. You still have to build during the battle! The remnant did that during Tatnai’s offensive. Nehemiah and the people of God persisted with rebuilding the walls in the midst of repeated attacks from the enemy, the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other. But then the Lord in His mercy also gives us pauses in the battle so that His work can go ahead unhindered.

B. The Declaration of the Word (Vs. 14a)

1. The faithful preaching of Haggai and Zechariah was the key to the success of the work. The preaching of God’s Word brought challenge, encouragement and correction to the people of God and kept them energized in their service.
2. Concerning the prophet, H.A. Ironside writes, “The true prophet is the one whose words come from heaven to men on earth, searching the heart, reaching the conscience, and exposing the evil that may have come in.”
3. No work can last or prosper without the preaching of the Word of God. We believe in the primacy of preaching in the local church. A genuine work of God is built on the preaching of the Word of God. This is an important reminder in a day when preaching is being neglected in favor of feel-good speeches and pulpits are being replaced with bar stools and glass lecterns and preachers are being replaced with sissy, effeminate men with spiked hair and ripped jeans.
4. As a believer is you are going to “prosper” in your Christian walk you need to be under a sound preaching ministry in a separated, biblical local church. Only through the Word of God can we have true prosperity and success (See Josh. 1:7-8).

C. The Diligence of the Workers (Vs. 14b-15)

These saints of old:

1. Obeyed the command (Vs. 14b)
 - a. They obeyed the Heavenly Sovereign – “the God of Israel”. There is an important order in the verse. God’s authority is supreme and they were there by Divine appointment to rebuild the temple.
 - b. They obeyed the earthly sovereigns – Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are mentioned.
 - c. This project had the backing of four kings!
 - i. The King of kings.
 - ii. King Cyrus.
 - iii. King Darius.
 - iv. King Artaxerxes.
2. Finished the job (Vs. 15)

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- a. Twice it is noted that they “finished” the work. Today we have lots of starters and lots of quitters but few faithful finishers. Finish the race well that God has called you to run. Finish the work He has given to you!
- b. Ultimately, it was God who actually finished the work that He started but it was done through His people as they cooperated with Him. God will finish the work He started in you if you will walk with Him! Php. 1:6 “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ:”
- c. The work was completed in the sixth year of Darius’ reign. The work had gotten back underway in the second year of Darius (See Ez. 4:24) so it took around 4 years for them to complete the temple after the work was resumed. It was now around 20 years since they had returned and the initial foundation had been laid. Zechariah prophesied of Zerubbabel: “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it.” (Zech. 4:9)

III. THE PRAISE FOR THE WORK (VS. 16-22)

This section of the chapter records the rejoicing of the remnant in response to the completion of the work. Seeing God accomplish His work through His people is a wonderful joy and encouragement! The remnant demonstrated their gratitude through their:

A. Offerings to the Lord (Vs. 16-17)

- a. Offerings of worship (Vs. 17a)
They offered:
 - i. 100 bullocks.
 - ii. 200 rams.
 - iii. 400 lambs.
 - iv. Compared to the dedication of Solomon’s temple, this was tiny. Theirs was the day of “small things” but God was with them as much as when He was with Solomon.
- b. Offerings for sin (Vs. 17b)
 - i. Twelve goats are offered, one for each tribe of Israel. Interestingly there were only two main tribes represented in the returned remnant – Judah and Benjamin. The northern kingdom of Israel comprised of the other 10 tribes had been taken into captivity by Assyria before the southern kingdom comprised of Judah and Benjamin had been taken captive by Babylon.
 - ii. It reveals a sober mindset on the part of the returned remnant. There was a clear recognition of the enormity of the

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nation's sins, hence the sin offering. It reminds us that Christ is our sin offering and that cleansing is available for the believer.

B. Obedience to the Lord (Vs. 18-22)

Obedience in:

1. The structures of the Lord (Vs. 18)
 - a. They “set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses” in obedience to what was “written in the book of Moses”.
 - b. This reminds us of the New Testament truths that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33) and that God would have all things done “decently and in order” in His local churches (1 Cor. 14:40).
2. The services of the Lord (Vs. 19, 22)
 - a. The feast of Passover (Vs. 19). Approximately six weeks had gone by since the house had been completed on the third day of the twelfth month Adar. The first feast of the Lord in the new year to be celebrated on the 14th day of the first month was Passover. (Hall) The Passover commemorated the Jews deliverance from Egypt. No doubt as they celebrated it for the first time since returning to the land, they thought also of how God had delivered them from Babylon.
 - b. The feast of unleavened bread (Vs. 22)
3. The separation unto the Lord (Vs. 20a, 21b)

Note the two parts to their godly separation.

 - a. Separation from – “the filthiness of the heathen of the land”.
 - b. Separation to – “unto them...to seek the LORD God of Israel”.
 - i. They were separated unto the people of God. We need to be in the company of other likeminded believers who are also living a pure life of separation from sin, the world and error.
 - ii. They were separated unto God. This is the most important aspect. The purpose of their separation was that they might seek the Lord. Make sure both aspects of separation are real in your life.

Conclusion: Are you in a battle? Look to Christ for victory! And when God does give the victory don't forget to thank and praise Him for it.

Thanksgiving to God for the Victory

Text: Ezra 6:16-22

Introduction:

1. Ezra 6 records the reversal of Tatnai's attempt to stop the work of God from going ahead. It is a wonderful testament to the power of God to give victory over the attacks of the enemy when God's people remain faithful at their post in the midst of the battle and keep on working for Him. Have a no retreat mindset as a believer!
2. The chapter also reminds us that God alone is the source of true victory. We are no match for the enemy with our own strength and resources but the power and Providential workings of God are more than enough to meet the challenge.
3. Concerning the structure of the chapter, M.K. Hall writes, "The first part of the chapter (1-12) is concerned with decrees – that of Cyrus, and three now made by Darius. The second section (Vs. 13-22) records the triumphant completion of the house of God and the joy which flowed from this and from obedience to the law of God in the celebration of the Passover."
4. The suggested outline for the chapter is:
 - The Preservation of the Work (Vs. 1-12)
 - The Prospering of the Work (Vs. 13-15)
 - The Praise for the Work (Vs. 16-22)
5. We will briefly review the first two points we covered in the last message then study the final point.

I. THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORK (VS. 1-12)

All through Ezra we see God's hand moving in the hearts of the Persian kings to ensure His work can go ahead. It is a reminder of how "the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD (Prov. 21:1). God used Persian decrees to preserve His work – one in the past from Cyrus and several new decrees in the present from Darius.

A. The Decree to Search (Vs. 1-7)

B. The Decree to Supply (Vs. 8-10)

C. The Decree to Sentence (Vs. 11-12)

II. THE PROSPERING OF THE WORK (VS. 13-15)

The work went on, prospered and ultimately was completed. There were several things that helped bring about the success of the work.

A. The Defeat of the Adversary (Vs. 13)

B. The Declaration of the Word (Vs. 14a)

C. The Diligence of the Workers (Vs. 14b-15)

These saints of old:

1. Obeyed the command (Vs. 14b)

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- a. They obeyed the Heavenly Sovereign – “the God of Israel”. There is an important order in the verse. God’s authority is supreme and they were there by Divine appointment to rebuild the temple.
 - b. They obeyed the earthly sovereigns – Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are mentioned.
 - c. This project had the backing of four kings!
 - i. The King of kings.
 - ii. King Cyrus.
 - iii. King Darius.
 - iv. King Artaxerxes.
2. Finished the job (Vs. 15)

III. THE PRAISE FOR THE WORK (VS. 16-22)

This section of the chapter records the rejoicing of the remnant in response to the completion of the work. Seeing God accomplish His work through His people is a wonderful joy and encouragement! The remnant demonstrated their gratitude through their:

A. Offerings to the Lord (Vs. 16-17)

- Offerings of praise, thanksgiving and gifts to the Lord are the heart response of the believer for what the Lord has done.
- a. Offerings of joy (Vs. 16)
 - i. “The theme of joy catches the reader’s attention in this chapter as also in chapter 3. In chap. 3 it was joy at the laying of the foundation. Here it is joy at the completion of that house (Vs. 16).” (M.K. Hall)
 - ii. Thankfulness is a very important part of the Christian life! 1 Thess. 5:18 “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Thanksgiving is the golden thread that runs through the recorded prayers of the Apostle Paul. Thanksgiving will keep your heart sweet and perfumed as a believer. Un-thankfulness can lead to a devastating and destructive course in one’s life (Rom. 1:21).
 - b. Offerings of worship (Vs. 17a)

They offered:

 - i. 100 bullocks.
 - ii. 200 rams.
 - iii. 400 lambs.
 - iv. Compared to the dedication of Solomon’s temple, this was tiny. 2 Chronicles 7:5 “And king Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty and two thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep: so the king and all the people dedicated the house of God.”

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- v. Theirs was the day of “small things” but God was still with them as much as when He was with Solomon. Zec. 4:10 “For who hath despised the day of small things?”
 - vi. Dennett wisely observes, “Christ remains the same for His people in a day of difficulty as in a season of prosperity. To be in the power of this raises us, as nothing else can, above our circumstances, and gives us courage to press onward whatever the perils of the path.”
- c. Offerings for sin (Vs. 17b)
- i. This is the first mention of the sin offering in the Book of Ezra. It wasn't the Day of Atonement, as they would have to wait seven months for that to arrive. It appears the remnant had a consciousness of the enormity of the nations sins and hence why they offered the sin offering. (Hall) A soberness and sensitivity towards sin and a willingness to confess it is a feature of revival.
 - ii. Twelve goats are offered, one for each tribe of Israel. Interestingly there were only two main tribes represented in the returned remnant – Judah and Benjamin. The northern kingdom of Israel comprised of the other 10 tribes had been taken into captivity by Assyria before the southern kingdom comprised of Judah and Benjamin had been taken captive by Babylon. The fact there was an offering to cover each tribe and thus the whole nation speaks points to the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice to cover every sin. 1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”
 - iii. The sin offering reminds us that Christ is our sin offering and that cleansing is available for the believer. 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

B. Obedience to the Lord (Vs. 18-22)

Obedience is another important facet of true worship (John 14:15, 15:10). Obedience in:

1. The structures of the Lord (Vs. 18)
 - a. They “set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses” in obedience to what was “written in the book of Moses”. Each one needed to be in his proper place of service in the house of God.
 - b. This reminds us of the New Testament truths that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33) and that God would have all things done “decently and in order” in His local churches (1 Cor. 14:40). As a New Testament priest (1 Pet. 2:5, 9, Rev. 1:6), it is

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important that you be in your place in the local church (1 Tim. 3:15) to offer spiritual sacrifices and serve. 1 Peter 2:5 “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up **spiritual sacrifices**, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

2. The services of the Lord (Vs. 19, 22)
 - a. The feast of Passover (Vs. 19). Approximately six weeks had gone by since the house had been completed on the third day of the twelfth month Adar. The first feast of the Lord in the new year to be celebrated on the 14th day of the first month was Passover. (Hall) The Passover commemorated the Jews deliverance from Egypt. No doubt as they celebrated it for the first time since returning to the land, they thought also of how God had delivered them from Babylon. The shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb would remind them again of their need of redemption. The feast of Passover also points to Christ – “For even **Christ our passover** is sacrificed for us.” (1 Cor. 5:7)
 - b. The feast of unleavened bread (Vs. 22). Leaven is a type of sin and corruption in the Bible. “During the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Jews had to remove all yeast (leaven) from their dwellings, a picture of personal purification. To a Jew, yeast was a symbol of evil, so Passover was a time to put away all evil from their lives. What good is a dedicated temple if you don’t have a dedicated people?” (Wiersbe)
3. The separation unto the Lord (Vs. 20a, 21b)

Note the two parts to their godly separation.

 - a. Separation from – “the filthiness of the heathen of the land”. The purity of the priests is also mentioned – “For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure” (Vs. 20a). How we need believers today who will be separate from the wickedness of the world and walk in purity. We are called to a distinct, holy and separated walk. Sadly, this principle is largely ignored, dismissed our outright rejected in this Laodicean age.
 - b. Separation to – “unto them...to seek the LORD God of Israel”.
 - i. They were separated unto the people of God. We need to be in the company of other likeminded believers who are also living a pure life of separation from sin, the world and error. 2 Tim. 2:22 “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, **with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.**” 1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, **we have fellowship one with another**, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son

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cleanseth us from all sin.” It has been wisely said that “separation from evil is God’s principle of unity.”

- ii. They were separated unto God. This is the most important aspect. The purpose of their separation was that they might seek the Lord. Make sure both aspects of separation are real in your life or you will leave a vacuum. Remove sinful things from your life but be sure to replace them with godly things. The purpose of separation from the world is that we might be consecrated for the Lord’s use.
- c. We note these two aspects to separation in 2 Cor. 6:14-18. Separation from sin, error and the world are essential if we are going to know close fellowship with the Father.

Conclusion: Is thanksgiving a part of your life? Do you demonstrate your thankfulness to God through spiritual offerings and practical obedience? Are you living a pure and separated life – separated from sin, error and compromise in company with other separated believers in order that you might be devoted and consecrated to God?

God's Hand upon God's Man

Text: Ezra 7:1-10

Introduction:

1. Ezra 7 opens the second section of the Book and for the first time the Author of the Book (Ezra) is introduced to the storyline. The name 'Ezra' means 'help'. It is the shortened form of the name Azariah which means "The Lord is my keeper or helper". We are reminded of our suggested outline for the Book of Ezra:
 - The Return of the Saints (Chap. 1-2)
 - The Rebuilding of the Sanctuary (Chap. 3-6)
 - The Reformation of the Saints (Chap. 7-10)
2. It is of interest to note the importance of both prophetic preaching and precise teaching in the Book of Ezra. Haggai and Zechariah were used of God to stir up the saints with their fiery preaching. Ezra was more of an instructor in the Word. We need both preaching that challenges us and teaching that instructs us in the Christian life. Good exposition contains elements of both!
3. Ezra chapter 7 divides neatly into two parts. In verse 1-10 we are introduced to godly Ezra and then in verse 11-28 we are provided with a copy of Artaxerxes letter to Ezra and Ezra's concluding words of praise for God's blessing (Vs. 27-28).
4. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra) and God's work (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).
5. In this message we will study the first section of the chapter (Vs. 1-10) and see not just the evidence of God's hand upon Ezra but the reason for God's hand being so mightily upon him in verse 10. Ezra 7:10 reveals the secret behind Ezra's spiritual success and also teaches us how we might also know the same spiritual success for God's glory. We will divide the text under three headings to aid our study of this important section of the Book.

I. THE HERITAGE OF GOD'S MAN (VS. 1-5)

The opening five verses of the chapter detail Ezra's priestly lineage. This would help establish his credibility and authority as a teacher to the Jewish remnant. In a similar way, the Apostle Paul frequently appealed to his apostleship in his Epistles so they would be received as authoritative by the believers. In studying Ezra's godly heritage, we note that he had:

A. A Privileged Pedigree (Vs. 1-5)

1. A descendant of the high priest.
 - a. Ezra's lineage is traced all the way back to Aaron the first high priest. Ezra did not occupy the office of high priest himself but he was in family line of the high priest.

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- b. We are reminded of the privilege we enjoy through salvation of being a part of the family of our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. His priesthood is far superior to the Levitical priesthood as Christ is a priest “forever after the order of Melchizedek” (See Hebrews 7). Christ is a perfect, pure and eternal High Priest. Hebrews 4:14-16 encourages us, “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as *we are, yet* without sin. **Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace**, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”
2. A descendant of notable names. A couple of names are worth noting:
 - a. Zadok the son of Ahitub – Zadok was the high priest during David’s reign. He is noted for his loyalty to king David especially in the Absalom rebellion.
 - b. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar – Phinehas is noted in Scripture for his zeal for holiness in the incident recorded in Numbers 25 when Israel committed whoredom with the daughters of Moab. Phinehas slew two of the principal offenders with a javelin – Zimri, “the son of Salu, a prince of a chief house among the Simeonites” (Num. 25:14) and Cozbi, “the daughter of Zur; he was head over a people, and of a chief house in Midian.” (Vs. 15)
 - c. The fact Ezra had these godly people in his lineage did not automatically mean he would live for God. Praise God he did not throw away His godly heritage but lived for God himself in his day and time.

B. A Priestly Position

1. Being in the lineage of the high priest made Ezra a priest himself. It reminds us of the truth that as believers we are all priests of God with direct access to our Heavenly High Priest. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. The Roman Catholic Church greatly errs with its creation of a priest class.
2. 1 Peter 2:9 “But ye *are* a chosen generation, **a royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light:”
3. Rev. 1:5-6 “And from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness, *and* the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his

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own blood, And hath made us **kings and priests unto God** and his Father; to him *be* glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

4. Whether you have a godly heritage or not in your ancestry, you have a godly inheritance in Christ and God can empower you like He did Ezra of old to live in the power of your union with Christ and impact your generation for the truth.

II. THE HAND UPON GOD’S MAN (VS. 6-9)

This section of Ezra is not a record of what Ezra could do but a testament to what God did through Ezra. The key to it all is found in the phrase “according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him” (See Vs. 6, 9 & 28). In fact, the whole of the Book of Ezra is a testament to hand of God working in history. We see God’s hand working in the hearts of heathen kings, the hand of God stirring up His people to return and rebuild, the hand of God protecting against the attacks of the enemies etc.... In these verses we see evidence of God’s Hand at work in:

A. The Plea that was Granted (Vs. 6)

1. Evidently Ezra had appealed to the current Persian Monarch, requesting permission to lead a new group of pilgrims back to the promised land. God’s hand worked in Artaxerxes heart to grant this request. This was Artaxerxes I known as Artaxerxes Longimanus of in history.
2. Approximately 58 years had elapsed since the temple had been rebuilt so there is a sizable time gap between Ezra 6 and 7 (516 to 459 BC). During that time, spiritual decline had taken place in the returned remnant. Some 78 years after Zerubbabel and Joshua had left Babylon, Ezra follows in their footsteps.
3. God raised up Ezra to go back to be a spiritual help to His people. God moved in the heart of the Persian king not only to grant Ezra permission to return to Jerusalem, he also backed the endeavor financially (See Vs. 11-28).

B. The People who were Gathered (Vs. 7)

1. God’s hand not only raised up Ezra to lead His people in the ways of God but also raised up a fresh band of faithful people to accompany him. This represented a fresh remnant that was prepared to return to the promised land.
2. This is something we see throughout biblical and church history. When God raises up a man to do His work, He also provides the helpers and supporters for his man and work.
3. It reminds us of how when Saul became king “...there went with him a and of men, **whose hearts God had touched.**”

C. The Protection that was Given (Vs. 8-9)

1. A timeframe is given for the journey that was undertaken.

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- a. The journey began on the **first** day of the **first** month in the seventh year of Artaxerxes reign (Vs. 9a). This represented a new beginning for Ezra and the new remnant about to return. Praise God that He is in the business of reviving His people and giving them fresh starts in the Christian life!
 - b. It appears it took them the first 12 days to organize the caravan and then they departed for Jerusalem on the 12th day of the month (Ezra 8:31) from the river of Ahava.
 - c. They arrive in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month so the whole endeavor took approx. 4 months from start to finish (Vs. 9b).
2. The success of the journey was because of “the good hand of his God upon him”. We can be encouraged that God’s good hand upon us is the key to us completing our Christian journey successfully for the Lord. We can be encouraged that God’s hand will be upon what He calls us to do for Him.

III. THE HOLINESS OF GOD’S MAN (VS. 10)

This verse reveals the secret behind Ezra’s spiritual success. It is the key to understanding why God’s hand of blessing was so mightily upon Ezra. If there was one word that could summarize the life and character of Ezra it would be the word **‘Scripture’**. The reason God used Him so mightily was because of his relationship to God and God’s Word. Observe four facets of Ezra’s relationship to God and His Word. Ezra was:

A. A Studier of the Scriptures – “a ready scribe” (Vs. 6a, 10a)

There are two phrases that reveal Ezra as a passionate, diligent student of the Word.

1. Ezra was Skilled with the Scriptures – “a ready scribe” (Vs. 6a)
 - a. The word ‘ready’ means “skillful, diligent”. Because Ezra was diligent in his study of God’s Word, he became skilled in understanding, interpreting and applying it.
 - b. We are reminded of the New Testament command to **“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”** Interestingly the word ‘study’ here literally means “to give diligence, make haste, exert one’s self, be earnest”. (2. Tim. 2:15) Webster defines the word ‘study’ as “Literally, a setting of the mind or thoughts upon a subject; hence, application of mind to books, to arts or science, or to any subject, for the purpose of learning what is not before known.”
 - c. Ezra’s belief in the Divine nature of the Scriptures was what him the passion to study them so diligently. Notice the law of God is described as “the law of Moses, **which the LORD God of Israel**

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had given". He did not approach the Bible like he would another book written by man. He knew this was God's Word!

d. Why should we be passionate students of the Bible? Because it is the Divinely inspired, infallible, indestructible, pure, preserved, eternal Word of the Living God!

i. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 "**All scripture is given by inspiration of God**, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: **That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished** unto all good works."

ii. 1 Thess. 2:13 "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, **ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God**, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

2. Ezra Searched the Scriptures – "to seek the law" (Vs. 10a)

a. This was more than just reading the Word of God. It reveals Ezra's desire to understand and know God's Word.

b. Do you want to be used of God? Be a Studious Scripture-soaked Saint!

c. True success is determined by our relationship to the Scriptures. There is much talk about 'success' today but interestingly, the only time the word appears in the Scriptures is in Joshua 1:8 – "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good **success**." Ezra was a living testimony of the Josh. 1:8 promise.

B. A Lover of the Scriptures – "prepared his heart" (Vs. 10a)

The conjunction 'for' provides the reason and explanation as to why God's blessing was upon Ezra as described in the previous verses. Do you want to be used of God? Be a Studious Scripture-soaked Saint! True success is determined by our relationship to the Scriptures. The only time the word 'success' appears in the Scriptures is in Joshua 1:8 – "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then **thou shalt make thy way prosperous**, and then thou shalt have good **success**." Ezra was a living testimony of the truth of this promise.

1. Ezra's Heart Preparation – "Ezra had prepared his heart"

a. Prov. 4:23 reminds us that the issues of life flow out of the heart. Here we get to the source of Ezra's zeal for the Word of God. He prepared his heart to find out what God had said and then to apply it to his life.

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- b. Ezra studied God's Word diligently because He loved the Word of God and most importantly the God who gave the Word. It was a vital part of His relationship with God. Someone wisely said, "If you love God for who He is, you will love Him for what He says."
- c. We are reminded of the principle of preparation for the work God has called us to. Whom God calls He prepares and the most important preparation for any work of God is spiritual, heart preparation. The head is involved in the process but the goal is truth in the "inward parts" (See Psalm 51:6). If you believe God has called you to the ministry of preaching and teaching God's Word, you need to prepare!
- d. Ezra's Heart Passion – "to seek the law of the LORD". His heart for God led him on a quest to know the mind, heart and will of God as revealed in the Word. Baker and Carpenter write concerning the word 'seek', "Its most important theological meaning involves studying or inquiring into the Law of the Lord." M.K. Hall adds, "So Ezra determined in his own heart that he would **leave no stone unturned** in his endeavour to understand and master the Law of Moses, or, as he rightly recognised it to be, "the law of the Lord."

C. A Doer of the Scriptures – "to seek the law...and to do it" (Vs. 10b)

- 1. Ezra was not just a hearer of the Word, he was a Doer of the Word. He was not just filling his head with Bible knowledge with no accompanying life change. His study of God's Word was for life change.
- 2. Notice the important order in the verse. He studied and obeyed God's Word before he taught God's Word. We need to be just as passionate about the doing as we are about the knowing when it comes to God's Word. This is a vital pre-requisite to an effective teaching ministry. Nothing undermines the public ministry of the Word so much as hypocrisy in the life of the one proclaiming it.
- 3. We understand that knowledge possessed does not automatically mean knowledge applied. There are many believers who don't lack in Bible knowledge but severely lack in the area of obedience.
- 4. The Bible warns us of the subtle danger of self-deception in this area, thinking we are right with God because we are hearers of the Word. James 1:22-25 "But be ye **doers of the word**, and **not hearers only, deceiving your own selves**. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

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D. A Teacher of the Scriptures – “and to teach in Israel” (Vs. 10c)

1. Ezra had a zeal to impart the truths of God’s Word to others. Each believer needs to learn the Word of God, not only for their own benefit but that they might be a channel of blessing to others also.
2. Even if you are not called to full time ministry (e.g., as a pastor), your aim should still be to equip yourself in God’s Word, not only for your own spiritual growth and progress but that you might also be a help to others. In fact, the Bible reproves believers who ought to have matured from milk to meat but have not.
3. Hebrews 5:12-14 “For when for the time **ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again** which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Conclusion: How important is God’s Word to you? Is it a priority to you to read, study, love and obey it? Are you allowing God to prepare you for the work He has for you?

God's Hand upon God's Work

Text: Ezra 7:11-28

Introduction:

1. Ezra chapter 7 divides neatly into two parts. In verse 1-10 we are introduced to godly Ezra and then in verse 11-28 we are provided with a copy of Artaxerxes letter to Ezra and Ezra's concluding words of praise for God's blessing (Vs. 27-28).
2. We need to remember that there is a time gap of approx. 58 years between Ezra 6 and 7 (516 to 459 BC). Some 78 years after Zerubbabel and Joshua had left Babylon, Ezra follows in their footsteps. During that time, spiritual decline had taken place in the returned remnant, particularly in the area of marriage.
3. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra) and God's work (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Wiersbe writes, "If you could have interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, "The good hand of the Lord was upon me", a phrase that is found six times in Ezra 7 & 8 (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Nothing but the blessing of God can explain how an obscure Jewish priest and scholar, born in Babylonian captivity, could accomplish so much for God and Israel when so much was working against him."
4. In our last message we studied the first section of the chapter (Vs. 1-10) and saw not only the reality of God's hand upon Ezra but the reason for God's hand upon Ezra. Ezra was a Scripture studying, Scripture loving, Scripture living man and was therefore in a place where God could use him mightily. We now continue with the theme of God's hand upon His work as revealed in King Artaxerxes' letter.

Note firstly,

I. THE PROVISION FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 11-24)

Hudson Taylor, the celebrated missionary to China once said, "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply." In these verses we see how God moved mightily to ensure the ministry Ezra was called to was abundantly supplied.

A. The Provision of Manpower (Vs. 11-14)

1. The Provision of a Godly Teacher (Vs. 11-12, 14)

The letter is addressed to Ezra and is a reminder that when God does a work, he raises up a man to lead that work.

- a. Ezra's Credentials (Vs. 11-12). We are reminded of Ezra's godly credentials by the **titles** the king uses for Ezra in the opening section of his letter. Ezra was:

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- i. A Sanctified (set apart) Man – “Ezra the priest”. As noted in our last message, Ezra was from the line of the High Priest, tracing all the way back to Aaron. Therefore, he was a priest Himself. He was set apart by God to be a leader of God’s people. Ezra was a true priest as it was always God’s intention that His priests also be teachers of the law (See Lev. 10:11). We have also been set apart by God to be His spiritual priests in the New Testament era (See 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6, 5:10).
 - ii. A Scriptural Man – “the scribe”. Initially the scribes were merely copyists of the Scriptures but over time they became expositors of the Scriptures and Ezra was such a man. His was not a mere intellectual interaction with the Scriptures but a spiritual interaction whereby he sought to understand the Word of God in order that he might live according to God’s precepts (See Vs. 10).
 - b. Ezra’s Commission (Vs. 14). There was to be:
 - i. A search – “inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (Vs. 14a) The word ‘inquire’ means “to make search”. In fact, this same Hebrew word is translated that way four times in the Book of Ezra – “search may be made” (4:15), “search hath been made” (4:19), “let there be search made” (5:17), “search was made” (6:1). He was to diligently look into the spiritual state of the people of God. Godly leaders should be concerned about the spiritual state of God’s people.
 - ii. A standard – “according to the law of thy God” (Vs. 14b). The moral and spiritual state of the people of God was to be assessed on the basis of Divine truth and dealt with in light of God’s truth. Ezra was to declare God’s mind from God’s Word on the condition of God’s people and he did just that. He was no politician preacher who toned down the force of God’s Word to make himself more popular with the people.
2. The Provision of a godly Team (Vs. 13)
 - a. God moved in the hearts of a fresh remnant of people to join in this godly endeavor with Ezra. In 537 BC, the first wave of Jewish refugees, about 50,000 of them, returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel’s leadership to rebuild the temple. Now, in 458, Ezra was authorized to lead the second group, 1, 500 men plus women and children.
 - b. These were companions for Ezra, not conscripts. The king recognized the need for the volunteers to go “of their own freewill”.

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- c. How the work of God needs not only godly leaders like Ezra but also godly men and women who have a heart to make themselves available to assist God's men as they carry out the calling God has for them.

B. The Provision of Materials (Vs. 15-24)

God provided for the financial needs of this endeavor in a most remarkable and amazing way. When God calls a man to do a work for Him, He supplies the needs to ensure that His work is done.

Remember that God supplies for **His Work**, not every idea we may have we think we should do for Him. There are a number of means of provision outlined in the text:

1. The King's Contribution (Vs. 15, 19)
 - a. The people involved in giving – the king and his counsellors. This was a contribution from the king and his court to the project. God moved in the hearts of these heathen men to financially assist the house of God in Jerusalem.
 - b. The principle of their giving – the offering was “freely offered” and most importantly it was “offered **unto** the God of Israel”. While the motivation in the heart of this pagan king may have been partly superstition, he clearly had a respect for Israel's God which lead to his favorable support to the project.
 - c. The particulars of their giving – “silver and gold” (Vs. 15); “vessels” (Vs. 19). As the other temple vessels were carried back to Jerusalem with the first remnant, it seems likely these were additional vessels contributed by the king.
 - d. Note: If a heathen king could contribute financially to the house of God, how much more should we who know God personally be prepared to contribute to the New Testament house of God (local church)!
2. The people's offering – “with the freewill offering of the people” (Vs. 16-18). A contribution was made by the people of God still in Babylon.
 - a. In the work of the Gospel, some are called to pioneer and lead the work of God both home and abroad. Others are called to the very important and vital ministry of support. You may not have a call to be a full-time pastor, church planter, evangelist or missionary but you can be a financial supporter of God's work and help keep home base strong and stable.
 - b. The **voluntary nature** of the offerings is emphasized again twice – “the freewill offering of the people...offering willingly”. We are reminded of the timeless biblical principle that the primary means God uses to finance His work is through the freewill tithes and offerings of God's people. When God does a

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work, He moves the hearts of His people to supply the financial and material needs of that work.

3. The king's instructions (Vs. 17-18) How the offerings were to be used is outlined in these verses. Instructions were given concerning:
 - a. The primary use of the funds (Vs. 17). The funds were to be used to finance the running costs of the Temple, particularly in relation to the costs of the offerings.
 - b. The procedure for surplus funds (Vs. 18). Some liberty was afforded Ezra and his team with any funds that might be left over. Two safeguards would help prevent the funds from being misappropriated:
 - i. Ezra was to use the funds in consultation with the "brethren". This is a very wise principle we find often in the Scriptures in relation to the disbursement of funds the Lord has provided for His work. In the New Testament church, it is only natural that the Pastors as overseers of the assembly provide leadership in relation to the use of church funds in consultation with church office bearers (e.g., Deacons) but the "brethren" still need to be afforded an opportunity to be a part of the final decisions. The annual church budget is a good, practical way this can be done.
 - ii. Ezra was to use any extra funds "after the will of your God". This is the highest governing principle of all. Any extra moneys were to be spent in accordance with the revealed will of God.
4. The king's treasury (Vs. 20). This reveals the high level of trust Artaxerxes had in Ezra's character! What a testimony he must have had in heathen Babylon! We again wonder in amazement at the abundance of God's provision.
5. The king's treasurers (Vs. 21-22). The king now issues a further decree to the treasurers responsible for collecting the taxes in the provinces of Judea and surrounds that they be prepared to assist Ezra with resources that might be required for the temple. Caps are put on silver, wheat, wine and oil but not limit on salt. While there were caps, the provisions were still generous. For example, a hundred talents of silver would be nearly four tons of silver! (Wiersbe)
6. The king's attitude (Vs. 23). There is a real emphasis in Artaxerxes letter on the importance of the work being carried out:
 - a. Diligently (Vs. 23) – diligence is the opposite to idleness and sloppiness. Diligence is the outworking of the right attitude and mindset. The work of God deserves our best. Sloppiness,

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laziness, idleness and passivity have no place in God's work. Service for the Lord should be approached in a disciplined manner.

- b. Speedily (Vs. 17, 21 & 26) – doing things speedily is really a subset of diligence. God's work needs people who will carry it out diligently and without delay. There is a time to wait on the Lord to reveal His will on certain things in our lives and we should avoid fleshly haste in our decision making (Prov. 19:2). However, so much of God's will for the Christian life has already been revealed and to delay in carrying it out amounts to disobedience. The king's wishes had been made known and were to be obeyed at once. In like manner, the orders from the King of kings should be attended to without delay!
7. The king's tax relief (Vs. 24). The king also decreed tax exemption for the temple priesthood, singers, porters and ministers. Christian nations that have been influenced by the Bible generally provide some kind of tax relief to churches. For example, Churches are tax exempt in Australia. This is a reflection of the influence the Bible has had on our history. It is right and appropriate that the government provide such tax relief to God's house.

Note secondly,

II. THE PROTECTION FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 25-26)

The house of God was to be protected by:

A. Godly Overseers (Vs. 25)

King Artaxerxes commanded Ezra to:

1. Elect the wise (Vs. 25a)
 - a. Their principal qualification was that they were to be men who knew "the laws of thy God". They were then to judge righteous judgment based not on their own opinions but the revealed truth of God's Word.
 - b. The New Testament church does not have a judiciary function within government. The church and the state have separate functions. However, within the sphere of their oversight in the local church, the Eternal, unchanging standard of God's Word should be the basis of all faith and practice. In the words of our Statement of Faith, "We believe it (the Bible) to be the sole and final authority for all faith and practice of a Christian, and **the supreme standard** by which all human conduct, creeds and opinions shall be tried."
 - c. Judgments and decisions of a spiritual nature are to be made in the church by God's appointed overseers. Such men must be

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men of the Word who will seek to apply the truths and principles of God's Word to every situation that arises. Many people want the preacher to deal with spiritual matters in the local church in the way the world would deal with it (e.g., the political approach) but he cannot afford to do this! The Word of God is the only standard for the local church and all of God's people must yield and submit to that standard.

- d. Godly overseers who know God's Word and seek to diligently lead according to God's Word play a tremendously important role in the spiritual protection of the local assembly.
2. Educate the ignorant (Vs. 25b). Those who were ignorant of God's law were to be instructed by Ezra and other godly leaders appointed by him. Ignorance of the whole council of God's Word is one of the great blights on the church in our day and the pulpit ministry must take a leading role in seeking to fix this problem.

B. Government Order (Vs. 26)

Artaxerxes decree included laws to deal with the disobedient and rebellious. Judgment was to be executed:

1. Speedily – it has been expressed as a legal maxim that “justice delayed is justice denied”. Crimes in a society should be dealt with swiftly but this is often not the approach in our society today.
2. Firmly – four possible punishments our listed which the magistrates and judges of the land could impose on offenders, no doubt depending on the severity of the crimes committed. They were:
 - a. Death.
 - b. Banishment.
 - c. Confiscation of goods.
 - d. Imprisonment.

Note thirdly,

III. THE PRAISE FOR GOD'S WORK (VS. 27-28)

The final two verses of this chapter contain Ezra's words of praise in response to the moving of God's hand on behalf of His people. “This is the first occurrence of first-person narrative in the book; it continues through 9:15.” (Wiersbe) We must always remember to give God all the glory for any success in His work. Ezra expresses thanksgiving and praise for:

A. God's Hand Working in Artaxerxes' Heart (Vs. 27)

1. Ezra recognized that everything that was taking place as due to the mighty hand of the all-powerful, sovereign God. Ezra claims zero credit and zero glory for himself. If it wasn't for God, none of this would have happened. We would do well to remind ourselves that apart from Christ, we also can do nothing (John 15:5).

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2. God had sovereignly put it in the heart of this heathen king to “beautify the house of the LORD”. God is so powerful; He can even work in the heart of an unsaved ruler. We are reminded of the truth that **“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”** (Prov. 21:1)

B. God’s Hand working in Ezra’s Life (Vs. 28)

God had moved on Ezra’s behalf in at least three ways. God’s hand had:

1. Granted Ezra favor before the king (Vs. 28a).
2. Strengthened Ezra for the task (Vs. 28b). The word ‘strengthened’ means “made strong” and the same word is used by the Lord to exhort Joshua – “be strong”, “only be thou strong”, and again, “be strong” (Josh 1:6, 7 & 9). In the N.T. Paul exhorted Timothy, “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”. (2 Tim. 2:1)
3. Enabled Ezra to lead others (Vs. 28c).

Conclusion: How much do we earnestly desire for God’s hand to rest upon us as a church? How much do you desire God’s hand upon your life as one of His children? If your desire is to be blessed like Ezra then follow his example and love, study, live and teach God’s Word.

God's Hand upon God's People

Part 1

Text: Ezra 8:1-23

Introduction:

1. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra), God's work and God's people (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).
2. "Chapter 8 (like chap. 2) provides the register of those who returned as Ezra's companions (Vs. 1-14); and then records the preparations at the river Ahava for the journey (Vs. 15-30; the journey itself (Vs. 31); and the arrival in Jerusalem (Vs. 32-36)." (M.K. Hall)
3. In this chapter, we see God's hand of protection and preservation upon His people as they make the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.
4. Ezra 8 is a testament of:
 - The record of the returning remnant.
 - The godly leadership of Ezra.
 - The protecting power of God.
5. We will break the chapter into six segments for our study.

Note firstly,

I. THE SURRENDERED FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 1-14)

This section of the chapter provides a record of this new remnant of people who returned with Ezra. Ezra gathers approximately eighteen men who are heads of Jewish families who influence those within their family groups to join the expedition. The result was a total of approx. 1,515 men, plus women and children, who agreed to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. This genealogy reminds us that this remnant was:

A. Submitted to God

1. These dear men and women had heeded the call to join Ezra and return to Jerusalem. This was a huge **step of faith** for these people as most of them probably grew up in Babylon and were comfortably settled there. Many others chose to remain in Babylon and never return to the promised land.
2. The important role of the heads of homes is again emphasized in Scripture. The "chief of the fathers" are mentioned by name and then the number of men that accompanied each of them from each family group. These men were surrendered and their example had an influence on their relatives.

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- a. God could say of Abraham, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.” (Gen. 18:19)
- b. 1 Cor. 11:3 “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and **the head of the woman is the man**; and the head of Christ *is* God.”
3. It is a wonderful thing when God works in family groups. We need to remember how important it is that Christian men who are heads of their homes be totally yielded to the Lord. Their role and place of influence cannot be overstated. When the head of the home is not surrendered to God, it makes it very hard for his wife and children to go forward for the Lord.

B. Recognized by God

1. While some names are listed, most of this remnant as with the first group of pioneers recorded in Chapter 2 are unnamed. We simply are given a number.
2. They were unnamed heroes of the faith but while their names are unknown to us each and every one of them was and is known to God.
3. God allows some to be named heroes of the faith in this life to inspire and encourage us but that is not the case for most of us. The most important thing is now whether we have a name known by others in this life but that we are known to our God and that He will reward us for faithful service.

Note secondly,

II. THE SERVANTS FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 15-20)

A. The Problem concerning Servants (Vs. 15-17)

1. Ezra’s Discernment (Vs. 15)
 - a. Having gathered the people together to the river Ahava, Ezra took time to review the people. This is indicated by the phrase “and I viewed the people”. Ezra then “found” that there was an absence of Levites.
 - b. Ezra knew the people he was ministering to and was discerning. He detected the absence of the Levites. This man was astute, alert and watchful. Blessed are the people who have wise leaders watching over them who plan, prepare and avoid rushing the people of God in decisions without prayerful forethought and.
2. Ezra’s Dilemma (Vs. 15, 17b)

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- a. There was a shortage of “ministers” (servants) for the house of God. The same problem persists in our day. The problem is not that there is a lack of work to do for the Lord but a lack of willing servants to do the work.
- b. This is why Christ commanded his disciples to pray for labourers for the harvest field. Luke 10:2 “Therefore said he unto them, **The harvest truly *is* great, but the labourers *are* few:** pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest.”
3. Ezra’s Delegation (Vs. 16-17)
 - a. To address the problem, Ezra puts together a delegation of 11 men to go and seek for willing servants to join the team.
 - b. It is noted that these men were “men of understanding”. Evidently, they were mature and godly men who could be trusted with such an undertaking. How God’s work needs men of understanding in our day. Men who understand the needs of the hour and have the wisdom to find the right kind of help to meet those needs.
 - c. 1 Chronicles 12:32 “And of the children of Issachar, *which were men* that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them *were* two hundred; and all their brethren *were* at their commandment.” Ezra sends them to a man named Iddo who was evidently a leader among the Levites and Nethinims with an appeal that they would provide them “ministers for the house of our God” (Vs. 17).

B. The Provision of Servants (Vs. 17-20)

God’s hand moved on their behalf and raised up the necessary help (Vs. 18-20). God provided:

1. A man of understanding of the sons of Mali. Who this man was we cannot be certain but he was likely the leader God raised up for this group of Levites.
2. A total of 38 Levites. It appears that these Levites were primarily from two family groups – Sherebiah (18) and Hashabiah (Vs. 19).
3. A total of 220 Nethinims. This is the only place in the Bible that informs us that these Nethinims were originally appointed to the service of the Levites by King David and his princes.
 - a. Of the Nethinims M.K. Hall comments, If the Levites assisted the priests, the Nethinims, in turn, were those who assisted the Levites. The word means “those given” – that is, given to the Levites as Temple servants.
 - b. The word first occurs in 1 Chronicles 9:2, where the first inhabitants of Jerusalem on the return from the exile were the “Israelites, the priests, Levites, and the Nethinims”. In Ezra 8:20 it is stated that David and the princes appointed the Nethinims

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for the service of the Levites. The origin of these people is not precisely known but it is generally accepted that they are the Gibeonites. (See Josh. 9:23)

- c. We could say these dear saints served the servants! Pastors, deacons and ministry leaders are just servants but these servants also need willing servants to help them. At the end of the day no matter what your role is in the house of God, it is all team work for the furtherance of the cause of Christ and the glory of God.

Note thirdly,

III. THE SEEKING BEFORE THE JOURNEY (VS. 21-23)

Before undertaking the long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem, Ezra leads the people in earnestly seeking the Lord. Ezra was a spiritual, godly leader who took steps to prepare the people of God for a spiritual undertaking.

A. Their Method for Seeking God (Vs. 21, 23)

1. The Fasting of their Seeking (Vs. 21)

This fast was:

- a. A public fast (Vs. 21a)
 - i. There is private fasting in the Bible. Christ spoke of this in Matthew 6:16-18 “Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; **That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret:** and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”
 - ii. There is public fasting in the Bible where the people of God fast and pray together for a matter of special importance. Queen Esther proclaimed a fast when her life and the lives of her fellow Jews were under threat (Esther 4:16). They fasted for three days without eating or drinking! The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3).
- b. A purposeful fast (Vs. 21b)

The purpose of the fast was to:

 - i. Humble themselves before God – “that we might afflict ourselves before our God”. The word ‘afflict’ reminds us that fasting is where we deny ourselves by saying no to bodily appetites. The purpose is not to punish the flesh to

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get God’s attention as the heathen. The purpose is to humble ourselves before God and to give our entire focus to seeking Him undistracted. The word ‘afflict’ is also translated ‘humble’ frequently in the Old Testament.

- ii. Seek the Lord – “to seek of him a right way”. Fasting not only demonstrates humility before God but also is for the purpose of earnestly seeking God in prayer. Fasting and prayer are usually coupled together in the Bible and where fasting is mentioned without a specific reference to prayer, it is implied. In fact, there are certain answers to prayer that can only be obtained through fasting and prayer. Mark 9:29 “And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by **prayer and fasting.**” Fasting is best done on a day when the heart can be focused on the main prayer need the individual or church is bringing before the Lord.

2. The Focus of their Seeking (Vs. 21c, 23)

This was fasting and prayer with a purpose of seeking specific answers to specific needs for the people of God. They were earnestly seeking God for:

a. His Direction (Vs. 21)

- i. The right way for themselves – “a right way for us”. The idea seems to be that they were seeking the Lord for the best route across the deserts to Jerusalem.
- ii. The right way for their families – “and for our little ones”.
- iii. The right way for their substance – “and for all our substance”.

b. His Protection (Vs. 22, 31)

- i. Ezra knew there were dangers on the long journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (See Vs. 22 & 31) and this drove him to lead the people of God to earnestly seek the Lord.
- ii. In like manner, there are many spiritual dangers that confront the believer in this earthly pilgrimage and an awareness of that should drive us to earnestly seek the Lord for the spiritual protection of our families.
- iii. Psalm 5:8 “Lead me, O LORD, in thy righteousness **because of mine enemies**; make thy way straight before my face.”
- iv. On a very basic level, we are reminded in this passage of the principle of seeking God for traveling mercies. Romans 1:9-10 “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might

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have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.”

B. The Motivation for Seeking God (Vs. 22)

1. Ezra was conscious of their testimony before the Persian monarch. They had rightly testified of the power of God to preserve, protect and keep His people. To then request a band of soldiers for protection would appear to contradict that claim. Instead of seeking help from an earthly king, Ezra resolved to seek help from the King of kings.
2. Later, Nehemiah would accept the help of soldiers from Artaxerxes. This does not indicate any less faith on the part of Nehemiah. His was a different context. Their Protection on the journey.
3. The people of God prayed and God answered! (Vs. 23) In this verse the word (“entreated) is used in the passive mood, - not so much “we intreated Him” (which was true) but “He was intreated of us”. It conveys the sense that God had heard and answered their prayer, and voices their faith that He would indeed answer their prayer through the course of their journey.
4. Ezra was a man of great faith. “Here were several thousand Jews, inexperienced in travel and warfare, carrying a fortune in gold and silver, led by a scholar, not a soldier, and planning to travel through dangerous territory that was infested with brigands, and yet their leader didn’t want an army to protect them! If anybody deserves the “Great Faith Award,” it’s Ezra!”

Conclusion: Are we earnestly seeking God that His hand of guidance and protection might be upon our lives and that of our families? When was the last time we prayed with fasting for a special need?

God's Hand upon God's People

Part 2

Text: Ezra 8:24-36

Introduction:

1. Ezra 7 & 8 are a wonderful testament to the truth of God's hand upon His man and His work. Six times in these two chapters we have reference to "the good hand of God" being upon God's man (Ezra), God's work and God's people (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31).
2. "Chapter 8 (like chap. 2) provides the register of those who returned as Ezra's companions (Vs. 1-14); and then records the preparations at the river Ahava for the journey (Vs. 15-30; the journey itself (Vs. 31); and the arrival in Jerusalem (Vs. 32-36)." (M.K. Hall)
3. In this chapter, we see God's hand of protection and preservation upon His people as they make the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.
4. Ezra 8 is a testament of:
 - The record of the returning remnant.
 - The godly leadership of Ezra.
 - The protecting power of God.
5. We are breaking the chapter into six segments for our study. We will review the three points from last message then consider the final three.

I. THE SURRENDERED FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 1-14)

This section of the chapter provides a record of this new remnant of people who returned with Ezra. Ezra gathers approximately eighteen men who are heads of Jewish families who influence those within their family groups to join the expedition. The result was a total of approx. 1,515 men, plus women and children, who agreed to go with Ezra to Jerusalem. This genealogy reminds us that this remnant was:

A. Submitted to God. These dear men and women had heeded the call to join Ezra and return to Jerusalem. This was a huge **step of faith** for these people as most of them probably grew up in Babylon and were comfortably settled there. Many others chose to remain in Babylon and never return to the promised land.

B. Recognized by God. God allows some to be named heroes of the faith in this life to inspire and encourage us but that is not the case for most of us. The most important thing is now whether we have a name known by others in this life but that we are known to our God and that He will reward us for faithful service.

II. THE SERVANTS FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 15-20)

A. The Problem concerning Servants (Vs. 15-17)

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Ezra discerned that there was a shortage of Levites for the service of the house of God. Not much has changed since Ezra's time. One of the biggest challenges we face is the labor shortage in the harvest field (Matt. 9:37; Luke 10:2). I remember as a young man telling an Evangelist that God had called me to the ministry. He replied, "Well, there are plenty of vacancies!"

B. The Provision of Servants (Vs. 17-20)

God provided "men of understanding" and men willing to serve in the work.

III. THE SEEKING BEFORE THE JOURNEY (VS. 21-23)

Before undertaking the long and dangerous journey to Jerusalem, Ezra leads the people in earnestly seeking the Lord. Ezra was a spiritual, godly leader who took steps to prepare the people of God for a spiritual undertaking.

A. Their Method for Seeking God (Vs. 21, 23)

1. The Fasting of their Seeking (Vs. 21)
2. The Focus of their Seeking (Vs. 21c, 23)
They were earnestly seeking God for:
 - a. His Direction (Vs. 21)
 - b. His Protection (Vs. 22, 31)

B. The Motivation for Seeking God (Vs. 22)

Ezra was conscious of their testimony before the Persian monarch. They had rightly testified of the power of God to preserve, protect and keep His people. To then request a band of soldiers for protection would appear to contradict that claim. Instead of seeking help from an earthly king, Ezra resolved to seek help from the King of kings.

IV. THE STEWARDS FOR THE JOURNEY (VS. 24-30; 33-34)

Ezra ensures that a group of godly men are in place to oversee the offering and the temple treasures. We can learn some important lessons from Ezra's appointment of these men to this role. Ezra appointed:

A. Multiple Men (Vs. 24)

1. Ezra appointed 12 of the "chief of the priests" to oversee the temple treasury. He names two men as leaders "Sherebiah" and "Hashabiah" and they were assisted by "ten of their brethren with them".
2. The key point is that the responsibility for the offering and the temple treasures did not rest with one man but with multiple men. This is very wise and appropriate. The love of money is "the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10) and money matters can quickly bring the worst out in people if not handled in a spiritual manner.

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3. The Apostle Paul understood this important principle as illustrated in the collection that was taken up for the poor saints in Jerusalem. A team was involved.
 - a. 1 Cor. 16:1-4 “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first *day* of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as *God* hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, **whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send** to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem. And if it be meet that I go also, **they shall go with me.**”
 - b. 2 Cor. 8:16-21 “But thanks *be* to God, which put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you. (17) For indeed he accepted the exhortation; but being more forward, of his own accord he went unto you. (18) And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise *is* in the gospel throughout all the churches; (19) And not *that* only, but who was also chosen of the churches to **travel with us** with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and *declaration* of your ready mind: (20) **Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us:** (21) **Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.**”

B. Responsible Men (Vs. 25-27; 33-34)

1. Evidently these were men who could be trusted with such a big responsibility. They were looking after “the offering of the house of our God” which had been contributed to by the king, his court and the saints of God as well as the temple “vessels”.
2. They were responsible for:
 - a. 650 talents of silver. A talent was 75.5 pounds or 34 kg. That’s 22,100 kilograms of silver (24 tons). That’s a lot of silver and a lot of responsibility!
 - b. 100 talents worth of silver vessels (3,440 kg).
 - c. 100 talents of gold (3,440).
 - d. 20 basons of gold of a thousand drams. The “dram” was a Persian gold coin (1 Ch. 29:7; Ezra 2:69; 8:27 Neh. 7:70-72) and was possibly worth about one British pound or two U.S. dollars in today’s money.
 - e. Two vessels of fine copper as precious as gold.
 - f. The offering was weighed not only at the beginning but also at the end of the journey, thus drawing attention to Ezra’s concern that all the currency and valuables should be accurately accounted for.

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3. They discharged their responsibilities faithfully. Compare Vs. 29 & 33-34.
4. We learn from this passage, as well as many others in the Bible the principles behind careful record keeping and the involvement of a plurality of spiritual men in the management of church finances.

C. Spiritual Men (Vs. 28)

1. Ezra reminds them of their set apart position and the sacredness of the temple treasures. There is a vital connection between the priests and the vessels in that both are designated holy. “Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord” (Is. 52:11). Ministry is a high and holy calling.
2. Every true believer today is a member of the “holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).
3. God’s work needs holy men and this is especially true in the management of church finances. Carnal, covetous men can tear a church apart over financial matters. Illustration: Carnal treasurer who was pinched financially and caused division over the pastor’s stipend.
4. Illustrations:
 - a. The men Moses appointed to leadership positions in the nation of Israel – “Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people **able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness**; and place *such* over them, *to be* rulers of thousands, *and* rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens:” (Exodus 18:21)
 - b. The first deacons – “Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven **men of honest report**, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” (Acts 6:3)
 - c. The deacon’s qualifications – “Likewise *must* the deacons *be* grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, **not greedy of filthy lucre;**” (1 Tim. 3:8)

D. Watchful Men (Vs. 29-30)

1. They were to watch over the temple vessels and resources. How important it is to have spiritual watchmen in all aspects of the work of God who are alert to spiritual dangers.
2. They were to guard (“keep”) the temple vessels and resources until they had been safely delivered to the house of God in Jerusalem.
3. Note: By way of application, pastors are called upon to watch over and seek to protect the souls (vessels) of those under their care. Heb. 13:17 “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: **for they watch for your souls**, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that *is* unprofitable for you.” The word ‘bishop’ means ‘overseer’.

V. THE SAFETY ON THE JOURNEY (VS. 31-34)

These verses are a testament the preserving hand of God upon His people through that long and dangerous journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. The journey was 900 miles (1,448 kms) and took close to four months (Compare Ezra 7:9 & 8:31-32). God had answered their earnest prayers for safety for themselves and for their families from the enemies that lurked by the way (Vs. 21-22). We note the preservation of:

A. The Saints of God (Vs. 31-32)

1. Preserved throughout the journey (Vs. 31a)
 - a. They were leaving Babylon and were bound for Jerusalem. God sustained and kept them all the way to their destiny in Jerusalem.
 - b. What a touching picture of the Christian life and the comforting assurance that God preserves those He saves.
 - i. Phil. 1:6 “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath **begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:**”
 - ii. 1 Peter 1:5 “Who are **kept by the power of God** through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”
 - iii. Jude 1:24 “Now unto him that is able to **keep you from falling**, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,”
2. Preserved from the enemy (Vs. 31b)

The biggest threat to their safety on this journey was the enemies that lurked by the way. We are reminded of:

- a. The Reality of the Enemy – Ezra knew there were enemies that would try and obstruct their progress and plunder their goods. Enemies who hated the people of God and desired their destruction. How the enemy hated to see the people of God returning out of captivity to the place of blessing and victory in the land of promise. In the two and a half thousand years that have transpired since Ezra’s day, the enemy’s intentions have not changed. For the believer we need to be reminded of the spiritual axis of evil that we have to deal with in our Christian journey.
 - i. The world.
 - ii. The flesh.
 - iii. The devil.
- b. The Subtilty of the Enemy – note the enemy’s character is highlighted in the description “such as lay in wait by the way”. The reference is to an ambush.

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- i. In the Old Testament the same phrase is used of a murderer – Deut. 19:11 “But if any man hate his neighbour, and **lie in wait for him**, and rise up against him, and smite him mortally that he die, and fleeth into one of these cities:” Micah 7:2 “The good *man* is perished out of the earth: and *there is* none upright among men: they all **lie in wait for blood**; they hunt every man his brother with a net.”
- ii. The same word picture is also used frequently to describe a military ambush – Joshua 8:4 “And he commanded them, saying, Behold, ye shall **lie in wait against the city**, *even* behind the city: go not very far from the city, but be ye all ready:” The word is translated “ambushes” in Jeremiah 51:12 – “prepare the **ambushes**”. See also Judges 9:34, 43; 20:29, 33, 36-38.
- iii. In the New Testament the figure is used to describe false teachers – Eph. 4:14 “That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they **lie in wait to deceive**;” Messing with false teachers and false doctrine is very dangerous. The context of this passage is the gifts God has given the local church, including the office of the pastor, to ensure doctrinal stability and maturity in the local church.
- iv. We would do well to keep this picture of the enemy in our hearts and minds and remember that the devil is constantly lurking around, watching for an opportunity to strike and destroy. David let his guard down one night and was targeted by the enemy who was lurking and watching for such an opportunity to bring down a man of God.
- v. **Notice that the two “hands” in this verse (Vs. 31).** There is the “hand of our God” and the “hand of the enemy”. Praise God His hand prevailed over the enemy’s!

B. The Sacred Vessels of God (Vs. 33-34)

1. The offering and temple treasures are delivered safely to the house of God in Jerusalem because of the faithful, priestly oversight of the “chief of the priests”.
2. We can be comforted with the thought that as God’s vessels, we are kept by the High Priestly oversight and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hebrews 7:34-25 “But this *man*, because he continueth ever, hath **an unchangeable priesthood**. “Wherefore he is able also to **save them to the uttermost** that come unto God

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by him, **seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.**”

Note: The context of this verse is the fact of Christ’s superior priesthood in Melchizedek in contrast to the Aaronic priesthood.

VI. THE SACRIFICES AFTER THE JOURNEY (VS. 35-36)

A. The Offering of Sacrifices (Vs. 35)

1. The Sin offering
 - a. Twelve bullocks are offered for Israel according to the number of the 12 tribes. Significant considering the fact the northern 10 tribes had been carried away into Assyria.
 - b. Twelve goats are offered for a sin offering. The sin offering here was the acknowledgement of the sins of the nation as a whole which had led to the exile.
 - c. Concerning the sin offering, Keil writes, “the sin-offering preceded the burnt-offering, as the necessary basis of an acceptable burnt-offering.”
2. The Burnt Offering
 - a. The Burnt offering (Lev. 1:1-17) was of the “sweet savour” offerings described in Leviticus. They were the first 3 of the 5 offerings described in the first part of Leviticus. The burnt offering speaks of Christ’s total devotion to God in giving His very life to obey and please His Father. The central thought is that of an offering that is well pleasing to the Father.
 - a. The seventy and seven lambs suggest infinity and the infinite value of the blood of Christ as the Lamb of God. The number seven speaks of perfection and we are reminded of the total perfection and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice.

B. The Offering of Service (Vs. 36)

1. They served the king (Vs. 36a). These were law abiding, king honoring people.
2. They furthered the people of God. The word ‘furthered’ has the root meaning “to lift”. The arrival of these saints of God was a spiritual lift to the remnant in Judea.
3. They furthered the house of God. How we need people who will have a heart to help lift the load in the work of God’s house!

Conclusion: Are you seeking God’s hand of blessing on your life, family and church? Nothing could be more important than being in the center of God’s will and His hand upon your life.

Sin in the Camp

Text: Ezra 9:1-5

Introduction:

1. Ezra 9 and 10 form a new section in the Book and concern the exposing of grievous sin amongst the remnant and Ezra's godly response to it. We could summarize Ezra's godly response to sin in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. The Book of Ezra abruptly closes after this incident. "The emphasis is placed by the Holy Spirit on the most important issue at that time, the moral condition of the people of God, because "holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, for ever" (Ps. 93:5)." (M.K. Hall)
3. The opening verses of chapter 9 give us the context and the details of the problem which we will consider under three headings.

I. THE REVEALING OF THE PEOPLE'S SIN (VS. 1A)

God in His mercy, allows the sin of the people to be exposed.

A. The Season of the Revelation – "Now when these things were done"

1. The sin amongst God's people was exposed right after some significant victories and blessings. What a grief it must have been for Ezra to have to deal with this after the highpoints described in the previous two chapters. But he was God's man raised up for that hour which means confronting the problems as well as enjoying the victories.
2. This is the reality of the Christian life and ministry. There are victories and high points then there are battles that must be fought and won. The grapes and the giants come together!

B. The Source of the Revelation – "the princes came to me saying"

1. The "princes" of the nation were the ones who brought the report to Ezra. This was entirely appropriate as Ezra was one of the main spiritual leaders in the nation whom God had raised up for this time.
2. In a similar fashion, the house of Chloe brought a report to Paul concerning the divisions in the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11), a report Paul accepted as reliable and acted upon.
3. Within the local church context, it is right and appropriate that the leaders (pastors/overseers) be made aware of problems and issues as they arise within the assembly.

C. The Stimulation of the Revelation

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1. Evidently this sin was quite widespread amongst the people of God and had been going on for some time before Ezra arrived. What prompted the princes to bring it to Ezra's attention?
2. Note that Ezra and his company arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). On the twentieth day of the ninth month the men of Judah and Benjamin came together to Jerusalem to deal with this matter (10:9). Thus, four and a half months went by until this problem came to light.
3. It is reasonable to conclude that during this time Ezra had been teaching "in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ez. 7:10) and the Word of God had brought conviction to the heart and awakened the consciences of the princes (Ez. 9:1). This represented real humility on the part of the princes as they were among the chief offenders in this matter (Vs. 2b).
4. As sad as the news was, it was a good thing that the sin had been exposed. If there was to be ongoing revival and blessing amongst the returned remnant, then sin would need to be confessed and forsaken.

II. THE REPORT OF THE PEOPLE'S SIN (VS. 1B-2)

Consider the specifics of the people's sin as reported by the princes. We note that there was:

A. A Separation Problem (Vs. 1b)

1. The failure of no separation – "have not separated themselves from the people of the lands".
 - a. Clearly there had been a breakdown in their separation as earlier under the leadership of Zerubbabel it is noted at the dedication of the temple "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," (Ezra 6:21) This was approximately 58 years before Ezra came to Jerusalem so things had deteriorated over that time. In disobedience to the many clear commands of the Old Testament concerning separation, the people of God had ceased maintaining separation from the heathen.
 - b. "This failure demonstrates the ever-prevailing character of human nature. Whatever the spiritual blessing that has been enjoyed, there is nevertheless always the danger that if the flesh and the world are allowed an entrance into the believer's heart there can be shameful failure." (M.K. Hall)
 - c. M.F. Unger has commented on this verse: "That the returned remnant should so grossly violate their pilgrim character after so

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- brief a time following their gracious and remarkable deliverance from Babylon...shows the deceitfulness of the human heart.”
- d. The absence of separation in the people of God is as great a failure in our day as it was in Ezra’s day. There is failure in:
 - i. Separation from the world – there is very little personal separation from the world in the lives of Christians today and very little separation from the world in churches. It is hard to tell the difference between the world and many churches. They sound, look and behave like the world with a few Christian trappings on the outside.
 - ii. Ecclesiastical separation – by ecclesiastical separation we refer to separation from compromise, error, false doctrine, false brethren and even genuine believers who are walking in disobedience to God’s Word. We are living in an ecumenical age where most of the professing church, including those who claim to believe the Gospel, have renounced separatism and there is little to no separation from those who are in error. In the name of “love, unity and the so-called cause of the Gospel”, the walls of separation have been torn down. In reality the result has been catastrophic for the cause of the truth and has produced the opposite of what was claimed.
 - iii. Note: One of the hallmarks of the Fundamental, Independent Baptist movement in its early days was its separation from error. This was not an isolationist position as soul-winning and missions was also a major emphasis and practice. This separatist stance has collapsed over the past couple of decades at an alarming rate. While a good number of IFB’s may still pay some lip service to separation, in reality most have embraced a soft form of separatism where sin and error is condemned in generalities (in theory) but in practice there is little to no real stand being taken or drawing of sharp, clear lines of separation.
 2. The fruit of no separation – “doing according to their abominations”. Ezra lists eight pagan nations with which the people of God had intermingled – the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.
 - a. The break down in separation lead to **accepting** the abominations of the heathen. The word ‘abomination’ is “an awesome word, and its major use is to denote anything that is of intense offence to God” (M.K. Hall) Lowering the walls of separation leads to a toleration of error which in turn leads to an acceptance of error. This is exactly what we are seeing across

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- Christendom today with widespread tolerance, acceptance and even the promotion of things the Bible calls an abomination. T
- b. The break down in separation lead to **adopting** the abominations of the heathen. The influence only moves in one direction when you violate Biblical principles of separation from sin and error. Instead of you influencing them, they influence you! The influence is a one-way street and it's always the wrong direction. This is significant as reason that is most often put forward for rejecting separation is "in order to have an influence from within". In reality, it is the separated, salt and light believer who will be used of God to have a real impact for good and godliness.

B. A Spouse Problem (Vs. 2)

Here we get to the root cause of the breakdown in separation; some of God's people had married heathen wives and thereby had been influenced to adopt heathen practices. Apart from salvation, there is no closer tie on earth than the marriage bond and the influence spouses have on one another is powerful for good or evil.

1. The problem with these marriages (Vs. 2a)
 - a. They were unequal yokes which were forbidden the people of God in Israel and which are still forbidden the people of God in the New Testament age. 2 Cor. 6:14 "**Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers:** for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?"
 - b. Note: The Bible does not condemn so called "interracial marriage". There is only one race, the human race (Acts 17:26) and differences are cultural, not racial. There are examples of marriages between Jews and Gentiles in the Old Testament that were blessed of God. E.g., Boaz and Ruth (a Moabites), Salmon and Rahab (the harlot) and Moses and an Ethiopian woman. The key point in all of these marriages was the fact these ladies clearly embraced and One True God of Israel.
 - c. They jeopardized the "holy seed". Not only would the children of these marriages be affected but the Messianic line was threatened.
 - d. In some cases, these marriages likely involved divorcing one's Jewish wife in favour of a heathen one. See Malachi 2 and the description of what was happening in Nehemiah's day, a few decades after Ezra.
2. The principal offenders with these marriages (Vs. 2b)
 - a. Sadly, the chief offenders were the leaders in the nation. There was sin in the leadership!

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- b. The statement, “Everything rises and falls with leadership”, while not a Scripture quotation, does seem to express a lot of truth. If the leaders of the nation had failed in the area of godly separation, then it would only be natural for the people to follow.

III. THE RESPONSE TO THE PEOPLE’S SIN (VS. 3-5)

Thank God Ezra had a godly response to this heart-breaking revelation. This says a lot about the kind of leader Ezra was. His response was twofold:

A. Contrition (Vs. 3-4)

1. The expression of his contrition.
 - a. He was brokenhearted (Vs. 3a)

His grief and sorrow over the sin of the people is portrayed in his actions:

 - i. He rent his garment and mantle.
 - ii. He plucked out hair from his head and beard.
 - iii. All of these actions were expressions of deep grief. Sadly, today sin doesn’t seem to grieve God’s people much anymore!
 - b. He was dumbfounded (Vs. 3b)
 - i. Ezra uses the word ‘astounded’ twice to describe how he felt at that time (Vs. 3b, 4b). The word in Old English means to be stunned, dazed and shocked.
 - ii. This is a healthy response to sin from a man of God who is filled with the Word of God (Ez. 7:10). His heart and conscience had been sharpened by the truth of God’s Word, making him sensitive to sin.
 - iii. The problem today is that all too often we have become desensitized to sin. We are no longer shocked and disturbed by sin.
2. The effect of his contrition (Vs. 4)
 - a. Ezra’s godly response to the scandal had an impact and an influence on others under his leadership.
 - b. Notice that it was not all the people who responded soberly to this situation but specifically the people who had a high and holy reverence for the Word of God – “everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel”.
 - c. Isaiah 66:2 “For all those *things* hath mine hand made, and all those *things* have been, saith the LORD: **but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.**”
 - d. God had exalted His Word above His very name. Psalm 138:2 “I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy

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lovingkindness and for thy truth: **for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.**”

- e. Note: The modern versions are based on an irreverent model of translation that shifts away from the emphasis of each Word of Scripture (Dynamic Vs. Formal Equivalency).

B. Confession (Vs. 5)

1. The Place of his Confession (Vs. 5a)
 - a. Significantly it was as the evening lamb was being offered as a burnt offering that Ezra began to pray his great prayer of confession.
 - b. The offering of the Lamb upon the altar is a reminder of the atoning death of Christ and of the precious blood that is available to cleanse us from every sin. Sin needs to be confessed before the Lamb of God.
2. The Posture of his Confession (Vs. 5b)
 - a. Ezra falls on his knees, a posture of humility and reverence before God. Kneeling is a great posture for prayer as it reminds us we are in the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The most important part of the posture is the attitude of heart it conveys.
 - b. Ez. 10:1 “Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God...”
3. The Prayer of his Confession (Vs. 6-15). This will be the focus of our next message but what a heartfelt, humble prayer of confession this was.

Conclusion: How important is biblical separation to you? Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Confess it to God and experience the cleansing of the blood.

Ezra's Prayer of Confession

Text: Ezra 9:6-15

Introduction:

1. Ezra 9 and 10 form a new section in the Book and concern the exposing of grievous sin amongst the remnant and Ezra's godly response to it. We could summarize Ezra's godly response to sin in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. In our last message we studied how the sin was exposed to godly Ezra and how he responded with godly sorrow. Ezra takes the initiative and sets the example as a spiritual leader and leads the people of God in a heartfelt, humble prayer of confession. Note the word 'confession' in Ez. 10:1.
3. Ezra 9 takes its place alongside Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 9 as one of the great confession chapters of the Bible. These chapters bring us to the heart and soul of what it really means to humble ourselves before God over our sin.
4. We will study this great prayer of confession under four headings.

Ezra confesses...

I. THE SHAMEFULNESS OF THEIR SIN (VS. 6-7)

Ezra speaks of:

A. The Humiliation of their Sins (Vs. 6a)

1. Sin always brings a nation low. Prov. 14:34 **"Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people."**
2. While Ezra felt a deep sense of shame over the sins of the nation, yet he was able to approach Almighty God on the basis of his relationship with Him – "O my God". In like manner, we come before God as our Heavenly Father to pray "And forgive us our sins" (Luke 11:4).
3. "I am ashamed and blush" = Ezra was shocked (Vs. 3b, 4b) and ashamed by the sin of the nation. There is something desperately wrong when sin doesn't bother us anymore! Jeremiah 6:15 **"Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the LORD."**
4. It was a good sign that Ezra could blush with shame over the sins of the people. **"Words and actions that would have made earlier generations blush in shame are today part of the normal entertainment diet of the average TV viewer. When a nation**

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turns sin into entertainment and laughs at what ought to make us weep, we are in desperate need of revival.” (Wiersbe)

B. The Height of their Sins (Vs. 6b)

Ezra confesses the enormity of their sins with two word pictures:

1. Their iniquities were increased over their heads.
2. Their trespasses were grown up to the heavens.
3. True confession means being honest, humble and accurate with God about the seriousness of our sin. This is the opposite of attempting to minimize and cover over sin. Prov. 28:13 “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy.”
4. Notice that Ezra does not say “their iniquities” and “their trespasses” but “our iniquities” and “our trespass”. He confesses the sin of the nation as a whole and includes himself as a part of that sinful nation.

C. The History of their Sins (Vs. 7)

1. The pattern of their sins as a nation (Vs. 7a)
Ezra plainly acknowledges that as a nation they had a history of sinning grievously against God. He confesses the culpability of every level of Jewish society:
 - a. The people – ‘we’.
 - b. The kings – “our kings”. While Israel had some godly kings, she had many kings who lead the people into deep depravity and wickedness.
 - c. The priests – “and our priests”. Sadly, those who were meant to be the spiritual leaders and examples of purity in the nation were also involved in the abominations of the heathen.
2. The punishment of their sins as a nation (Vs. 7b)
Because of their sin the chastening hand of God had come upon them and they had been delivered into the hands of heathen kings.
 - a. “To the sword”
 - b. “To captivity”
 - c. “To a spoil” = refers to plunder. Their sins had stripped them of everything precious.
 - d. “To confusion of face” = refers to shame.

Ezra confesses...

II. THE UNGRATEFULNESS OF THEIR SIN (VS. 8-10)

The enormity of their sins is further emphasized when considered in the light of God’s grace and goodness that had been shown to the nation. God’s grace had given the people of God:

A. A Remnant (Vs. 8a)

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1. “grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God” = the “exceeding sinfulness of sin” is seen clearly when it is considered in the light of what God’s grace has done in our lives. Grace will not teach you to sin. Grace will teach you to live holy. Titus 2:11-12 “For **the grace of God** that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, **Teaching us** that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;”
2. “to leave us a remnant to escape” = Ezra is acknowledging that the remnant in Judea was there only by the grace of God. It was not something they deserved.
3. God had given them “a nail in this holy place”. The word for ‘nail’ means a nail or tent peg such as that employed by Jael to kill Sisera (Judg. 4:21), but is also used metaphorically as here. The same word is used repeatedly in reference to the ‘pins’ of the tabernacle and is also translated “stake” in Isaiah (33:20; 54:2). It has the idea of “a constant and sure abode in his holy place” which was the Temple (M.K. Hall). Albert Barnes writes, “The metaphor is probably drawn from a tent-pin, which is driven into the earth to make the tent firm and secure.”

B. A Reviving (Vs. 8b-10)

1. The description of their reviving (Vs. 8b)
 - a. “that our God may lighten our eyes” = the word ‘lighten’ means “to enlighten”. The same word is translated ‘enlightened’ in several places. For example, 1 Samuel 14:27 “But Jonathan heard not when his father charged the people with the oath: wherefore he put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in an honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes were **enlightened**.” God’s gracious ministry of enlightening our eyes in His truth is never to be taken for granted.
 - b. “and give us a little reviving in our bondage” = while the revival is described as ‘little’ it does not mean it was insignificant. We have seen the record in Ezra God’s hand moved so powerfully and wonderfully on behalf of His people to raise up this remnant. But it was a small work when compared to some of the glory days of Israel’s history (e.g., Solomon’s temple). But the “little reviving” God had given them was significant, precious and an act of God’s grace.
 - c. Do not despise “little revivings”! Any revival, no matter how small it might be in size and scope can only take place by the power and grace of God. While we may not see a revival on the same scale as some of the large revivals of church history at this apostate hour, I believe we can by God’s grace experience a “little reviving” as a part of God’s faithful remnant. When man

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does something 'little' it is tiny and insignificant but when Almighty God does something "little" it is significant, powerful and great. A "little reviving" from the hand of God is a big for us as God's people.

- d. Note: It is of interest to note that in verse 8 that the reviving came as a result of the rebuilt temple but in verse 9 the order is reversed. God revived a remnant and worked through the Persian kings to allow the temple to be rebuilt. Such reviving was the cause of the setting up of the house of their God. So, the people of God were stirred up in order to rebuild the house of God and then once the house of God was built, there was further revival blessing they enjoyed from the rebuilt temple. The point is we need a continual work of reviving in our lives as God's people.
2. The details of their reviving (Vs. 9)
Look at the catalogue of what God had done on their behalf:
 - a. God had not forsaken them in their bondage.
 - b. God had granted the favour in the eyes of the Persian kings.
 - c. God had enabled them to repair and rebuild the temple.
 - d. God had given them protection – "a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem". Note: Literal walls were yet to be rebuilt under Nehemiah which follows the timeline of Ezra chronologically. The word 'wall' is used in the same sense as the word 'nail' in verse 8. God had given them a place of safety and protection.
 3. The disregard of their reviving (Vs. 10)
 - a. In spite of all God had done for them, they had disobeyed God's Word and were now in a desperate state.
 - b. It is a solemn reminder of our potential even if we have experienced God's reviving work in the past. The fact you have known God's power working in your life does not except you from sinning grievously against God! There are Christians who knew God's reviving work in the past who are now living in bitterness and rebellion to God's truth. Apart from God's grace, any one of us could do just as foolishly!

Ezra confesses...

III. THE WAYWARDNESS OF THEIR SIN (VS. 11-12)

Ezra now acknowledges that the sin of the people was a direct violation of God's clear commands. True confession deals with sin plainly in the light of God's Word. Ezra's prayer reflects his familiarity and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. Ezra's saturation in the Scriptures (Ez. 7:10) was the key behind his sensitivity to sin and his supplication before

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God. While there is some direct quotation of Scripture, the majority of this part of his prayer is a summation of numerous Scriptures. The wisdom of the Word was woven into the fabric of his prayer. God's Word was crystal clear about:

A. The Perversity of the Canaanites (Vs. 11)

Their depravity was:

1. Vile (Vs. 11a)

The depravity and wickedness of the people of the land is described in plain terms.

- a. "unclean land"
- b. "filthiness"
- c. "abominations"
- d. "uncleanness"
- e. We know from Leviticus 18 that their abominations included immorality, adultery, sodomy and bestiality. The word 'nakedness' occurs 24 times in this one chapter. The perversion of sexuality is one of the primary manifestations of a godless, pagan society.
- f. Lev. 18:24-28 "Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you: And the land is defiled: therefore I do visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and **the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants**. Ye shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, and shall not commit *any* of these abominations; *neither* any of your own nation, nor any stranger that sojourneth among you: (For all these abominations have the men of the land done, which *were* before you, and the land is defiled;) That the land **spue** not you out also, when ye defile it, as it **spued out** the nations that *were* before you."

2. Vast (Vs. 11b)

- a. It wasn't that these sins were confined to isolated pockets within Canaan, they were widespread and pervasive – "which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness". When the "vile" (Rom. 1:26) sins of Sodom are spread from coast to coast in a nation, you know that nation is pagan.
- b. In our day, the sins of Sodom are no longer confined to a few slummy streets in the major cities of our country but are now being promoted at about every level of society from pre-school to politics. The politicians claim the electorate is becoming more "progressive" but in reality, it is "regressive". We are not going forward morally and spiritually but are regressing back into the same old depraved sins that brought God's judgment upon these ancient civilizations in Canaan.

B. The Prohibition concerning the Canaanites (Vs. 12)

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1. The basis of the command (Vs. 12a)
 - a. 'therefore' = in light of the wickedness of the Canaanites described in the previous verse, God's command to His people concerning marriage makes perfect sense. Unequal yokes with an amoral people would quickly weaken and undermine the morals of God's people.
 - b. There is a direct citation of Deuteronomy 7:3 here – "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son."
 - c. King Solomon is an example of a man whose heart was turned away from the Lord by his pagan wives. 1 Kings 11:1-3 "**But king Solomon loved many strange women**, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, *and* Hittites; **Of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love.** And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and **his wives turned away his heart.**" Apart from the fact Solomon had 999 wives too many, the women he married were pagan idolaters who influenced him with their pagan beliefs and practices.
2. The blessings of the command (Vs. 12b)

Obedience to the Lord would bring blessings. There is much wisdom in following God's ways! The heart and intent behind God's command in this area was in order that His people might be blessed with:

 - a. A strength in the land – "that ye may be strong". See the link between separation from the world and spiritual strength? If you lie your head in the lap of the world, it will quickly shave off the locks of your strength and you will be weak and powerless. In these days of apostasy, it is time to be stronger in separation, not weaker and yet many are doing the exact opposite. The collapse of separatism amongst IFB's has led to tragic weakness and powerlessness. God's power rests upon genuine holiness but it is quickly retracted from those who walk in disobedience.
 - b. A satisfaction in the land – "eat the good of the land". Obedience to God is a life of true blessing and satisfaction. What blessings abound for those who walk uprightly! (Psalm 84:11) The devil tries to lead Christians to believe that a holy, consecrated life is a joyless life of bondage. In reality, the opposite is true!

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- c. An inheritance in the land – “and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.” They would have something to pass on to the next generation. Remember, its not just your life which is at stake when it comes to following God. If we drift from the old paths of truth and blessing, what will happen to the next generation?

Ezra confesses...

IV. THE FOOLISHNESS OF THEIR SIN (VS. 13-15)

Note the word ‘again’ in verse 14. In spite of all the history of God’s dealings with them as a nation, they had foolishly sinned against Him again. They had gone back into sin in spite of:

A. The Chastening of God (Vs. 13a)

1. Ezra acknowledges that the 70-year Babylonian captivity was because of these very kinds of sins. Now they were foolishly going back to those same sins!
2. See 2 Chronicles 36:11-17

B. The Compassion of God (Vs. 13b)

1. God had shown mercy – “thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve”. God hadn’t given them all the punishment they deserved and yet they sinned against Him. Do you see the picture? They sinned against a Good and Gracious God!
2. God had shown them grace – “and hast given us such deliverance as this”. Not only had God not given them all they did deserve, He graciously gave them what they didn’t deserve. Yet in spite of the mercy, grace and goodness of God, they had still chosen to sin against Him.
3. Note: Always remember that when you sin, you are not sinning against a cruel, unjust and evil god but you are sinning against a loving, faithful, gracious and merciful God.

C. The Character of God (Vs. 14-15)

Ezra knew something of the righteous character of God and was full of godly fear.

1. God’s righteous anger (Vs. 14)
 - a. Ezra questions how they could sin again so treacherously against their God (Vs. 14a)
 - b. Ezra knows the anger of God would be kindled against their sin and anticipates that He may well judge them afresh (Vs. 14b)
2. God’s Righteous Person (Vs. 15)
 - a. Ezra confesses the truth of the absolute and perfect righteousness of God. True confession means seeing my sinfulness in contrast to God’s perfect righteousness.

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- b. Ezra then casts himself and the nation upon the mercy of God. He stands there in humility and in dependence upon God for the situation.
- c. The confession was the first important step but the people of God would need to also put their repentance into practical action and deal with the sin. That's where the events of chapter 10 come in.

Conclusion: What kind of perspective do we have on sin? Do we see sin from man's perspective or God's perspective? How important is humility and confession of sin to you? If we are going to know revival in our homes and churches, we need to deal humbly, plainly and honestly with sin before God.

Ezra's Covenant

Part 1

Text: Ezra 10:1-9

Introduction:

1. Ezra 9 and 10 form the concluding section of the Book and concern the exposing of grievous sin amongst the remnant and Ezra's godly response to it. We can summarize Ezra's godly response to the sin of God's people in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. In our last message we studied Ezra's great prayer of confession before God. Ezra 9 takes its place alongside Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 9 as one of the great confession chapters of the Bible.
3. In this message we are going to study the covenant that was made by the people of God to deal with the sin that had been confessed. Forsaking sin must follow confession of sin. Proverbs 28:13 "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso **confesseth and forsaketh** *them* shall have mercy."
4. Summary of the chapter:¹ "The first part of the chapter (Vs. 1-17) is a record of the steps taken to remedy the sin brought to light in the previous chapter. The strange wives that some of the men had taken were put away. The remainder of the chapter gives the list of the men who had offended in this way (Vs. 18-44)."
5. We will study this covenant that was made under five headings as follows:
 - The Context of the Covenant (Vs. 1)
 - The Counsel regarding the Covenant (Vs. 2-9)
 - The Command of the Covenant (Vs. 9-11)
 - The Commitment to the Covenant (Vs. 12-17)
 - The Convicted in the Covenant (Vs. 18-44)

I. THE CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT (VS. 1)

A. The Example of Ezra's Confession (Vs. 1a)

Ezra's godly example demonstrates the pathway to revival.

1. Ezra prayed over the people's sin – "Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed".
2. Ezra mourned over the people's sin – "weeping". See Ezra 9:3-5. Ezra had the appropriate response to the discovery of sin amongst God's people. Psalm 51:17 "The sacrifices of God **are a broken**

¹ Summary by M.K. Hall

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spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

3. Ezra humbled himself over the people’s sin – “casting himself down before the house of God”.
 - a. 2 Chr. 7:14 “If my people, which are called by my name, shall **humble themselves**, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”
 - b. Isaiah 57:15 “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name *is* Holy; I dwell in the high and holy *place*, with him also *that is* of a **contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.**”

B. The Effect of Ezra’s Confession (Vs. 1b)

“We cannot sufficiently stress how much blessing of God’s people may depend on one or a few faithful individuals. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2 present a revival produced by two prophets who moved two leaders and then the entire people to activity for the Lord. Here, one man’s humiliation to which a few individuals then are associated leads to a general humiliation.” (H. L. Rossier)

1. The size of the response – “a very great congregation”.
 - a. Men assembled.
 - b. Women assembled.
 - c. Children assembled.
2. The soberness of the response – “for the people wept very sore”.
 - a. The people of God began to also be convicted and broken hearted over what had happened.
 - b. God used Ezra to awaken the consciences of the people. We are again reminded of the importance of godly leadership. If those tasked with the high office and responsibility of leading God’s people won’t take sin seriously, how seriously will the people under their leadership take sin? Imagine how different things would have been if Ezra had taken a light and flippant view of the situation?

II. THE COUNSEL REGARDING THE COVENANT (VS. 2-9)

Ezra is lying prostrate before the temple in grief and anguish over the compromise amongst God’s people. God moves the heart of one called Shechaniah to see the situation with clarity and offer his leader some sound advice as to the way forward.

A. The Content of Shechaniah’s Counsel (Vs. 2-4)

His counsel was:

1. Humble – “we have trespassed” (Vs. 2a).

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- a. Like Ezra, Shechaniah humbles himself over the sin of the people. His name does not appear in the list of offenders at the end of the chapter but he was prepared to be a part of the solution. Some of his own relatives were involved in the compromise (Vs. 26). This took real humility, courage and discernment to acknowledge a wrong his own relatives were involved with and then be a part standing with Ezra to help deal with the problem. Shechaniah's are all too rare in churches today! Sadly, the majority tend to blindly defend their relatives rather than looking at things biblically in the situation.
 - b. Wiersbe notes, "Shecaniah was the spokesman for the people, a man whose own relatives had sinned by marrying foreign women. **In my pastoral ministry, I've seen churches split and their witness almost destroyed because people have sided with their disobedient relatives in matters of discipline instead of with the Lord and His Word.**"
 - c. As a church member, when all the debate is over on the more subjective matters (e.g., "how" something was handled), you need to plant your feet on the right side (Scriptural) of the issue and stand there. That means waiting on the Lord, thinking biblically, being discerning, getting wise counsel (e.g., pastor, mature members) and allowing time for the emotional hype and dust to settle so you can see things clearly. Something I have learned is that no matter how gracious and loving you may endeavour to be, certain issues by their very nature are just plain hard and difficult to deal with. There is no easy way of resolving them. The Biblical way of dealing with sin and error is not the path of ease! **Never put family and friends before God and His Word.**
2. Hopeful – "yet now there is hope" (Vs. 2b). Shechaniah was sober about what had happened but he also saw the situation with the eye of faith. He had eyes to see a godly solution to the problem. This is the right balance in responding to sin. There needs to be both:
 - a. Humility for past wrongs.
 - b. Hope for future restoration.
 3. Practical – "let us make a covenant" (Vs. 3a). Shechaniah suggested a specific plan to resolve the situation in a godly manner. He recommended a covenant be made.
 - a. The Person of the Covenant – "a covenant **with our God**".
 - b. The Particulars of the Covenant – "to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them". They would resolve to put away their heathen wives and children. Imagine how hard this would have been to actually carry out in practice!
 - i. We know that God hates "putting away" (Mal. 2:16) but this was necessary at this unique time of history in the national life of Israel. Remember that God is dealing with

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Israel, not the church at this time. The “holy seed” was being mingled with the heathen (Ez. 9:2) which if allowed to continue could threaten the integrity of the Messianic seed line, hence why drastic measures had to be taken. Also, this painful procedure would never have needed to happen if God’s people had just obeyed God in the first place and not taken heathen wives. Sin always brings pain, hurt and damage into people’s lives. The way of obedience brings blessing and peace.

- ii. The New Testament standard is higher for an unbelieving spouse. See 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 and 1 Peter 3:1-2. If you are saved, you should never be unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14) but if you find yourself in that situation due to your unsaved past or a foolish choice made when you weren’t walking with the Lord, then you are to remain faithful to your marriage and seek to win your unsaved spouse for Christ.
4. Respectful – “according to the counsel of my lord” (Vs. 3b).
 - a. Shechaniah gives plain, honest and biblical advice but he strikes the right balance when offering advice to his spiritual leader. He is not forceful and demanding in a fleshly way. He is respectful and allows for input and guidance from Ezra and from other godly individuals in the assembly (“and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God”). This was not carnal “my way or the highway” advice. **The one giving counsel was open to counsel himself!**
 - b. Shechaniah also uses a respectful title (“lord”) when addressing Ezra which would be equivalent to something like “sir” or “mister” in today’s vernacular.
 - c. Note: This is the right approach when giving advice to someone in a position of authority. God’s people are free to approach their pastor (s) in the local church and offer their counsel on situations as they arise but should temper that with an openness to also hear their pastor’s counsel and the counsel of other godly people in the assembly. Shechaniah gives counsel but is also open to getting counsel on his counsel! He is plain spoken but the tone is respectful and humble.
 5. Biblical (Vs. 3c). Shechaniah was also concerned that the action taken be within the boundaries of the Word of God – “let it be done according to the law”. **What a blessing it is to have men like Shechaniah who are concerned that things be done right according to God’s Word.** Instead of thinking along the lines of how the world would approach the situation (e.g., popular opinion, business philosophy, psychology), they think about how the matter should be handled Scripturally. Why would you want to handle a

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spiritual matter with the wisdom of this world which is foolishness with God?

6. Inspirational (Vs. 4) Shechaniah exhorts and encourages Ezra to take godly, biblical action in the situation. Praise God for faithful, godly men who encourage and support their leaders in doing what is right. Shechaniah encourages Ezra to:
 - a. Stand up – “arise”. See the picture? Ezra is on his face before God broken hearted over what has happened. Shechaniah is at his side encouraging him to get up and deal with the situation. There is a time to mourn and pray about a situation but then the time inevitably comes where it must be dealt with. Men of God can be very low at times in the ministry with the great burdens that come with such a high calling. There are times of sorrow and heart break in the ministry, especially when the saints fall. At such times, the ministry of encouragement from men like Shechaniah can make such a difference.
 - b. Take ownership – “this matter belongeth unto thee; we also will be with thee”. Ezra was God’s man for the hour and ultimately, he would have to exercise leadership in dealing with the situation. Again, we note that Shechaniah is working under his leader, not usurping his leader. He recognizes that Ezra is the one who must take the lead but also assures him of his and others support. One of the best ways you can help God’s man is to stand behind him up when he takes a stand on the truth of God’s Word.
 - c. Be courageous – “be of good courage”. The Hebrew word has the idea of “be strong”. Shechaniah helped strengthen Ezra to the task at hand. He was a Jonathan to Ezra. 1 Sam. 23:16 “And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and **strengthened his hand in God.**”
 - d. Take Action – “and do it”. What a contrast to many today who actively try to stop God’s men from taking action against sin! Shechaniah is encouraging Ezra to deal with it!

B. The Commitment to Shechaniah’s Counsel (Vs. 5-9)

Note the adverb ‘then’ at the beginning of verse 5 and 6. These verses details Ezra’s response to Shechaniah’s counsel. Ezra’s commitment to Shechaniah’s godly counsel is demonstrated by:

1. The Swearing to the Covenant (Vs. 5). Ezra leads the people to take an oath of commitment to the covenant as proposed by Shechaniah. Ezra knew that in order to properly deal with the situation it would require the cooperation of God’s people, especially those in leadership (“chief priests, the Levites”).
2. The Seeking of the Lord (Vs. 6).
 - a. Ezra retires to the private chamber of a man named Johanan. This room was probably within the Temple precincts. Now he is away from the public eye but he continues his mourning before

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the Lord over the sin of the people. This provides another secret to Ezra's godly leadership. What he was in public before men, he was in private.

- b. Ezra's fast was an extreme one. Not only did he not eat, he did not drink either. How long he fasted this way we do not know but it again highlights how seriously Ezra took sin. Alone with God, he 'mourned' over the transgression of the remnant. Today all too often we laugh at or view lightly what should make us weep. We have become so desensitized to sin!
 - c. Illustration: Paul had to rebuke the Corinthian church for their careless, prideful attitude towards serious moral leaven in the church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 "It is reported commonly *that there is* fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. **And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned**, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you."
3. The Summoning of the People (Vs. 7-9)
- a. The plan of the proclamation (Vs. 7).
 - i. The leadership of the nation issued a public summons for the people of God to gather at Jerusalem to deal with the problem. The saints must assemble and take action together in unity.
 - ii. This is the biblical model for church discipline. Of necessity, those in spiritual authority must take the lead and propose the biblical and practical way of dealing with the issue but the local church body as a whole must join together in the decision. 1 Co 5:4-5 "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."
 - b. The time period in the proclamation (Vs. 8a). The people were required to assemble at Jerusalem within three days. This gave sufficient time for the people to assemble without procrastinating on dealing with the issue at hand. Now that the issue had been exposed, it would be dealt with without delay. There is a time to wait on the Lord in prayer but there is also a time to act. Leaven needs to be dealt with swiftly or it will spread and do widespread damage.
 - c. The penalty in the proclamation (Vs. 8b). A stiff penalty was attached to the command. For those who failed to obey the summons, they would be required to:

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- i. Forfeit their substance – indicates confiscation of goods.
- ii. Be separated from the congregation.
- iii. This is within the national context of Israel and the powers given to the rulers by the Persian king (See Ez. 7:26) but highlights the seriousness with which they approached resolving the situation.
- d. The performing of the proclamation (Vs. 9)
The people gathered:
 - i. Obediently – “gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days” (Vs. 9a). The people of God submitted to the godly directions of their leaders.
 - ii. Reverently – “trembling because of this matter” (Vs. 9b). The word ‘trembling’ is a strong word and means “to shudder violently”.
 - iii. Sacrificially – “for the great rain” (Vs. 9c). This speaks of bodily discomfort. Dealing with serious sin is not easy and doesn’t feel good!

Conclusion:

1. Do we see sin from God’s perspective?
2. Are we prepared to stand on the right side of the truth, even if it costs us something?
3. Do we give heed to wise, godly counsel?
4. Do we support God’s men when they need to take a stand for righteousness?

Ezra's Covenant

Part 2

Text: Ezra 10:10-44

Introduction:

1. We can summarize Ezra's godly response to the sin of God's people as recorded in Ezra 9-10 in three words:
 - Contrition
 - Confession
 - Covenant
2. In our last message we commenced our study of the godly covenant that was made by the remnant under Ezra's leadership to deal with the sin of taking heathen wives. Forsaking sin must follow confession of sin. Proverbs 28:13 "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso **confesseth and forsaketh** *them* shall have mercy." We now continue our study of the covenant that was made by the people of God and also conclude our series in the Book of Ezra.
3. We are studying this covenant that was made under five headings as follows:
 - The Context of the Covenant (Vs. 1)
 - The Counsel regarding the Covenant (Vs. 2-9)
 - The Command of the Covenant (Vs. 9-11)
 - The Commitment to the Covenant (Vs. 12-17)
 - The Convicted in the Covenant (Vs. 18-44)

I. THE CONTEXT OF THE COVENANT (VS. 1)

A. The Example of Ezra's Confession (Vs. 1a)

Ezra's godly example demonstrates the pathway to revival.

1. Ezra prayed over the people's sin – "Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed".
2. Ezra mourned over the people's sin – "weeping".
3. Ezra humbled himself over the people's sin – "casting himself down before the house of God".

B. The Effect of Ezra's Confession (Vs. 1b)

God used Ezra to awaken the consciences of the people.

II. THE COUNSEL REGARDING THE COVENANT (VS. 2-9)

God moves the heart of one called Shechaniah to offer timely and godly advice to Ezra.

A. The Content of Shechaniah's Counsel (Vs. 2-4)

His counsel was:

1. Humble – "we have trespassed" (Vs. 2a).

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2. Hopeful – “yet now there is hope” (Vs. 2b).
3. Practical – “let us make a covenant” (Vs. 3a).
4. Respectful – “according to the counsel of my lord” (Vs. 3b).
5. Biblical – “let it be done according to the law” (Vs. 3c). Shechaniah was also concerned that the action taken be within the boundaries of the Word of God.
6. Inspirational (encouraging) (Vs. 4) Shechaniah exhorts and encourages Ezra to take godly, biblical action in the situation.

B. The Commitment to Shechaniah’s Counsel (Vs. 5-9)

Note the adverb ‘then’ at the beginning of verse 5 and 6. These verses details Ezra’s response and commitment to Shechaniah’s counsel.

Ezra’s commitment to Shechaniah’s godly counsel is demonstrated by:

1. The Swearing to the Covenant (Vs. 5).
2. The Seeking of the Lord (Vs. 6).
3. The Summoning of the People (Vs. 7-9). The people were trembling for both **spiritual** and **physical** reasons.

III. THE COMMAND OF THE COVENANT (VS. 10-11)

A. The Admonition (Vs. 10)

1. Ezra rebukes them directly (Vs. 10a)
 - a. Ezra now issues a direct rebuke to the people for their sin.
Notice the shift from the first-person plural ‘we’ to the second person plural ‘ye’. Ezra had humbled himself in his prayer of confession and included himself as a part of the nation as a whole. But now the time had come to specifically rebuke those who were the actual offenders in this matter.
 - b. There is not the slightest hint of pride in Ezra’s rebuke. This rebuke is issued with the backdrop of Ezra’s deep and sincere humbling of himself before God and the nation in confession, fasting and weeping.
 - c. It is the job of God’s men to reprove sin in plain language.
 - i. 2 Tim. 4:2 “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; **reprove**, **rebuke**, **exhort** with all longsuffering and doctrine.”
 - ii. Titus 2:15 “These things **speak**, and **exhort**, and **rebuke** with all authority. Let no man despise thee.”
2. Ezra rebukes them plainly (Vs. 10b)
 - a. The specifics of their sin – “Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives”. Ezra did not try and generalize their sin or soften his language to make it less offensive. He names the sin plainly and specifically on the basis of the law of Almighty God. Many preachers today are afraid to call sin out specifically. Not so with Ezra. He feared God rather than man.

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- b. The size of their sin – “to increase the trespass of Israel”. Ezra is accurate as to the magnitude of the sin they are dealing with. He does not try to make the sin smaller than what it really is. All sin is serious before God but not all sin is the same to God. By that we mean that there are sins of a greater magnitude in the eyes of God than others.

B. The Instruction (Vs. 11)

Ezra then issues a threefold instruction to those who had transgressed.

1. Confess to the Lord (Vs. 11a). Ezra had prayed his great prayer of confession on behalf of the nation as a whole but each individual would need to confess their own sins before the Lord also.
2. Obey the Lord (Vs. 11b)

True repentance is seen in Ezra’s instruction. Repentance in heart leads to a change of life in action. Godly sorrow over sin and confession was important but the fruit needed to be manifest in godly change. 2 Cor. 7:10 “...godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of.”

 - a. “do his pleasure” = this means to do what is acceptable to the Lord; what is pleasing to Him; that which is in accordance with His will. The first goal and aim of every believer is to be pleasing to the Lord.
 - b. “separate yourselves” = to be obedient and pleasing to the Lord, they would need to exercise separation. Godly separation is God’s will for His people! They were to exercise separation in two areas:
 - i. From the heathen generally – “from the people of the land”. Their failure to maintain clear lines of separation had led to the problem of intermarrying with the heathen.
 - ii. From their heathen wives specifically – “and from the strange wives”. They would need to put away their heathen wives. Refer notes in previous lesson for explanation of the unique context with Israel as a nation at this time.
 - iii. Notice that they are exhorted to first separate from the “people of the land” before “the strange wives”. “Ezra recognized the root cause of the problem. The people were mixing and socialising with the heathen peoples among whom they lived. Had there been no social intercourse with the surrounding peoples the major problem would not have arisen, and the sins of intermarriage would not have been committed.” (M.K. Hall)
 - iv. Dennett writes, “The order of the separation...is most instructive – ‘From the people of the land, and from the strange wives’. As marrying the strange wives had been the sin, it might be thought that these would be

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mentioned first. But what had led to these marriages?
Association with the people of the land. This was the root
of the mischief, and Ezra thus deals first with it.”

IV. THE COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT (VS. 12-17)

These verses record the response of the people to Ezra’s exhortation.

A. The Promise to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 12)

It was:

1. A united promise – “Then **all** the congregation answered” (Vs. 12a).
 - a. The people of God all submitted to the authority of Scripture as communicated through God’s servant Ezra. Remember that when the preacher declares “Thus saith the Lord” it isn’t about your submission to the preacher but your submission to the Lord.
 - b. There is a wonderful spirit of unity and working together in the whole remnant here. There is unity within the leadership of the nation, there is unity amongst the congregation and there is unity and cooperation between the leaders and the people.
2. An unreserved promise – “with a **loud** voice” (Vs. 12b) They were not halfhearted in their commitment. We are given the distinct impression that their response was with enthusiasm and in wholehearted agreement with the course of action demanded by Ezra.
3. An unequivocal promise – “As thou hast said, so must we do”. Their commitment was clear and plain. They would follow through and do as they had been commanded. Again, their submission first and foremost was to God and His Word.

B. The Process to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 13-15)

The congregation now offers some advice to Ezra and the leadership on how to go about resolving the issue in practical terms.

1. Time would be required – “neither is this a work of one day or two” (Vs. 13)
 - a. What the people **were not** suggesting. This was not an attempt on the people’s behalf to delay dealing with the matter. It was not an insincere excuse to avoid the issue. Rather, it was an accurate observation that time would be required to sort the problem out.
 - b. What the people **were** suggesting. They were suggesting that time would be required to work through things because of:
 - i. The size of the congregation – “the people are **many**”.
 - ii. The limitations of the congregation – “it is a time of **much rain**, and **we are not able** to stand without”. It would not be possible to resolve the issue that same day on account of the bad weather. To ask the people of God to

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endure long hours in the freezing rain to attempt to resolve everything that day would be unreasonable. Physical limitations upon God's people have to be considered when working through a discipline issue like this. For example, how long meetings can practically run for before God's people are stretched beyond capacity mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Dealing with sin is taxing for the flock and its under shepherds.

- iii. The scope of the problem – “neither is this a work of one day or two”. There is a clear acknowledgment that the problem would take more than a couple of days to rectify due to its magnitude. There is a time factor involved when dealing with strongholds of sin in an individual or church. Again, the attitude is not to prolong the problem beyond what is necessary but having resolved to deal with deep rooted sin, time will be needed. Confession and forgiveness can take place in moments. The work of removing a stronghold and restoring the life can take weeks, months and even years depending on the seriousness of the problem. Like an older man of God has wisely counseled me on more than one occasion, “This problem didn't develop overnight so it won't be fixed overnight!”
2. Structure would be required (Vs. 14a)
 - a. People would need to come at appointed times and from specific locations.
 - b. Judges representing a particular area would need to accompany the guilty ones to Jerusalem.
 - c. The principle is that the matter would need to be dealt with in a decent and orderly fashion. It would require thoughtful planning. Each case would have to be considered individually to make sure things were done justly.
 - d. Note: The general problem and the principles for dealing with it was clearly defined but even so, each individual case had to be considered on its own merits. This is the nature of issues of a disciplinary nature. Much wisdom is needed to apply the truths of God's Word to the particular cases as they arise.
 3. Perseverance would be required – “**until** the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us” (Vs. 14b). There would need to be a commitment to see the matter through to its conclusion. This would mean resolving it to the satisfaction of God Almighty so that He would no longer be displeased with them in this matter. Notice that God's wrath is described as being 'fierce' which has the sense of a “burning anger”.

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4. Help would be required (Vs. 15)
 - a. It appears that two men were appointed to overseeing and facilitating the process and two men assisted them. Their job was “to see that this affair was conducted in the manner proposed; that the magistrates of every city brought the persons that had been delinquents, in their turns, of which they gave them notice, and took the account of them as they came” (John Gill).
 - b. Note: Since Shabbethai is referred to as a ‘Levite’ it is possible that the scenario was two priests overseeing the matter and two Levites assisting them.
 - c. The point is that in order for such things to be dealt with, it requires those who are willing to give of their time and be voluntarily “employed” in helping the saints get restored back to spiritual health and vitality.

C. The Period to Deal with the Sin (Vs. 16-17)

1. The people followed through on their commitment – “And the children of the captivity did so”.
2. Ezra along with a team of men were assigned to review the cases as they were presented. They commenced proceedings on “the first day of the tenth month” and finished on “the first day of the first month”. That means that it took them about 3 months to deal with this problem.
3. “Thus it took them three months to go through all the cases. According to the list there were 113 guilty men. Leaving aside the Sabbaths there would have been about 77 available days. This means that, on average, each case would have taken about two thirds of a working day. This suggests that there was a fair and compassionate examination of each case with each male assisted by elders and judges from his town or city (Vs. 14).” (M.K. Hall)

V. THE CONVICTED IN THE COVENANT (VS. 18-44)

The offenders are now named and recorded in the canon of Scripture.
How sobering!

A. The Offenders amongst the Leadership (Vs. 18-24)

It is fitting that the leaders be named first. Their bad example no doubt had a devastating influence upon others. To whom much is given much is required!

1. The priests (Vs. 18-22)
 - a. What a sad state of affairs that this sin had infected even the priesthood; those who were supposed to be the spiritual leaders and examples to the remnant. Sadly, even the sons of Jeshua the high priest were involved (Vs. 18).

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- b. What a sad state of affairs it is when New Testament priests¹ dishonor their high calling and bring disrepute upon the name of Christ by engaging in sin and error.
 - c. On a positive note, while these men had set a bad example in taking heathen wives, they set a good example in the steps they took towards restoration for others to follow. Two actions are noted:
 - i. They “gave their hands that they would put away their wives” (Vs. 19a). The expression “gave their hands” is an interesting one. Keil and Delitzsch state the phrase means “bound themselves by shaking hands”. M.K. Hall says it “has the idea that they gave a pledge that they would indeed do so, indicated by a grasping of the hand.” It signifies their solemn commitment to follow through with what was required.
 - ii. They “offered a ram of the flock for their trespass”. In accordance with the law, they offered a trespass offering for their sin (See Lev. 6:6). Praise God for the Provision of the Blood of Christ to cover our trespasses. Christ is our trespass offering!
 - d. Matthew Henry summarizes the situation well, “Those that should have taught others the law broke it themselves and by their example emboldened others to do likewise. But, having lost their innocency in this matter, they did well to recant and give an example of repentance; for they promised *under their hand* to put away their strange wives (some think that they made oath to do so with their *hands lifted up*), and they took the appointed way of obtaining pardon, bringing the ram which was appointed by the law *for a trespass offering* (Lev. 6:6), so owning their guilt and the desert of it, and humbly suing for forgiveness.”
- 2. The Levites (Vs. 23)
 - 3. The Singers (Vs. 24a). There was compromise in the choir! If you are going to stand and sing in the house of God, you need to be living right. **In music ministry, purity is primary, ability is secondary!**² All too often in music ministry, singers and instrumentalists are chosen for their talent, not their integrity. This is especially true in the CCM scene. At NBC we have high standards for those in music ministry for a reason.³ We want to do our best

¹ We believe in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9)

² Obviously there needs to be a basic music sense and skill level to minister in church music but holiness is the primary requirement! The most talented musician might never play in the orchestra if they are living in sin!

³ Remember that outward conformity to standards in dress does not automatically equal holiness of heart.

When serving in music ministry we want to be prepared on the inside and appropriately and modestly dressed on the outside.

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and earnestly endeavour not to grieve the Lord in His Church.

There is nothing more grievous than a carnal choir.

4. The Porters (Vs. 24b). There was ungodliness amongst the ushers!

B. The Offenders amongst the Laymen (Vs. 25-44)

1. The rest of the list concerns the people in general. If the leadership of the nation was compromised, is it any wonder that those under their oversight would follow!
2. “There are several lists of names in Ezra. In chapters 2 and 8 are contained the lists of the captives in Babylon who, with Zerubbabel in 536 BC and Ezra 458 BC respectively, had the desire to return to Jerusalem. These lists are lists of honour. Yet in the final chapter and even final words of the book of Ezra, in stark contrast, there is given a list of the names of men who had sinned by taking wives of the women of the land. In some instances, the names are of the same men or the same families who feature in the earlier chapters. **It is a sad and solemn reminder of the fact that believers who have done exploits for God earlier in life are always at risk of tragically failing Him later on.**” (M.K. Hall)
3. On the one hand this was a humbling thing to have your name listed as one of the transgressors. On the other hand, the record is a record of God’s grace in that the issue was dealt with and spoke well of the cooperation of the men involved to submit to leadership and deal with the issues.
4. It is important to recognize that as difficult as this situation was, the Book of Ezra ends in triumph not defeat. If the matter had been left undealt with, it would have been a defeat but the matter was dealt with in a godly and God-honouring manner. So, while it is a sobering note with which to end the Book, it is at the same time, a victory note.
5. But “making it right” didn’t automatically heal every wound or remove every pain because the women and children involved had to leave the community and go back to the heathen homes from which they had come. Sin always brings pain and damage to people’s lives. “It’s easy to pull the nails out of the board, but it’s impossible to pull out the holes that they leave behind.” (Wiersbe)

Conclusion: Ezra next appears in Nehemiah 8. Thirteen years have gone by. It is now 445 BC. He is the priest (Vs. 2) and the scribe (Vs. 1) and is engaged, with others, including Nehemiah, in bringing the law before the people. By the grace of God, he hasn’t changed!