REBUILDING AND REVIVING

COMMENTARY ON BOOK OF EZRA

REBUILDING WORSHIP FOUNDATIONS REQUIRES A HEART REFORMATION INFORMED BY THE WORD OF GOD

Paul Apple (April 2021)

For each section:

- Thesis statement … to focus on the big idea
- Analytical outline … to guide the understanding
- Devotional questions … to encourage life application
- Representative quotations … to stimulate deeper insight

Ezra 7:10: "*For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statues and ordinances in Israel.*"

Ezra 9:9 "*For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem."*

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BACKGROUND NOTES

George Rawlinson: **Authorship**:
The simple view that Ezra, who is admitted to have written at least one section, really composed the whole, using for the most part his own words, but in places inserting documents, is to the full as tenable as any other hypothesis. The general harmony of the whole Book, and the *real* uniformity of its style, are in favour of this view. The objection from the changes of person is of no great importance, changes of this kind often occurring in works admitted to be the production of a single writer, as in Thucydides and in Daniel. Moreover, tradition ascribes the whole Book to Ezra; and if Ezra wrote Chronicles, which is the view of many critics, then the connection of the Book with Chronicles will be an additional argument in favour of Ezra's authorship.

J. Sidlow Baxter: The subject with which this Book of Ezra deals is one of the most important in Jewish history, namely, *the return of the Remnant*. This event took place about the year 536 B.C., that is, at the end of the seventy years' servitude to Babylon. Bothe the Exile and the return were predicted before ever the Exile began (see **Jer. xxv. 11-12**, and **xxix. 10, 11**); and the Book of Ezra recognizes this in its opening words . . .

At the outset, then, let us clearly note these two facts – first, that the return was foretold in prophecy; and second, that it was actually set on foot by the decree of Cyrus. . . There was this return of fifty thousand, in response to the decree of Cyrus, in 536 B.C. – which return was under the leadership of Zerubbabel (see ii. 2), who was a lineal descendant of the kings of Judah. But about eighty years later, in the year 456 B.C., there was a further return, though of a very much smaller number, under the leadership of Ezra, the priest and scribe. It was occasioned by a decree of Artaxerxes, the then reigning Persian king. . .

There is a noticeable parallelism between the two main parts of this Book of Ezra. In preference to an ordinary paragraph-by-paragraph analysis, we ought to get into our minds a picture of this book in this parallel form.

THE BOOK OF RESTORATION

"*Though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion.*"

Return Under Zerubbabel (i.-vi.)	**Return Under Ezra (vii.-x)**
Decree of Cyrus (i.1-4)	Decree of Artaxerxes (vii.1, 11-26)
Leader = Zerubbabel (i. 8; ii. 2)	Leader = Ezra the scribe (vii. 1-10)
Names & Number of Remnant (ii. 3-65)	Names & Number of company (viii. 1-20)
Sacred vessels-gifts (i. 6-11; ii. 68-70)	Sacred vessels-gifts (vii. 15-22; viii. 24-35)
Coming to Jerusalem (iii. 1)	Coming to Jerusalem (viii. 32)
Prophetic Ministry: Haggai / Zechariah	Intercessory ministry of Ezra (ix. 1-15)
Main Outcome = Temple rebuilt (vi. 15-22)	Main Outcome = People re-separated (x. 1-44)

In the first half of this Book of Ezra (**i.-vi**.) there are *six steps* particularized in connection with the restoration of the Jews, and these six steps or stages correspond with the main factors in **spiritual restoration**.

1. Return to the land (**i. and ii**.) – back to right basis.
2. Altar re-erected (**iii. 1-6**) – dedication renewed.
3. New Temple begun (**iii. 8-13**) – service and witness.
4. "*Adversaries*" obstruct (**iv**.) – faith under testing.
5. Prophets exhort (**v. 1-vi. 14**) – need of God's word.
6. Temple finished (**vi. 15-22**) – faith wins through.

The four chapters which tell of Ezra and his mission mark a fourfold progress. In these chapters Ezra is a model of service and leadership.

1. Ezra's Preparation for the Task (**vii**).
2. Ezra's Prosecution of the Task (**viii**).
3. Ezra's Consternation at Compromise (**ix**).
4. Ezra's Restoration of Separation (**x**).

Thomas Constable: The title in the English text comes from the main character in the second part of the book (**chapters 7—10**). Also in the Septuagint translation, this book bore the name of Ezra: "*Esdras*," the Greek transliteration of "*Ezra*." "Ezra" is a short form of Azariah, which means "*Yahweh has helped*." The Hebrew Bible has the same title.

Rhetorical studies of Ezra-Nehemiah have revealed a **chiastic structure** that supports the view that these two books were originally one.

A. Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees (**Ezra 1—2**)
  B. Building of the temple and opposition (**Ezra 3—6**)
    C. Return of Ezra (**Ezra 7—8**)
      D. Center: Purification of the people (**Ezra 9—10**)
    C.' Return of Nehemiah (**Neh. 1—2**)
  B.' Building of the walls and opposition (**Neh. 3:1—7:3**)
A.' Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees; final reforms (**Neh. 7:4—13:31**)

The Book of Ezra reveals four things about God's dealings with Israel that are of permanent value.

First, **God's instruments are very diverse**. In shaping Israel again, God used instruments outside the nation as well as inside it.

His primary instruments outside were Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. Each one issued a decree that God had inspired as fully as any message by Isaiah or any of the other prophets of Israel (e.g., **1:1-4**). God turned the hearts of these kings in the direction that He wanted them to go (cf. **Prov. 21:1**). God directed the marching of their armies, as well as the praying of the captives, to accomplish His will.

His primary instruments inside the nation of Israel were Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Ezra. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King Jehoiachin, and Jeshua was a descendant of Aaron. Thus, God raised up a member of the kingly family and a member of the priestly family to resume His dealings with the nation as formerly. They began to inspire other Israelites, and the movement to return was under way. The third Israelite instrument was Ezra, who was a scribe. We begin here to read of the scribes, who are prominent in the Gospels. A scribe was a student, interpreter, teacher, and expositor of the Word of God. God uses both people who do not know Him and people who do know Him to carry out His plans.

Second, **God's might is awesome**, another clear revelation in this book. We see this not only in the way God uses the two kinds of people just differentiated. We see it in the way He qualifies His workers to accomplish their tasks, as I have noted. We also see it in God gathering His people from all over the ancient world to bring them back into Palestine. Most of the exiles did not return. Ezra's revelation provided the original readers with hope for the future.

Third, **God's people are changeable**, another significant revelation. God gathered people from all the tribes, not just Judah, back to the land (**2:70; 6:16-17**). In exile, the Israelites had renounced idolatry. They had returned to the worship of the one true God. The Lord's severe punishment of them for idolatry, as well as their own observation of idolatry for 70 years, took away their appetite for it. God had purged out this dross and could now fashion the nation anew.

Fourth, **God's work is proceeding**, another important revelation. Note what God did to the nation. When the people returned to Palestine, they had lost their national influence. They could not demonstrate how glorious it is to live under God's government, as they had formerly. They also lost their independence. However, they regained a place for themselves as a nation. Furthermore, God had saved them from racial extinction and religious absorption. The Pharisees (lit. separated ones) came into existence during the Captivity. They wanted to prevent the Jews from intermixing with others. That attitude was good then, but it became bad later. In all these respects, we can see God's work of reshaping the nation.

The message of the book arises from these observations on its emphases, and I would state it this way: **God does not discard what He has chosen but remakes it when it fails.**

A. E. Cundall: The two books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one, being attached to the book of Chronicles to form a composite historical work for the period from Adam to Nehemiah. A comparison of **2 Ch. 36:22ff**. with **Ezr. 1:1ff**. indicates this continuity, while a similarity of style and interests (the Temple and its cultus, statistics and genealogies, etc.) in Chronicles and Ezra suggests a unity of authorship. Ezra and Nehemiah cover a period of history not dealt with in the books of Kings (unlike Chronicles, which, in measure, is a duplication of history) and so were detached from Chronicles and given a more prominent place in the third section (the Writings or Hagiographa) of the Hebrew Canon.

John Martin: Ezra wrote to encourage the remnant to be involved in true temple worship and to remind them to fulfill their covenantal obligations because of God’s mercy. The highlight of the book is in **chapters 9-10**, which tells of the people’s proper response after sin was found in their

midst. Ezra wanted his readers to emulate that same attitude of dependence on God, which believers of all time should have.

Israel Loken: Ezra is one of the most significant books in the Hebrew Bible. It describes the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to return His people to their land after seventy years of exile in Babylon. Throughout the book God is seen as completely sovereign, stirring up the hearts of the key characters to act as He wants them to act. The Lord is pictured as sovereign even over the most powerful nations on earth as He raises up the Persians to reverse the wrongs committed by the Babylonians.

Ezra also describes the efforts of the Jewish remnant to restore its cultic worship of Yahweh. The remnant is sincere in its efforts to please God; however, its devotion is affected by the apostasy of its age. When the rebuilding efforts do not go smoothly, they abandon the work. When they are attracted to foreign women, they abandon the practice of marrying Jewish women and proceed to marry foreigners. In each case, the Lord raises up spiritual leaders to inform the remnant of its apostasy. Haggai and Zechariah are instrumental in getting the nation to finish the temple project while Ezra is used to purify the land of the ungodly marriages. In both cases the nation responds with immediate repentance.

While this repentance was genuine and immediate, it was not long lasting. The nation began the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem only to halt the work when opposition arose. The nation's resolve to separate from foreigners lasted but a few years as Nehemiah reveals that the remnant's practice of intermingling with its foreign neighbors continued in his day. Thus, the story of Ezra is one of finished business (temple) and unfinished business (complete restoration with spiritual and physical purity). The unfinished business of Ezra is completed in Nehemiah, a fact that explains why the books were originally joined in the Hebrew Bible.

Tiberius Rata: Ezra himself embodies the man of God who excels in the knowledge of God's Law (**7:6**) because he is wholly committed to studying and teaching it (**7:10–11**). He realizes that he must know "*What says the Lord*" before he rises to declare, "*Thus says the Lord*." He is also careful to maintain a good testimony. The Persian king Artaxerxes recognizes that Ezra is a servant of the Creator God and that he possesses God-given wisdom (**7:12, 25**). However, even though Artaxerxes shows reverence for Yahweh, he was likely not a follower of the true God since he refers to Ezra's God as "*your God*" (**7:17**) as opposed to "*my God*." Ezra is portrayed as a leader who inspires and gathers others to join him in the good work that God put on his heart (**7:28**). His focus on fasting, humility, and seeking God's guidance points to his spiritual depth and sensitivity (**8:21–23**). Ezra teaches the Israelites that they are holy to the Lord, a quality which includes both behavioral holiness—how they are to act; and also positional holiness—separation unto God in order to do His will and accomplish His purposes (**8:28**). Once again the people respond to God's Law, goodness, provision, and protection by worshipping Him, lived out here through sacrifices (**8:35**).

Derek Kidner: The people of God, then, were still confronted with the ethical implications of the covenant and with calls to courageous faith such as had been given by the prophets. But the three successive foci of activity in these two books, namely, the Temple, the law and the wall, bring into special prominence the character of Israel as God's minority group in an alien world, his

'own possession among all peoples'. As such, this community was priestly: called to offer worship, not only through material sacrifices but in songs and prayers for which a highly organized temple staff was maintained (see especially **Neh. 11:15–24**). It was becoming, in the second place, the people of a book—not only in the sense that the Mosaic law was now vigorously enforced (especially over mixed marriages) but that it was expounded and given a major part to play in worship (cf. **Ezra 7:10; Neh. 8:3, 8; 9:3**). With this emphasis and the example of the scholarly Ezra, the role of the scribe in Israel was already beginning to emerge in its developed form. The third focus of the story, the rebuilding of the wall, almost asks to be seen as a symbol of Israel's separatism: the material expression of a siege mentality. While this is not altogether fair, since the wall had been torn down in a campaign of slander and intimidation and rebuilt in a spirit of faith, it is true that Nehemiah used it not only for physical protection but for spiritual quarantine, to defend the sabbath from violation (**Neh. 13:15–22**). It is also true that separatism was now being taken with new seriousness as a demand of the law ('*I … have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine*'—**Lev. 20:26**), and was thereby—not unlike the city wall itself—potentially a means either of preservation or else, if it should loom too large, of constriction.

John MacArthur: Ezra was a scribe who had access to the myriad of administrative documents found in Ezra and Nehemiah, especially those in the book of Ezra. Very few people would have been allowed access to the royal archives of the Persian Empire, but Ezra proved to be the exception (cf**. Ezra 1:2–4; 4:9–22; 5:7–17; 6:3–12**). His role as a scribe of the law is spelled out in 7:10: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." He was a strong and godly man who lived at the time of Nehemiah (cf. **Neh. 8:1–9; 12:36**). Tradition says he was founder of the Great Synagogue, where the complete OT canon was first formally recognized.

The Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity seemed like a second Exodus, sovereignly patterned in some ways after Israel's first redemption from Egyptian bondage. The return trip from Babylon involved activities similar to those of the original Exodus:

1) the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls;
2) the reinstitution of the law, which made Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah collectively seem like a second Moses;
3) the challenge of the local enemies; and
4) the temptation to intermarry with non-Jews, resulting in idolatry.

Other parallels between the original Exodus and the return from Babylon must have seemed to the returnees like they were given a fresh start by God.

In his account of the return, Ezra drew upon a collection of Persian administrative documents to which he had access as a scribe. The presence of actual royal administrative documents carries a powerful message when accompanied by the resounding line "*the hand of the LORD my God was upon him/me*" (**7:6, 28**). The decrees, proclamations, letters, lists, genealogies, and memoranda, many of them written by the Persian administration, attest to the sovereign hand of God in Israel's restoration. The primary message of the book is that God orchestrated the past grim situation (captivity) and would continue to work through a pagan king and his successors to

give Judah hope for the future (return). God's administration overrides that of any of the kings of this world, and thus the book of Ezra is a message of **God's continuing covenant grace to Israel**.

Another prominent theme which surfaces in Ezra is **opposition** from the local Samaritan residents whose ancestors had been imported from Assyria (**4:2**; cf. **John 4:4–42**). For reasons of spiritual sabotage, Israel's enemies requested to participate in rebuilding the temple (**4:1, 2**). After being shunned, the enemies hired counselors against the Jews (cf. **4:4, 5**). But the Lord, through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, rekindled the spirit of the people and their leaders to build, with the words " … *be strong … and work; for I am with you*" (**Hag. 2:4**; cf. **Ezra 4:24–5:2**). The reconstruction resumed (ca. 520 B.C.) and the temple was soon finished, dedicated, and back in service to God (ca. 516 B.C.).

Greg Herrick: The book of Ezra, in conjunction with Nehemiah, records the fulfillment of God's promise to restore his people to their land after seventy years of Babylonian captivity. In keeping with this, there is stress laid on God's sovereignty over both his own people, but also foreign kings and peoples as well. It was he who "*stirred up the spirit*" of Cyrus II (**1:1**) to permit any willing Israelite to return to his land. And it was he who later prompted Darius I (**6:14, 22**) and Artaxerxes I (**7:11-13ff**) to decree similarly (**9:9**).

Ezra also lays stress on the theme of God's covenant with his people, reflected especially in the Lord's special presence in the temple and Israel's special access to him through God-appointed sacrifice. Thus the rebuilding of the altar and the temple (**Ezra 3-6**), and the offering of sacrifices, receives considerable attention in Ezra. So also the joy and exuberance of the people (**3:10-13; 6:22**).

But religious reform is essentially meaningless in Israelite theology without spiritual and ethical reform. Marriages to foreign women, though forbidden in the law of Moses (cf. **Ezra 9:11-12**), were rampant during Ezra's time and posed an enormous threat to Israel's future commitment to remain true to YHWH. The solution was drastic, yet necessary: after Ezra's lengthy confession to God and plea for his mercy (**9:5-15**), the people decide to put their foreign wives away (**10:19**). Thus, the religious purity of the people was restored, if ever so briefly, through the work of Ezra. The overall focus in Ezra, then, is on the return of the Lord's people to

(1) the worship of the God who keeps his covenant;
(2) to the land He promised to give his people; and
(3) to religious and ethical purity.

Chuck Swindoll: The book of Ezra provides a much-needed link in the historical record of the Israelite people. When their king was dethroned and captured and the people exiled to Babylon, Judah as an independent nation ceased to exist. The book of Ezra provides an account of the Jews' regathering, of their struggle to survive and to rebuild what had been destroyed. Through his narrative, Ezra declared that they were still God's people and that God had not forgotten them.

In the book of Ezra we witness the rebuilding of the new temple, the unification of the returning tribes as they shared common struggles and were challenged to work together. Later, after the

original remnant had stopped work on the city walls and spiritual apathy ruled, Ezra arrived with another two thousand people and sparked a spiritual revival. By the end of the book, Israel had renewed its covenant with God and had begun acting in obedience to Him.

Ezra's narrative reveals two main issues faced by the returning exiles:

(1) the struggle to **restore the temple** (**Ezra 1:1–6:22**) and
(2) the need for **spiritual reformation** (**7:1–10:44**).

Both were necessary in order for the people to renew their fellowship with the Lord.

A broader theological purpose is also revealed: **God keeps His promises**. Through the prophets, God had ordained that His chosen people would return to their land after a seventy-year exile. Ezra's account proclaims that God kept His word, and it shows that when God's people remained faithful to Him, He would continue to bless them. Hence, the book emphasizes the temple and proper worship, similar to Chronicles (which was also written during these days).

J. Vernon McGee: The Books of Haggai and Zechariah should be read and studied with the Book of Ezra, for all three books were written in the shadow of the rebuilt temple, and were given to encourage the people in building. "*Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of God of Israel, even unto them*" (**Ezra 5:1**).

Breneman: The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah presents Ezra as a strong personality. He did not emphasize the law as an end in itself; rather, he was convinced that the covenant community needed to return to God by taking seriously his revelation and applying it to every aspect of life. Ezra's prayer of confession (**Ezra 9**) demonstrates his genuine concern for the spiritual life of the people. He realized, "as perhaps no one else had since Moses and the prophets, that man cannot live by bread alone, only by and through the words that proceed from the mouth of God."

Free Bible Lessons**: Here Are 5 Lessons from the Book of Ezra**
1 # Short Commentary & Lesson from Ezra 1.1-4 – A Kept Promise
Many years before this time, the prophet Jeremiah had predicted that God's people would be in captivity for seventy years. Now, King Cyrus was beginning to complete that prophecy. Cyrus was not a Jew, yet God caused this ruler to be a special part of God's plan for his people. God kept his promise to return his people to their homeland.

God often uses people and events that we would not suspect of being able to help us. A teacher, boss, coach, commanding officer, judge, or government official may be God's means of speaking directly to us. Often, the person involved may not even know that God is using them in this way. But when we are open to hearing the Lord and seeing him at work, we see how vast God's reach is.

2 # Short Commentary & Lesson from Ezra 4.7-24 – The Enemy Doesn't Fight Fairly
In this passage, Ezra gives us a summary of the opposition to the Jews' rebuilding the temple. Israel's enemies wrote letters to king Artaxerxes, making it sound as though they the king's best

interests at heart. As a result, the king ordered the Jews to halt their work on the temple.

Although the information given to the king was true, it was not fair to assume that this group of Israelites would rebel as their ancestors had done. But the enemy does not fight fairly. We should not be discouraged when those who oppose our work try to dig up something from our past in an attempt to stop what God wants to do. When the enemy wins a temporary victory, remember that this is only a delay - not defeat.

3 # Short Commentary & Lesson from Ezra 6.1-15 – God's People Find Favor
Not only did King Darius command Governor Tatternai to stop hindering the work on the temple, but he actually told the governor to use public taxes to pay for the work! With the help of King Darius, the temple was completed in four years.

In our day, we are often tempted to think that the government and religion should be completely separate. But God can use the state to help complete his work when and where he wants to do so.

4 # Short Commentary & Lesson from Ezra 7.1-28 – Help from the World
What a happy time for God's people! They who had been slaves recently were now treated like royalty by the secular government. How can we account for this unusual kindness king Artaxerxes showed the Israelites?

We see the immense generosity of Artaxerxes and his concern that God's laws must be obeyed by everyone. In his own way, "*God controls rulers*" (**Proverbs 21.1**). What a comforting fact to keep in mind as we live in today's world.

5 # Short Commentary & Lesson from Ezra 9.5-15 – A Prayer for Forgiveness
Ezra's prayer is one of the best examples in the Bible of how to pray when we have sinned, Even though Ezra himself had not married a foreign woman, he included himself in the Israelites' failure to obey God. By tearing his clothes, he was outwardly expressing the sorrow he felt because of the people's sins.

Ezra recognized that if God gave them what they deserved, he would have to destroy them all. Similarly, we may not have committed all the awful sins of which our society is guilty. We can, however, confess our own sins as well as the sins of society to God. We can proclaim God's loving fairness, and trust that he will be compassionate toward us.

Promises For Us
When Cyrus the Persian emperor offered the Israelites in Babylon the chance to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their shattered culture, most of them stayed put in their comfortable Babylonian homes. Instead of cities and villages, those who returned found weed-choked piles of rubble and neighbors who opposed their every move.

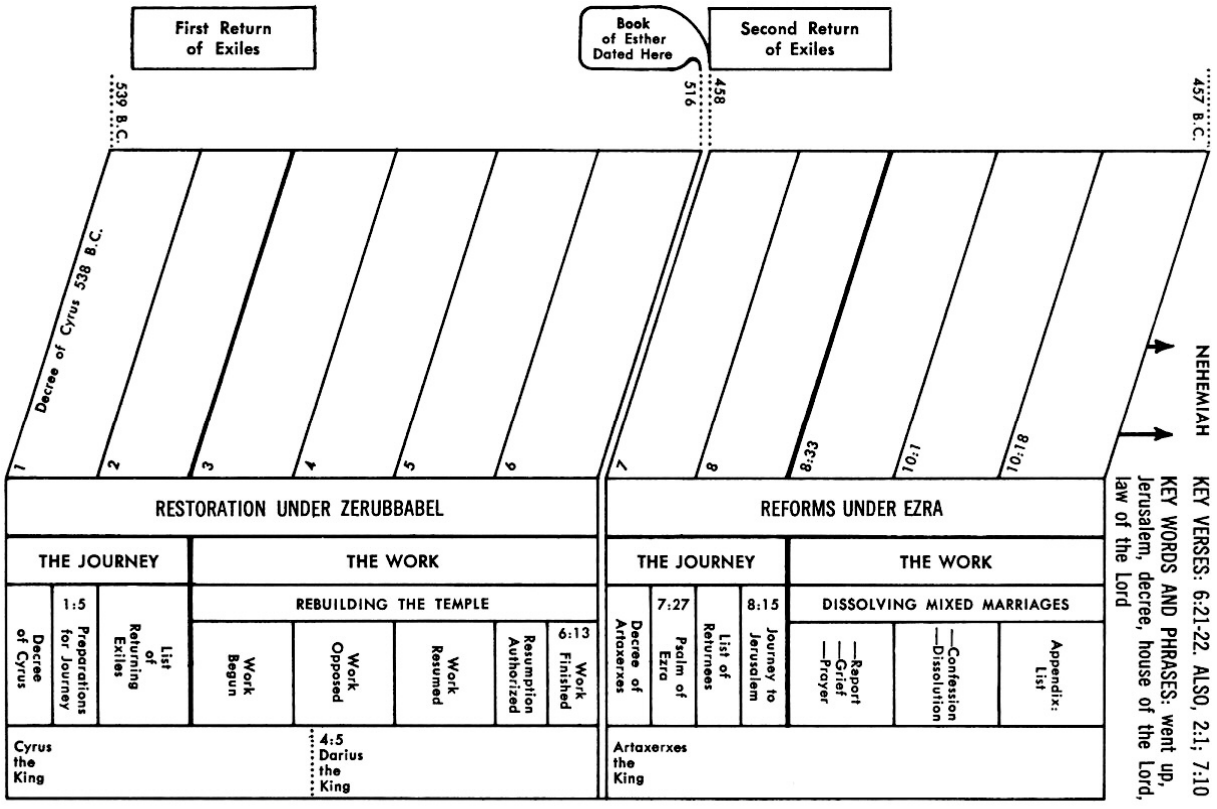
The Israelites who went home soon grew discouraged and wanted to give up. God wouldn't let them. He sent reinforcements in the persons of Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets, and Ezra who emphasized the laws of God. The big winners in life are those who dare to keep starting over. Ezra is a straightforward record of people who seized an opportunity to make a difference

for God in an indifferent world. Notice how God continually provides resources for people who dare, but he doesn't do the work for them
https://simplelessonsfromthebible.blogspot.com/2018/07/5-life-lessons-from-book-of-ezra-bible-study-and-Commentary.html

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown: The **revival** of the Jewish remnant in the book of Ezra bears seven characteristics:

- Consciousness of their own weakness (**chapters 2 and 9**)
- Obedience to the Word of God (**chapter 7**)
- Return to the God-given centre (**chapter 3**)
- Separation from the world (**chapter 4**)
- Spirit of commitment and sacrifice (**chapter 2:68-69**)
- Consciousness of unity of the people (**chap. 3:1; 6:17; 8:35**)
- Prophetic service and anticipation of the Messiah (**chap. 5:1; 6:14**)

Bruce Hurt:



OVERVIEW OF BOOK OF EZRA

Today for the first time in a long time you get to change out of your **running shoes** into your **walking shoes**. There are only 10 Chapters in the **Book of Ezra**, so we have a better shot of taking our time and looking at more of the details in the book. Still there is more material than I can cover. These historical events pick up the story line after the **Babylonian Captivity** which we saw at the end of **2 Chronicles**. Now the exiles return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem under the leadership of first Zerubbabel and then Ezra.
Remember these 2 words: Return and Restoration.

I am going to jump right in by looking at my **favorite verse** in the book:

Application: **Make the Word of God a high priority.**
Ezra 7:10:

"*For Ezra had set his heart* [3 priorities]

- *to study the law of the Lord*
- *and to practice it,*
- *and to teach His statues and ordinances in Israel*."

Special focus of today's study – highlighting all of the **Applications of God's Word**. There will be 16 slides formatted like this one – just like I was taught in Hermeneutics class in seminary – make sure you have 16 major points.

The phrase in **7:10** "*set his heart*" indicates a deliberate decision, reflecting a deep inner conviction. **What is your heart set on?**

Reading the bible is important; but we need to be committed to dig deeper and apply ourselves to study the Word.

This practical application is crucial, as seen in **James 1:22**, which urges believers to be *doers of the word, not hearers only*. Ezra's life exemplifies the **integration of faith and action**, serving as a model for believers to follow. His practice of the Law would have been a powerful testimony to those around him, demonstrating the power of God's Word to guide and transform.

Ezra's mission includes teaching, which is vital for the preservation and transmission of faith. The "*statutes and ordinances*" refer to the specific commands and decrees within the Law. Teaching is a key component of the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19-20**), where Jesus instructs His disciples to teach others to obey **everything** He has commanded. We take the entire body of truth and faithfully teach it to the next generation of believers. You don't have to be gifted in teaching to teach your family and to teach people you are discipling.

We are going to see the **power of preaching the Word** in this book of Ezra.

2nd Application: **Sometimes we need to renew our spiritual mission.**

What was lost in the Exile that needed to be Restored and Revived?

- Loss of the system of priesthood
- Loss of the system of sacrifice
- Loss of the central sanctuary

- How committed are we to our mission of the Great Commission?
- How committed are we to making the Word of God our priority – studying it, practicing it, and teaching it to others as God gives us opportunity?

Title: Hebrew – Originally combined with **Nehemiah** as one book
Cover about one century in Israel's history – from 538 – 433 BC
Eventually in 1448 – the two books in the Hebrew bible Renamed as Ezra and Nehemiah = basis for our English division and names
Name derived from Hebrew meaning *help* or *helper* – concept of God as the nation's Helper

Arguments for Ezra as the Author:

- Jewish tradition in the Talmud; has remained the consensus view
- Specific portions of the book written in first person = from Ezra's point of view
- Vividness of details suggest an eyewitness account
- Strong priestly emphasis – Ezra was a respected scribe

Reknown of Ezra:

- The founder of the **Great Synagogue** = group of learned Jewish scholars; like a Synod; progenitor of the Sanhedrin in the days of the Gospels
- Really settled on the OT canon as far as its threefold division – the Law, Prophets and the Writings (**Luke 24**)
- In the transcribing of the Hebrew text, he changed the characters that were used from the Hebrew characters to the **square Assyrian characters** (Ezra was a scribe)
- Initiated the **local synagogues** – see them in the NT cities – place of education – taught the Torah = the Law of Moses; to worship they were to go to Jerusalem and the temple; main tenet: the whole success of their culture depended on returning to their religious roots and obedience to the Law and conformity to the sacrificial system administered by the priests and Levites (wrote 1&2 Chronicles as well) with the emphasis on the Temple and the covenant relationship
- Compiled 4 books in the OT – impressive task

Historical Setting:

Why the Exile to Babylon? What is known as the 70 year Babylonian Captivity occurred after the events of 2 Chronicles. They broke the covenant and suffered the consequences as detailed in **Deut. 28**.

3rd Application: **We cannot escape divine accountability.**
when we cheat God there comes a payday; must give God what is His; *Be not deceived, God is not mocked; whatever a man sows, he shall reap*

2 Chron. 36:19-21 "*Then they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its fortified buildings with fire, and destroyed all its valuable articles.* [20] *And those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia,* [21] *to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete*."

4th Application: **God keeps His promises so we need to trust Him completely.**

Jer. 29:10
"*'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope."*

Prophet Jeremiah had predicted 70 years of captivity until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths – to make up for the 70 sabbath years that Israel had failed to observe in their recent 500 year history; every seventh year they were not to plant seeds in their fields – People probably reasoned: "Why let the land lay fallow? Why not increase our wealth;" God was collecting the 70 years of rest that He deserved.

Exile effectively lasted only **50 years** after 586 B.C. – but the 70 year duration is taken from the beginning date of 606 BC when the first deportation took place.

3 Deportations of Jews to Babylon:

- (606 BC) – During Jehoiakim's Reign

  included some nobles, royal family members, Daniel and his friends

- (597 BC) – During Jehoiachin's Reign

  around 10,000 people including the king, some craftsmen, artisans, Ezekiel taken

- (586 BC) – Fall of Jerusalem

  After a failed rebellion by King Zedekiah, Babylonians returned;

  Destruction of the Temple, city walls and royal palace;

  Most of the remaining population taken except the poor

Bill McRae: Conditions during those 70 years: 3 geographic areas:

- Some remained in Jerusalem; a few in the priesthood; but mainly the poor; incorporated into province of Samaria governed by Babylonian kingdom at that time; they will oppose the rebuilding of the temple under Ezra and of the walls of the city under Nehemiah – would lose part of their province; Lamentations describe the conditions
- Group living in Babylon after having been taken captive – story in Daniel and Ezekiel
  - Jewish people became commercial merchants during this time; had been farmers up until that time

- They no longer had any inclination towards idolatry; had other problems like formalistic, ritualistic legalism

Some returned after the 70 years and some stayed (like Esther); Talmud – Aramaic translation of the Jewish laws and the interpretation of the rabbis for the Jews who remained in Babylon instead of returning

- Some went to Egypt – cf. Jeremiah – just a very few – some stayed for an extended period of time; needed bible in their language = LXX translation into Greek; they had lost the Hebrew language and had learned the language of commerce = Greek

Providential Preparations for Return of Jewish Exiles:

- Changed World Empires – from Babylon to Persia
- Blessed the Jews with material prosperity in commerce
- Turned the hearts of pagan kings to accomplish His will
- Raised up spiritual leadership to guide the return and restoration

3 Corresponding Returns:

- (538 BC) – Led by Zerubbabel – Initiated by King Cyrus – Chaps. 1-6

  50,000 Jews (out of population of 2-3M) –

  Rebuilding of altar; restoration of sacrifices

  Temple completed in 516 BC

  Required faith and courage – long journey; left comforts of home; faced uncertainty and danger

- (457 BC) – Led by Ezra – Initiated by King Artaxerxes I – Chaps. 7-10

  1,500 men plus families (much smaller group)

  Religious reforms / Confession of national sins

Book of Esther written in 483 B.C. – historically fits in between the 58 year gap between Chaps. 6 and 7 of Ezra
[Books of the various prophets fit into the historical timeline – pre-exilic prophets; Daniel and Ezekiel; then post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)]

- (444 BC) – Led by Nehemiah – Initiated by King Artaxerxes I

  About 13 years after the events in the book of Ezra

  Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and secure the city;

  Social and religious reforms

5th Application**: Restoration is possible after failure.**

> **Ezra 9:8-9**
> "*But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.* [9] *"For we are slaves; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem*."

BIG IDEA:

REBUILDING WORSHIP FOUNDATIONS REQUIRES A HEART REFORMATION INFORMED BY THE WORD OF GOD

Thomas Constable: Rhetorical studies of Ezra-Nehemiah have revealed a **chiastic structure** that supports the view that these two books [Ezra and Nehemiah] were originally one.

A. Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees (Ezra 1—2)

B. Building of the temple and opposition (Ezra 3—6)

C. Return of Ezra (Ezra 7—8)

D. Center: Purification of the people (Ezra 9—10)

C.' Return of Nehemiah (Neh. 1—2)

B.' Building of the walls and opposition (Neh. 3:1—7:3)

A.' Zerubbabel's return and list of returnees; final reforms (Neh. 7:4—13:31)

John Martin: Ezra wrote to encourage the remnant to be involved in true temple worship and to remind them to fulfill their covenantal obligations because of God's mercy. The highlight of the book is in **chapters 9-10**, which tells of the people's proper response after sin was found in their midst. Ezra wanted his readers to emulate that same attitude of dependence on God, which believers of all time should have.

Structure of Book:

I. (1-6) Return and Restoration under Zerubbabel

Restoration of Worship / Rebuilding the Temple

II. (7-10) Return and Restoration under Ezra

Recovery of God's Word / Conviction of Sin/ Heartfelt Repentance

J. Sidlow Baxter:

THE BOOK OF RESTORATION

"Though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion."

Return Under Zerubbabel (i.-vi.)	**Return Under Ezra (vii.-x)**
Decree of Cyrus (i.1-4)	Decree of Artaxerxes (vii.1, 11-26)
Leader = Zerubbabel (i. 8; ii. 2)	Leader = Ezra the scribe (vii. 1-10)
Names & Number of Remnant (ii. 3-65)	Names & Number of company (viii. 1-20)
Sacred vessels-gifts (i. 6-11; ii. 68-70)	Sacred vessels-gifts (vii. 15-22; viii. 24-35)
Coming to Jerusalem (iii. 1)	Coming to Jerusalem (viii. 32)
Prophetic Ministry: Haggai / Zechariah	Intercessory ministry of Ezra (ix. 1-15)
Main Outcome = Temple rebuilt (vi. 15-22)	Main Outcome = People re-separated (x. 1-44)

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Structure of Book:

I. (1-6) Return and Restoration under Zerubbabel

Restoration of Worship / Rebuilding the Temple

A. (1:1 – 2:70) THE RETURN

1. (1:1-11) Permission to Return Granted by King Cyrus –

Restoration of the Temple Initiated by the Sovereign Intervention of the Decree of Cyrus to Fulfil Covenantal Promises

2. (2:1-70) Roster of Returnees

B. (3:1 – 6:22) THE RESTORATION

1. (3:1-13) Restoration of Worship and Laying the Temple Foundation –

Revival Starts with Re-Establishing Obedience to God in Worship

2. (4:1-23) Opposition to God's Work –

God's Enemies Use Familiar Tactics to Oppose God's Work and Achieve Temporary Victories

3. (4:24 – 6:22) Rebuilding of the Temple

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God providentially used Cyrus to initiate the restoration of the exiles back to Jerusalem and the project of rebuilding the temple.

(1:1-11) "*Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,* [2] *"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.* [3] *'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.* [4] *'And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"* [5] *Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.* [6] *And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.* [7] *Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;* [8] *and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.* [9] *Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;* [10] *30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1,000 other articles.* [11] *All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.*"

6th Application: **All human authority is delegated authority**.

"*The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth,*"

7th Application: **God is Sovereign over all world events.**

He controls kings and empires to accomplish His purposes. Isaiah had prophecied about 150 years before Cyrus came to the throne and issued his decree that the temple would be rebuilt. The prophet actually named Cyrus as the one who would bring it about. (**Isaiah 44:28** calls Cyrus "*My shepherd*"; **45:1** calls Cyrus "*His anointed*")

Isaiah 45:28 "*It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'*"

8th Application: **The Providence of God controls every circumstance of our lives in amazing ways.**

Bill McRae: God made some **remarkable preparations** for the restoration of his people

- God changed the rule of govt from Babylonian empire to Persian – Babylonians transplanted the inhabitants of the populace; Persians had opposite policy – recognized the individual uniqueness of the lands they conquered; encouraged them to maintain their culture and religion; that is what motivated the priority behind the decree of Cyrus as he takes over

- Prosperity of the Jews – God permitted the Jews to prosper in skill in commerce while in captivity; Why? So they could rebuild the temple – required resources – even the ones who did not return were compelled by Cyrus to share in the cost of the rebuild; look at how Jews continue to prosper in business in Europe and America – providence of God; that wealth being used to rebuild Israel today and later will rebuild the temple again
- Rise of a pagan king Cyrus – God raised him up to accomplish a particular task;
- Amazing leadership God raised up among Jewish exiles – Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi – in control of every circumstance in our lives as well

9th Application: **God can provide resources from surprising sources.**

Gary Smith: To the Israelites, as well as to God, the continuation of a worshiping community of believers in Jerusalem was of utmost importance. By releasing the **precious Temple utensils**, Cyrus affirmed the legitimacy of Israel's God and his right to have worship at his own Temple in Judah. Possession of these valuable items created continuity between the ancient past and the new worship activities in Jerusalem. These utensils also gave legitimacy to this new worship. The returnees would worship at the same place using the same Temple utensils as their forefathers.

These temple utensils were going to serve an important purpose later on of authenticating the restoration project when it came under attack – **Chap. 4-6**. The fact that King Cyrus had released these items from the temples and treasuries in Babylon and sent them back with the exiles proved he had authorized the project.

5:13-15

> "*However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.* 14 *And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.* 15 *And he said to him, 'Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place.'*" (Also **6:5**)

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(**3:1-13**) Restoration of Worship and Laying the Temple Foundation –

Revival Starts with Re-Establishing Obedience to God in Worship

Altar and sacrifices are restored;

They start observing the Feast of Booths and other religious festivals.

They lay the foundation for the temple.

Look at the contrasting reaction on the part of the people: **3:10-13**

> "*Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.* 11 *And they sang,*

praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, 'For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.' And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. [12] *Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy;* [13] *so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.*"

10th Application: **Spiritual Renewal can stir emotions of both Joy and Sorrow.**

Looking backwards, there can still be a sense of loss due to sin and its consequences.

Looking forwards, there can be great joy in the prospects for future worship and obedience and the renewal of God's blessing.

Our lives are a complex mixture of many experiences and emotions. Allow people space to react with heartfelt sincerity and authenticity.

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Chaps. 4-6 – Dealing with Opposition While completing the Temple Project

11th Application: **Reject ecumenical alliances that compromise theological integrity.**

> **4:1-3** "*Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,* [2] *they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.'* [3] *But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, 'You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us*.'"

The invitation of cooperation sounds very positive. How could you reject such an offer of help? But the theological foundations must be evaluated. Is there really a commonality of belief and mission?

12th Application: **Expect opposition to the Lord's work.**

> **4:4-6** "*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building,* [5] *and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.* [6] *Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem*."

Satan continues to use the same tactics to try to discourage God's people and divert us from our Christian mission. Opposition can come from within the believing community or from without. He uses fear and threats and intimidation and accusations. In this case after letters back and forth to the officials in Persia, a directive came down to stop the work. So there was a 15 year period when the work paused.

It took the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah to stir the people up to resume the work and finish the temple project.

4:7-23 – opposition that occurred almost a century later to the building of the walls – lumped in here in the **theme of opposition** – shows the long lasting nature of the opposition; **4:24** picks up the main line of the story

13th Application: **God directs the hearts of kings to accomplish His purposes.**

> **Prov. 21:1** "The king's heart is *like* channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes."

This happens to be a life verse for the Apple household. I shared earlier at one of the Men's prayer breakfasts what this verse means to us. We have it inscribed on a plaque just inside the entrance to our home. The Lord blessed us with purchasing this home by turning the heart of the seller to look favorably on us even though she had a substantially higher offer from somebody else.

We have already seen this principle at work in King Cyrus. Here we see it in directing the heart of King Darius to reject the accusations of Israel's adversaries and command the work to continue to completion. Even providing additional resources.

Your situation might look impossible; but God is able to accomplish the impossible.

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II. (7-10) Return and Restoration under Ezra

Recovery of God's Word / Conviction of Sin/ Heartfelt Repentance

A. (7:1 – 8:36) THE RETURN

1. (7:1-28) Emphasis on God's Hand of Favor on the Leader —

2. (8:1-36) Emphasis on Shepherding the Workers and the Resources —

Successful Pioneering Mission Couples Effective Leadership with Dependence upon the Blessing of God –

B. (9:1 – 10:44) THE REFORMS — HEARTBROKEN REPENTANCE MUST LEAD TO ACTIVE REPENTANCE

1. (9:1-15) Heartbroken Repentance Should Result from Exposure of Flagrant Sin

2. (10:1-44) Active Repentance Expresses Sorrow to God While Committing to Corrective Action

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14th Application: **God's good hand of favor is what guarantees success.**

God is actively guiding, empowering, and protecting Ezra and the returnees.

For returning exiles, the rebuilding of the temple and reestablishing the Law were daunting tasks. These references to the "*hand of God*" served as **encouragement and assurance** that God was still with His people.

6 References:

"*This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.*" (**Ezr. 7:6**) Shown favor in the eyes of the king who granted him his requests

"*For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.*" (**Ezr. 7:9**) Safe 900 mile journey; protected from dangers

"*Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, [28] and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*" (**Ezr. 7:27-28**) Strengthened to carry out the mission to return and rebuild

"*And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men*;" (**Ezr. 8:18**) Provision of much needed Levites and temple servants

"*For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, 'The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.'*" (**Ezr. 8:22**) Protection from enemies and a safe journey

"*Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.*" (**Ezr. 8:31**) Protection from enemies and a safe journey

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(**8:1-36**) 6 STEPS IN LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL REBUILDING MISSION FOR GOD

1) (:**1-14**) BUILDING A FUNCTIONAL TEAM
2) (:**15-20**) RECRUITING MISSING WORKERS (LEVITES FOR TEMPLE SERVICE)
3) (:**21-23**) SEEKING GOD'S PROTECTION AND BLESSING (BY PRAYING AND FASTING) FOR ALL THE LOGISTICS (HERE = SAFE JOURNEY)

4) (:**24-30**) STEWARDING THE PRECIOUS RESOURCES DEDICATED TO GOD'S SERVICE

5) (:**31-34**) EXECUTING THE MISSION SUCCESSFULLY

6) (:**35-36**) WORSHIPING GOD AND SEEKING ONGOING SUPPORT

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15th Application: **If we believe in God is sovereign, we need to pray more – both individually and corporately.**

For Ezra, prayer was foundational to leadership, national restoration, repentance, and seeking God's guidance.

> **Ezra 8:21** "*Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions*." Prayer for protection and safe journey

7:27-28 -- Ezra offers a spontaneous prayer of **praise** and humble thanksgiving after receiving the king's favor to return to Jerusalem and lead the people.

9:5-15 Intercessory prayer of confession and repentance on behalf of the nation

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16th Application: **Genuine Confession Leads to Active Repentance Reflected in Corrective Action involving separation from sin.**

Law of God revealed the sin of the people intermarrying with non-Israelites (pagan nations) and convicted Ezra of the nation's need for repentance. not condemning **interracial marriage** – don't marry people who don't worship the true God;

The sin is not just a breach of cultural norms—it is seen as a betrayal of **God's covenant** and a threat to the community's holiness and identity.

9:4 "*Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering*."

9:5-15 Extensive Prayer of Genuine Confession – verbal acknowledgment

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Key features of this Confession:

- **Grief and mourning**: Ezra tears his clothes, pulls hair from his head and beard, and sits appalled (**Ezra 9:3**).
- **Corporate Solidarity in guilt**: He uses first-person plural language ("**our** iniquities", "**we** have forsaken your commandments") to confess on behalf of the nation (**Ezra 9:6–7**).

- **Acknowledgment of grace**: Ezra recognizes that God has shown mercy by allowing a remnant to return (**Ezra 9:8–9**).
- **No excuse or defense or minimization**: The confession ends with the stark statement: "***We are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this***" (**Ezra 9:15**).

10:2-4 Shecaniah Encourages Active Repentance and Corrective Action

Remainder of **Chap. 10** -- the people agree with the indictment regarding intermarriage; join publicly in confession and repentance; and take the dramatic step of putting away their wives and children

There's **ethical tension**, especially regarding the decision to send away foreign wives and children (**Ezra 10:3, 44**). It shows how sin leads to **painful consequences** even after confession.

[This example of specific repentance is not a prescriptive command for believers to put away their unbelieving spouse and children]

REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS:

1. **Make the Word of God a high priority.**
2. **Sometimes we need to renew our spiritual mission.**
3. **We cannot escape divine accountability.**
4. **God keeps His promises so we need to trust Him completely.**
5. **Restoration is possible after failure.**
6. **All human authority is delegated authority.**
7. **God is Sovereign over all world events.**
8. **The Providence of God controls every circumstance of our lives in amazing ways.**
9. **God can provide resources from surprising sources.**
10. **Spiritual Renewal can stir emotions of both Joy and Sorrow.**
11. **Reject ecumenical alliances that compromise theological integrity.**
12. **Expect opposition to the Lord's work.**
13. **God directs the hearts of kings to accomplish His purposes.**
14. **God's good hand of favor is what guarantees success.**

15. **If we believe in God is Sovereign, we need to pray more – both individually and corporately.**

16. **Genuine Confession Leads to Active Repentance Reflected in Corrective Action involving separation from sin.**

BIG IDEA:

REBUILDING WORSHIP FOUNDATIONS REQUIRES A HEART REFORMATION INFORMED BY THE WORD OF GOD

Why Study this Book?

- To see the faithfulness of God in not abandoning His elect nation, despite their disobedience resulting in discipline in captivity.
- To view redemption in a fuller perspective as we read this account of a "second Exodus" where God brings His people out of captivity.
- To deepen our conviction regarding the sovereignty of God who is able to move the hearts of pagan kings to provide support and resources for this rebuilding effort in Jerusalem.
- To gain insight into effective spiritual leadership and the steps one must take to accomplish a successful pioneering work for God
- To learn how to combat opposition and discouragement in ministry and to continue to get up after setbacks and remain on course to fulfil God's mission.
- To see the importance of learning, applying and teaching the Word of God in laying the foundation for moral and spiritual reforms that will support genuine worship of God.
- To appreciate how God answers the prayers of His people — providing necessary leaders, providing safety and protection during the dangerous journey to Jerusalem, and fulfilling all of His covenant promises.
- To point us to the New Covenant and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for sin which alone can give us the new heart we need to worship and obey God.

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown: **Revival** of the Jewish remnant in Ezra bears 7 Characteristics:

- Consciousness of their own weakness (**chapters 2 and 9**)
- Obedience to the Word of God (**chapter 7**)
- Return to the God-given centre (**chapter 3**)
- Separation from the world (**chapter 4**)
- Spirit of commitment and sacrifice (**chapter 2:68-69**)
- Consciousness of unity of the people (**chap. 3:1; 6:17; 8:35**)
- Prophetic service and anticipation of the Messiah (**chap. 5:1; 6:14**)

OUTLINE OF EZRA

REBUILDING AND REVIVING

REBUILDING WORSHIP FOUNDATIONS REQUIRES A HEART REFORMATION INFORMED BY THE WORD OF GOD

I. (1:1 – 6:22) EXILES RETURN TO JERUSALEM TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE – RESTORATION UNDER ZERUBBABEL

A. (1:1 – 2:70) THE RETURN

1. (1:1-11) Permission to Return Granted by King Cyrus – Restoration of the Temple Initiated by the Sovereign Intervention of the Decree of Cyrus to Fulfil Covenantal Promises
    a. (:1-4) Decree by Cyrus to Return and Rebuild the Lord's House in Jerusalem
        1) (:1) Decree Initiated by the Sovereignty of God to Fulfil Covenantal Promise
            a) Historical Timestamp
            b) Prophetic Promise
            c) Sovereign Intervention
            d) Public Proclamation – Both Heralded and Recorded
        2) (:2) Decree Issued by the Persian Sovereign Cyrus as Divinely Commissioned
            a) Delegated Authority and Dominion
            b) Divine Commission
        3) (:3) Decree Instructs the Jews to Return and Rebuild the House of God in Jerusalem
            a) Release with the King's Blessing
            b) Return and Rebuild = the Specific Mission
            c) Reputation of the God of Israel -- Amazing Testimony of Cyrus
        4) (:4) Decree Invites Valuable Resources to be Donated towards the Project
    b. (:5-11) Dedication of People and Resources to the Mission
        1) (:5) Dedication of Jews to Participate in the Mission
        2) (:6) Dedication of Resources Donated from Their Neighbors
        3) (:7-11) Dedication of Resources Formerly Plundered from the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar
            a) (:7) Significance of These Resources
            b) (:8-10) Stewardship of These Resources
            c) (:11) Summary of These Resources
2. (2:1-70) Roster of Returnees
    a. :(1-2a) The Leaders

b. (:2b-35) The Laity
    1) (:2b-20) Laity Identified by Family Relationship
    2) (:21-35) Laity Identifed by Place Names
c. (:36-39) The Priests
d. (:40-42) The Levites, Singers and Gatekeepers
e. (:43-54) The Temple Servants
f. (:55-58) The Descendants of Solomon's Servants
g. (:59-63) Unconfirmed Ancestry
    1) (:59-60) Unconfirmed Claims of Israelite Birth
    2) (:61-63) Unconfirmed Claims to the Priesthood
h. (:64-67) The Totals
i. (:68-69) The Voluntary Contributions to the Temple
j. (:70) The Segregation by Cities
    1) Priests, Levites, etc. in Their Cities
    2) Rest of the People in Their Cities

B. (3:1 – 6:22) THE RESTORATION

1. (3:1-13) Restoration of Worship and Laying the Temple Foundation – Revival Starts with Re-Establishing Obedience to God in Worship
    a. (:1-6) Renewal of Worship Observances – Priority of Worship
        1) (:1-3) Renewal of Morning and Evening Burnt Offerings
            a) (:1) Corporate Commitment to the Priority of Worship
            b) (:2) Biblical Foundation for the Priority of Worship
            c) (:3) Priority of Worship Provides Protection in a Hostile Environment
        2) (:4-6a) Renewal of Feast of Booths and Other Burnt Offerings
            a) (:4) Renewal of Feast of Booths
            b) (:5) Renewal of Other Burnt Offerings
            c) (:6a) Worship Calendar
        3) (:6b) Reminder that Work on the Temple Had Not Yet Begun = Pivot Point
    b. (:7-9) Responsibilities for Supervising Temple Construction – Pattern of Oversight
        1) (:7) Paying the Craftsmen and Securing the Lumber
        2) (:8) Putting the Levites in Charge under the Leadership of Zerubbabel
            a) Length of Time Before Construction Began
            b) Leadership of Zerubbabel and Others
            c) Levites Appointed to Oversee the Work
        3) (:9) Partnering with Other Supervisors of the Workmen
    c. (:10-13) Reactions to Laying the Foundation for the New Temple – Passion of Praise
        1) (:10-11) Reaction of Joy and Praise
            a) (:10a) Grand Mission Begun
            b) (:10b) Glorious Symphony of Praise

c) (:11a) Goodness of God Extolled
d) (:11b) Great Shout of Celebration
2) (:12) Reaction of Weeping and Lament
3) (:13) Reaction Mixed and Indistinguishable as Loud Shouting

2. (4:1-23) Opposition to God's Work –
God's Enemies Use Familiar Tactics to Oppose God's Work and Achieve Temporary Victories
a. (:1-5) God's Enemies Use Familiar Tactics to Oppose God's Work
1) (:1-2) Deception Offers Cooperation that Really Leads to Compromise
a) (:1) God's Work Stirs Up Opposition from God's Enemies
b) (:2) God's Enemies Like to Disguise Themselves as God's Friends
2) (:3) Discernment Reinforces the Conviction of Separation in God's Work
a) Making Distinctions that Necessitate Separation in God's Work
b) Maintaining Solidarity to Stay on Mission
c) Mandating Conformity to Their Mission Authorization
3) (:4-5) Deployment of Familiar Tactics
a) Discouragement
b) Intimidation
c) Disinformation
b. (:6-23) Historical Parenthesis – God's Enemies Can Achieve Temporary Victories – Stopping the Jewish Building Activities of the City Walls
1) (:6-10) Context of the Letter of Accusation Addressed to King Artaxerxes
a) (:6-7) Historical Timeframe for the Composition of the Letter
b) (:8-10) Historical Figures Composing the Letter
2) (:11-16) Content of the Letter of Accusation Addressed to King Artaxerxes
a) (:11) Personal Address
b) (:12) Primary Accusation
c) (:13) Potentially Damaging Consequences
d) (:14-15) Praiseworthy Motivation
e) (:16) Pessimistic Outcome
3) (:17-23) Response of King Artaxerxes
a) (:17a) Targeted Recipients of the Response
b) (:17b-20) Testimony of Due Diligence
c) (:21-23) Tackling the Main Accusation Head-On

3. (4:24 – 6:22) Rebuilding of the Temple
a. (4:24) Resumption of the Narrative – God's Enemies Can Achieve Temporary Victories – Stopping the Jewish Building Activities of the House

of God

b. (5:1-17) Restarting Ministry in the Face of Discouraging Opposition Requires Motivation from God's Word and Conviction Regarding the Significance and Legitimacy of the Mission
    1) (:1-5) Renewal of the Ministry Project to Rebuild the Temple Driven by the Word of God
        a) (:1-2) Prophetic Support for the Rebuilding of the Temple
            1)) (:1) Exhortation of God's Word Re-Commissioning the Project
            2)) (:2a) Leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua Restarting the Project
            3)) (:2b) Partnership with the Prophets Re-Invigorating the Project
        b) (:3-5) Governmental Oversight Investigating the Rebuilding of the Temple
            1)) (:3) Legitimacy of the Project Questioned by Tattenai
            2)) (:4) Leaders of the Project Documented for Tattenai
            3)) (:5) Labor Continued During the Investigative Process
    2) (:6-17) Resolve to Pursue the Ministry Project While Testifying to Its Significance and Legitimacy
        a) (:6-7) Letter Sent from Tattenai to King Darius Investigating the Project
            1)) (:6) Political Authors of the Report
            2)) (:7) Personal Address to the King
        b) (:8-10) Listing of the Major Questions Requiring Investigation
            1)) (:8) What is the Objective? – Significant Building Project
            2)) (:9) Who Authorized It?
            3)) (:10) Who is Leading the Effort?
        c) (:11-16) Legitimacy and Significance of the Project Attested to by the Jews
            1)) (:11) Significance of the Project to Rebuild the Temple
            2)) (:12) Sinfulness that Led to the Destruction of the Temple and Deportation
            3)) (:13-15) Seal of Cyrus Authorizing this Project
            4)) (:16) Summary of the Persevering Construction Efforts
        d) (:17) Lawfulness of the Project Investigated by King Darius
            1)) Search the Records
            2)) Send Back Your Decision

c. (6:1-22) God's Providential Control of History Demonstrated in Persian Support for the Completion and Dedication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem as Worship is Renewed

1) (:1-5) Revisiting the Decree of Cyrus with its Explicit Instructions

a) (:1-2) Locating the Original Decree of Cyrus

1)) (:1) Command to Search for Cyrus' Decree

2)) (:2) Copy Found of Cyrus' Decree

b) (:3-5) Listing the Provisions of the Original Decree

1)) (:3a) Contents Contained in a Memorandum

2)) (:3b-4a) Construction Details Impressive

3)) (:4b) Cost Funded from Royal Treasury

4)) (:5) Captured Gold and Silver Utensils Ordered Returned to New Temple

2) (:6-12) Reinforcing Persian Support for the Jewish Temple Construction via a New Decree of Darius

a) (:6-7) Protecting the Project from Governmental Interference

1)) (:6a) Addressing the Governmental Officials

2)) (:6b-7a) Advocating for Independence – No Interference

3)) (:7b) Approving of:
- Jewish leadership of the project
- Design of the project = temple construction
- Site of the project

b) (:8-10) Providing Resources for the Project

1)) (:8a) Royal Authorization of Support for the Project

2)) (:8b) Royal Treasury Support from Tax Revenues

3)) (:9a-10) Recurring Provisions to Support Ongoing Sacrifices

c) (:11-12a) Proclaiming a Curse on Obstructors of the Project

1)) (:11) Curse Backed by Royal Judgment

2)) (:12) Curse Backed by Divine Judgment

d) (:12b) Promoting the Importance of the Decree

3) (:13-18) Recording the Successful Completion and Celebratory Dedication of the Temple

(:13) Prologue – Carrying Out the Decree of King Darius

a) (:14-15) Successful Completion of the Temple

1)) (:14a) Successful Completion in Accordance with Prophetic Encouragement

2)) (:14b) Successful Completion in Accordance with Divine and Royal Decrees

3)) (:15) Successful Completion in Accordance with

Historical Timetable

b) (:16-17) Celebratory Dedication of the Temple

1)) (:16) Outpouring of Abundant Joy

2)) (:17) Offering of Initial Animal Sacrifices

c) (:18) Appointment of Priests and Levites for Temple Service

4) (:19-22) Renewing Key Religious Observances

a) (:19-21) Renewing Observance of Passover -- Purity

1)) (:19) Proper Day of Observance

2)) (:20a) Purity in Observance

3)) (:20b) Passover Lamb Slain

4)) (:21) Passover Lamb Eaten

b) (:22) Renewing Observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread – Joy

II. (7:1 – 10:44) EZRA (WITH SECOND WAVE OF EXILES) RETURNS TO JERUSALEM TO REVIVE THE NATION BY TEACHING GOD'S LAW – REFORMS UNDER EZRA

A. (7:1 – 8:36) THE RETURN

1. (7:1-28) Emphasis on God's Hand of Blessing on the Leader -- The Key to Success in Serving God is Always God's Hand of Blessing

a. (:1-10) God's Hand of Blessing on His Chosen Leader Empowered by the Word of God

1) (:1-6) Evidence of God's Hand of Blessing Qualifying Ezra as a Leader

a) (:1-5) Qualified to Lead Due to His Priestly Pedigree

b) (:6a) Qualified to Lead Due to His Skill in the Revealed Word of God

c) (:6b) Qualified to Lead Due to His Reputation before the King

2) (:7-9) Enablement of God's Hand of Blessing Returns Ezra and Key Worship Leaders Safely to Jerusalem

a) (:7) Key Worship Leaders Return to Jerusalem

b) (:8-9) Key Leader Ezra Arrives Safely in Jerusalem

3) (:10) Essence of God's Hand of Blessing = Connected to His Commitment to the Word of God

a) Commitment to Study the Word of God

b) Commitment to Apply (Obey) the Word of God

c) Commitment to Teach the Word of God

b. (:11-26) God's Hand of Blessing on His Chosen Leader Enabled by the Authority and Approval of the Pagan Persian King

1) (:11-12) Authority of the Pagan Persian King Reflecting God's Blessing on Ezra

a) (:11) Reputation of Ezra (Priest/Scribe) Shown in the Issuing of the Decree

b) (:12) Reputation of Ezra (Priest/Scribe) Shown in the Initial Greeting

2) (:13-20) Approval of the Pagan Persian King Reflecting God's Blessing on Ezra
   a) (:13) Approval of the King in Granting Permission for the Rebuilding Mission
   b) (:14) Approval of the King Confirmed by Investigative Mission of 7 Civil Servants
   c) (:15-18) Approval of the King Shown by Donations of Silver and Gold
   d) (:19) Approval of the King Shown by Donations of Temple Utensils
   e) (:20) Approval of the King Shown by Ongoing Financial Support for Temple Needs

3) (:21-24) Approval of the King of Additional Needed Resources
   a) (:21-22) Authorization of Requisition of Needed Resources within Limits
   b) (:23) Motivation of Appeasement of the God of Heaven
   c) (:24) Exemption of Temple Officials from Taxation

4) (:25-26) Authority for Judgment and Enforcement Delegated to Ezra and His Appointees
   a) (:25) Authority for Judgment
   b) (:26) Authority for Enforcement

(:27-28) Thanksgiving to God for Supporting and Strengthening Ezra

1) (:27-28a) Thanksgiving to God for Supporting Him via the Pagan Officials
   a) (:27) Support of the King
   b) (:28a) Support of the King's Officials

2) (:28b) Thanksgiving to God for Strengthening Him -- both Personally and Nationally
   a) Personal Strengthening
   b) National Strengthening

2. (8:1-36) Emphasis on Shepherding the Workers and the Resources -- Successful Pioneering Mission Couples Effective Leadership with Dependence upon the Blessing of God – 6 Steps in Launching a Successful Rebuilding Mission for God

a. (:1-14) Building a Functional Team
   1) (:1) Heads of Households
   2) (:2-14) Key Players

b. (:15-20) Recruiting Workers (Levites for Temple Service)
   1) (:15-17) Addressing the Problem of Missing Workers
      a) (:15) Observing the Deficiency
      b) (:16) Organizing a Team of Recruiters
      c) (:17) Ordering the Desired Outcome = Bring Back Levites
   2) (:18-20) Appreciating God's Provision of Essential Workers
      a) (:18) Testimony of God's Provision of Capable Levites

b) (:19) Testimony of God's Provision of Merarites
c) (:20) Testimony of God's Provision of Additional Temple Servants

c. (:21-23) Seeking God's Protection and Blessing (By Fasting and Praying) for All the Logistics (Here = Safe Journey)
1) (:21) Fasting and Praying as the Primary Tactic
a) Proclamation of Fasting
b) Posture of Fasting = Humility
c) Purpose of Fasting = Prayer for a Safe Journey
2) (:22) Boasting in God's Power and Protection as the Public Testimony
a) Rejecting Dependence on the Flesh
b) Relying Only on Faith in God
3) (:23) Seeking God Successfully as the Providential Triumph
a) Activity of Fasting and Praying
b) Answer to Prayer

d. (:24-30) Stewarding the Precious Resources Dedicated to God's Service
1) (:24) Key Leaders Assigned the Accountability of Stewardship
2) (:25-27) Precious Resources Require Faithful Stewarding
a) (:25) Summary of the Accountability
b) (:26-27) Specific Value of the Precious Resources
3) (:28-29) Resources Are Valuable Only to the Extent they are Dedicated to the Lord's Service
a) (:28) Emphasis on the Need for the Dedication of Valuable Resources
b) (:29) Emphasis on the Need for Watchful Stewardship and Faithful Accounting
4) (:30) Responsibility of Stewardship Must Be Accepted and Carried Out

e. (:31-34) Executing the Mission Successfully
1) (:31-32) Completing the Dangerous Journey Safely
a) (:31a) Description of the Journey
b) (:31b) Divine Deliverance Credited for the Safe Travels
c) (:32) Destination Reached with a Well-Deserved Rest
2) (:33-34) Completing the Stewardship Responsibility Faithfully
a) (:33) Key Leaders Authenticate the Process of Accountability
b) (:34) All the Valuable Resources Accounted For

f. (:35-36) Worshiping God and Seeking Ongoing Support
1) (:35) Worshiping God
2) (:36) Seeking Ongoing Support

B. (9:1 – 10:44) THE REFORMS – HEARTFELT REPENTANCE EXPRESSED IN ACTIVE REPENTANCE

1. (9:1-15) Heartbroken Repentance Should Result from Exposure of Flagrant Sin
a. (:1-4) Exposure of Flagrant Sin

1) (:1-2) Shocking Apostasy Reported -- Involving Flagrant Sin of Foreign Marriages
   a) (:1) Summary Report of Flagrant Sin = Union with Foreign Abominations
   b) (:2) Specific Disturbing Aspects of Such Flagrant Sin
2) (:3-4) Shameful Humiliation = Reaction over Conviction of Flagrant Sin
   a) (:3) Personal Humiliation over Conviction of Flagrant Sin
   b) (:4) Corporate Humiliation over Conviction of Flagrant Sin

b. (:5-15) Confession of Heartbroken Repentance
1) (:5) Transition to Prayer of Confession
   a) Rising Up in Shameful Humiliation
   b) Falling Down in Contrite Humiliation
2) (:6-7) Testimony of Historic Pattern of Corporate Apostasy
   a) (:6) Expression of Solidarity
   b) (:7) Enormity of Israel's Historic Pattern of Apostasy
3) (:8-9) Testimony of God's Grace and Covenant Lovingkindness
   a) (:8) Testimony of God's Grace
   b) (:9) Testimony of God's Covenant Lovingkindness
4) (:10-12) Transparency of Divine Communication – No Confusion or Misunderstanding
   a) (:10) Clear Apostasy
   b) (:11) Clear Danger
   c) (:12) Clear Warning with Promise of Potential Rewards
5) (:13-15) Total Abandonment of Any Defense or Right to Continue to Exist
   a) (:13) No Justification for Our Continued Existence
   b) (:14) No Defense for Our Continued Apostasy
   c) (:15) No Recourse Apart from God

2. (10:1-44) Active Repentance Expresses Sorrow to God While Committing to Corrective Action

a. (:1-5) Active Repentance Expresses Sorrow for Sin via Confession and Covenant Commitment
1) (:1) Corporate Penitence – Weeping / Praying / Confessing
2) (:2-4) Covenant Proposal – Put Away the Foreign Wives and Children
   a) (:2) Unfaithful Yet Still Hopeful
   b) (:3) Ultimatum
   c) (:4) Urging Ezra to Take the Lead
3) (:5) Commitment Promise – Taking the Oath

b. (:6-8) Active Repentance Embraces Both Private Anguish and Public Accountability
1) (:6) Private Anguish
   a) Seeking Solitude
   b) Mourning Unfaithfulness

2) (:7-8) Public Accountability
   a) (:7) Proclamation to Assemble
   b) (:8) Penalty for Failing to Appear

c. (:9-16a) Active Repentance Urgently Responds with Corrective Action
   1) (:9) Public Assembly – Trembling Multitude
      a) Urgent Assembly
      b) Unmasked Guilt
   2) (:10-11) Prophetic Appeal – Commanding Confession and Corrective Action
      a) (:10) Idolatrous Indictment
      b) (:11) Required Response
   3) (:12-14) Prudent Arguments Regarding Deliberate Process
      a) (:12) Approving the End Goal
      b) (:13) Adjusting the Timeline to Complete the Process
      c) (:14) Advising Regarding the Next Steps to Take
   4) (:15-16a) Popular Assent
      a) (:15) Minimal Opposition
      b) (:16a) Maximum Compliance

d. (:16b-44) Active Repentance Complies with Open Investigation and Verified Findings
   1) (:16b-17) Open Investigation
      a) (:16b) Selecting the Investigators = Heads of Households
      b) (:16c) Conducting the Investigation
      c) (:17) Finishing the Investigation
   2) (:18-44) Verified Findings
      a) (:18-19) Sons of the Priests
      b) (:20-22) Sons of Leading Men
      c) (:23) Levites
      d) (:24) Singer
      e) (:24b) Gatekeepers
      f) (:25-43) Sons of Israel = Laity
      g) (:44) Summary

TEXT: Ezra 1:1-11

TITLE: GIVE ME SOME OF THAT OLD TIME RELIGION!

BIG IDEA:
RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE INITIATED BY THE SOVEREIGN INTERVENTION OF THE DECREE OF CYRUS TO FULFIL COVENANTAL PROMISES

INTRODUCTION:

What's so important about bringing captive Israel back to her homeland and rebuilding the temple to reinstitute the sacrificial worship system of God's covenant people? How is God able to direct the heart of a pagan world leader and his people to support such a movement? Why is it so important that the covenantal promises to Israel be fulfilled in explicit detail? What type of hope and encouragement did this decree of Cyrus provide to the beleaguered nation of Israel? All of these questions must be considered in studying this initial chapter of the Book of Ezra.

Israel Loken: In this passage, those who chose to return to the land of Judah took a significant **leap of faith**. The journey was perilous, and they had no idea what awaited them in the promised land. In a sense, their act of faith was similar to those of Abraham and the exodus generation. In each case, the people of God knew that they were acting according to the Lord's will. What about your own circumstances? Is there something in your life that God is calling you to do or somewhere that He is sending you? Follow the example of the faithful remnant and take that leap of faith. The Lord will provide for your needs, and the spiritual reward will be well worth the effort.

Breneman: Throughout **chap. 1** the author's purpose was clearly to show the small postexilic Jewish community their legitimate continuity with the pre-exilic community and with God's plan of redemption. Therefore he used motifs from the exodus; he emphasized God's providence; he mentioned Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites; and he explained that even the former articles from the temple had been returned. How thrilling this climax must have been to his readers, "*when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem*" (**v. 11**). In light of subsequent history God's continuing work in that community, which culminated in providing the Messiah and the promised salvation, demonstrates that this was one of the most important events in history.

I. (:1-4) DECREE BY CYRUS TO RETURN AND REBUILD THE LORD'S HOUSE IN JERUSALEM

A. (:1) Decree Initiated by the Sovereignty of God to Fulfil Covenantal Promise

1. Historical Timestamp – The Bible Records Historical Events

"*Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia,*"

Fensham: This book starts with a connecting *waw* exactly like I Kings. Some scholars are of the opinion that this *waw* proves that Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were written by the same person. Other scholars do not attach too much significance to this phenomenon. It is not strange according to the semitic style to start a book with a *waw*, especially when the author intended to write a continuation of the history of his people. He connects the history which he wants to write with the already-written history of his people by using the conjunction "*and*."

Rata: Cyrus the Great was the dominant king of the Achaemenid dynasty and is credited with being the founder of the Persian Empire. He reigned from 559 to 530 bc, and under his rule Persia enjoyed great military expansion through dominance of Media, Lydia, Ionia, and even Babylonia. The first year here refers "to the first year of the conquering of Babylon when he became king of Mesopotamia." Through the eighth century prophet Isaiah, God calls Cyrus "*my shepherd*" (**Isa. 44:28**) and "*the Lord's anointed*" (**Isa. 45:1**), pointing to God's sovereign control of both history and Cyrus' heart.

2. Prophetic Promise – God is Faithful to His Word
"*in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah,*"

MacArthur: Jeremiah had prophesied the return of the exiles after a 70-year captivity in Babylon (**Jer 25:11; 29:10-14; cf. Dan 9:2**). This was no isolated event, but rather an outworking of the covenant promises made to Abraham in **Ge 12:1-3**.

Or cf. **Is. 45:13** (**Williamson**)

3. Sovereign Intervention – God is Sovereign Over Kings and Nations
"*the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia,*"

MacArthur: A strong expression of the fact that God sovereignly works in the lives of kings to effect His purposes (**Pr 21:1; Da 2:21; 4:17**).

4. Public Proclamation – Both Heralded and Recorded
"*so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,*"

MacArthur: **vv. 1-3da** – These verses are almost identical to **2 Chron. 36:22-23**. The pre-Exilic history of 1 and 2 Chronicles gave the post-Exilic returnees direction regarding the Davidic kingship, the Aaronic priesthood, and temple worship. This book continues the story.

Fensham: In accordance with the spirit of the decree of Cyrus in which special attention was given to minority groups, a proclamation by heralds was sent out to be communicated orally to the various Jewish communities. The official written document was then given to the communities as proof of the proclamation. It is quite probable that this document was written in Aramaic, the language of diplomacy in the Persian empire (cf. also **6:3–5**).

B. (:2) Decree Issued by the Persian Sovereign Cyrus as Divinely Commissioned

"*Thus says Cyrus king of Persia,*"

1. Delegated Authority and Dominion

"*The LORD, the God of heaven,*
has given me all the kingdoms of the earth,"

John Martin: "*God of heaven*" – points to God's sovereignty. He is the One who made heaven (**Gen. 14:19, 22; 2 Chron. 2:12; Ps. 115:15**), who is in heaven (**Deut. 4:39; 1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; Ecc. 5:2**), and who reigns from His throne in heaven (**Isa. 66:1**). Though Cyrus was a monarch over an extensive empire, Yahweh is far greater for He rules from heaven.

2. Divine Commission

"*and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem,*
which is in Judah."

Whitcomb: It is not necessary to assume that the liberator was a true believer (cf. **Isa 45:4** – "*I have surnamed thee though thou hast not known me*"). The famous cuneiform Cyrus Cylinder records this prayer of the Persian king: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me . . ." Cyrus probably recognized the God of Israel as one of the most important deities, especially if Daniel showed him the prophecies of Isaiah (Josephus, Antiq. 11.1.1). This decree was filed in Ecbatana, where Darius I discovered it twenty years later (**Ezr 6:2**).

John Martin: Cyrus' concern was to establish strong buffer states around his empire which would be loyal to him. Also by having his subject peoples resettled in their own countries he hoped to have the gods in various parts of his empire praying for him to his gods Bel and Nebo.

C. (:3) Decree Instructs the Jews to Return and Rebuild the House of God in Jerusalem

1. Release with the King's Blessing

"*Whoever there is among you of all His people,*
may his God be with him!"

Rata: The word "*all*" used here points to a total repatriation wherein all Jews from both the Assyrian and Babylonian exile are invited to return to their homeland. The permissive "*let him go up*" indicates that Cyrus does not command the Jews to return, but rather he allows them to return. While the Babylonians ruled with an iron fist, forcing their subjects to worship their gods, Cyrus allowed those whom he conquered to worship their own gods. The expression "*the God who is in Jerusalem*" appears ten other times in Ezra, and points to Cyrus' practice of viewing deities in relation to a place. Cyrus was "an Iranian polytheist" whose view of Yahweh is limited even though he knows Him by the divine name (**1:1**).

2. Return and Rebuild = the Specific Mission

"*Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah,*
and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel;"

Williamson: The jussives may express permission rather than a strict command.

3. Reputation of the God of Israel -- Amazing Testimony of Cyrus

"*He is the God who is in Jerusalem.*"

D. (:4) Decree Invites Valuable Resources to be Donated Towards the Project

"*And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.*"

II. (:5-11) DEDICATION OF PEOPLE AND RESOURCES TO THE MISSION

A. (:5) Dedication of Jews to Participate in the Mission

"*Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.*"

Rata: The writer is clear that God is in control of both history and people's hearts. It is He who stirs up the spirit of the people to take action. Judah and Benjamin are singled out because the Southern Kingdom was mainly made up of those two tribes, along with the tribe of Simeon which had been assimilated into the tribe of Judah. The term "*Judah and Benjamin*" appears frequently in Chronicles, as well as Ezra-Nehemiah, and it does not imply a denial of the descendants of the other ten tribes. The remnant returning is divided into three classes: priests, Levites, and laity. **Verse 6** suggests a reversal of fortunes for the Jews who were in exile. Now, the people of God who are returning to their homeland do so enhanced not only by golden and silver vessels, but also by animals to help with transportation.

Derek Kidner: Nearly two hundred years after the kingdom of Israel had disintegrated, the remains of the little kingdom of Judah, which had always included some members of the other tribes, still had some cohesion and could rightly bear the name of Israel (cf. **1:3b; 2:2b**).

Gary Smith: God sovereignly moved spiritual leaders (priests and Levites) who were needed to renew worship in Jerusalem, as well as the sociopolitical heads of key family units. Important leaders, who could secure the unified effort of an extended family toward a common goal, headed up the ancestral houses, . . . the basic social unit in the postexilic era. Living on the ancestral land would be difficult at best, so survival in a hostile economic and political setting like Yehud was next to impossible for a single family. These extended family units provided the necessary numbers and skills to form a self-sufficient group, so they would immigrate as a unit. This verse suggests that no

members of the other 10 tribes of Israel returned at this point. One of the reasons for this is that they were exiled by Assyria about 140 years before the people of Judah came to Babylon. This verse, however, does not address what happened in other parts of the empire, so one should not argue from its silence that no one from the other tribes returned.

Breneman: The author emphasized the rebuilding of the temple and the vessels that belonged in it. From the beginning he made clear that he considered the restoration and rebuilding of the worshiping community as the most significant event in this history. Here is a parallel with the exodus. The large section of the Book of Exodus dedicated to the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship (**chaps. 25–40**) is often given little attention by the modern reader. Perhaps Ezra-Nehemiah is often neglected because it deals with the same theme. However, "It must not be overlooked that revelatory events only continue to be revelatory through the formation of some kind of community structure which 'remembers' the event and reflects on its implications for life." Religious traditions and "institutionalization" may sometimes become obstacles to true faith if they become the objects of faith, but they are also necessary to the survival of faith and faithfulness to God's word. . .

God's work requires decision and faith, but it also calls for planning and preparation and demands a specific goal. The establishment of the Jewish community in their land was important; but here the immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple. We can imagine the intense discussion in the villages where Jews lived, the difficulty of making such a momentous decision, and the packing of clothes and household essentials. No doubt those who were leaving had to sell or give away some of their possessions.

B. (:6) Dedication of Resources Donated from Their Neighbors

"*And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.*"

Commentators debate whether this is a reference to Gentile neighbors in parallel fashion to the Egyptian Exodus, or whether these were largely fellow Jews who chose to stay behind. I tend to see some parallels to the Exodus here.

Whitcomb: Only about 50,000 Jews returned (cf. **2:64-65**). The majority decided to remain in Babylonia, where many were well settled (**Jer 29:4-7**). Thus, they were in a position to help those who did return. Gentiles, too, probably gave gifts (cf. **Ex. 12:35, 36**).

C. (:7-11) Dedication of Resources Formerly Plundered from the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar

1. (:7) Significance of These Resources

"*Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem*

and put in the house of his gods;"

Israel Loken: The return of the temple articles served several purposes. First, it vindicated Yahweh and showed His power over patron gods. In a sense, the return of the temple vessels corresponded to the return of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines. Second, it fulfilled prophecy. The return of the temple vessels had been predicted in **Isa 52:11**, a prediction fulfilled by Cyrus. Third, it made the worship of the returning remnant more authentic. Not only was the temple to be rebuilt, but worship was to be restored. Fourth, it demonstrated the continuity of this generation with previous ones.

Breneman: The fact that "*King Cyrus brought out the articles*" is significant. When a king captured a nation, he would take that nation's gods (images) and cult objects to his own capital. This symbolized the victory of his gods over the gods of the subject peoples. So in addition to their great value as beautiful and costly objects, they symbolized religious values. In 587 Nebuchadnezzar had carried these objects to Babylon. Cyrus's decision to return the objects used in Israelite worship (of course there were no images of God) shows his seriousness in respecting his subjects' religion and customs. The memorandum of Cyrus's decree in **Ezra 6:5** specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

2. (:8-10) Stewardship of These Resources

a. (:8) Stewardship Administered by Key Leaders

1) Role of Mithredath the Treasurer

"*and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer,*"

2) Role of Sheshbazzar the Prince of Judah

"*and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.*"

Gary Smith: Lit., "*Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah*." Later in **5:14–16** Sheshbazzar is called the appointed "*governor*" who laid the foundations of the Temple. Other biblical texts state that Zerubbabel was involved with laying the foundation (**3:2–10**) and was governor (**Hag 1:1**), but totally ignore Sheshbazzar. One solution to this problem is to hypothesize that these two names refer to the same person. First Esdras 6:18 and Josephus (Antiquities 11.13–14) indicate that these were Babylonian and Hebrew names for the same person, similar to Daniel's having a Hebrew and a Babylonian name (Belteshazzar in **Dan 1:7**). Unfortunately, the Bible never makes this identification, and most commentaries conclude that both names are Babylonian. Some suggest that Sheshbazzar is Jehoiachin's fourth son Shenazzar (**1 Chr 3:17–18**), who died shortly after arriving back with the exiles (Clines 1984:41). Others believe the title "*prince of Judah*" was added by a later, ill-informed editor (Williamson 1985:18), while a few link this prince with the one mentioned in **Ezek 45:7, 9, 17, 22** (Levenson 1976:57–73). None of these options are as attractive as concluding that Cyrus gave Sheshbazzar official responsibilities for the return from Babylon and that Zerubbabel

was a high Jewish official who worked with Sheshbazzar and took over his responsibilities when he died. There are no records to indicate when this happened, but it probably took place fairly soon (within two years) after the people returned to Jerusalem. Thus, both were governors (Zerubbabel was later), and both had been involved in laying the foundation of the Temple.

b. (:9-10) Stewardship Accounted for by Categories
"*Now this was their number:*"

1) "*30 gold dishes,*"

2) "*1,000 silver dishes,*"

3) "*29 duplicates;*"

4) "*30 gold bowls,*"

5) "*410 silver bowls of a second kind,*"

6) "*and 1,000 other articles.*"

3. (:11) Summary of These Resources
"*All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.*"

MacArthur: The 2,499 articles counted in **vv. 9, 10** are only representative of the total of 5,400 mentioned in **v. 11**. . . journey took 3 to 5 months (cf. **Ezr 7: 8, 9**).

Whitcomb: The 2,499 vessels listed in 1:9, 10 may have been the largest or most important ones.

* * * * * * * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How would you apply the principles of this chapter to a church planting situation where you have a team charged with moving out to plant the church and other contributing resources and support for the mission?

2) Where have you seen the Lord stir up your heart to motivate you to commit to a specific spiritual mission? What is He stirring your heart to do right now?

3) How do you see the Lord sovereignly influencing the hearts of world leaders or pagan nations to accomplish aspects of His kingdom agenda?

4) What value would these old religious relics and valuable pots and pans play in helping to rekindle genuine worship of the God of Israel? What is required for spiritual renewal to take place in your heart?

* * * * * * * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Derek Thomas: **Freedom!**
A thousand-year history–from the time of Jacob and his troubled family in Egypt, all the way down to this point here in the **first verse of chapter 1** of Ezra–a thousand years of Israel's history is over. It has ended in catastrophe. Israel is no more. That great city, the city of God, the city which David made into the capital of what would become the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem with all of its importance religiously, with its temple and Levitical structures, as a social center, as a political center for Judah, had been more or less destroyed. The temple in all of its grandeur and beauty and significance had been razed to the ground — burnt. Whatever was combustible in the temple had been burnt by the Babylonians.

The Babylonians had come seventy years in the past — 68, to be precise — in 605 B.C. They had first made some predatory incursions upon Judah and upon Jerusalem. Ten thousand of its elite young men of talents and abilities had been taken into captivity into Babylon. And then in 587, after a siege of Jerusalem, the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, had escaped the night before Jerusalem collapsed and had been captured somewhere outside of Jericho…he and his two sons. He watched his two sons murdered in front of him, and then his eyes were put out and he was marched, blind and bleeding, a thousand miles away, in chains, to Babylon. We never hear of him again.

All the hopes, all the dreams, all the aspirations…. Israel, the Northern Kingdom with its capital in Samaria, had long since fallen to another empire, the Assyrians, 150 years in the past in 722 BC. Judah had continued for 150 years. It was a history mainly of failure and increasing compromise and increasing idolatry. And despite all of the warnings and threats of the prophets (the great prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah), Judah had fallen. And Jerusalem had fallen. All the dreams, all the hopes, all the aspirations had all crumbled.

And as Judah collapsed in 587 and began its exile, perhaps hundreds of thousands — we're not sure of the exact number that were taken into captivity — suddenly all of the men of significance and importance in Jerusalem would have been taken away, marched summarily off into Babylon under the rule of one of the great tyrants of history, Nebuchadnezzar. As a nation, Israel was no more. . .

The book begins with a story of those who returned. It will be eighty years before Ezra appears on the stage of history, so we're going to have to cover the first eighty years, two generations and more, of what they did when they came back to Jerusalem. It's not a pretty story. It's a story of hope and dream and aspiration again, but it's also a story of

failure and compromise.
Three words summarize the first chapter: **Providence; Promise; and, Pilgrimage**.

I. Providence.
God is at work. Whatever else is going on in this chapter…and there's a whole lot going on in this chapter, and the history is, well, fascinating…we can never lose sight of the fact that there's another vantage point, another way of looking at this, and it's from the perspective of God. "*God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus*." We see it again at the end of **verse 5**, but this time it's not Cyrus, but it's the men and women who return to build the house…whose spirit God had stirred to go to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. God is at work.

II. Promise.
And again, it's the idea that's given to us in the very opening verse. God did this, but He did it in order to fulfill a promise; in particular, a promise written by Jeremiah, one of His prophets; a promise that the exile would last seventy years. You remember how significant that was for Daniel? You remember the ninth chapter of Daniel. **Daniel 9** is that marvelous chapter that contains the prayer of Daniel. And the prayer of Daniel follows the discovery by Daniel of this very promise that is being referred to here in the book of Jeremiah, that the exile would be seventy years. And they'd already been in exile for 68 years when Daniel discovers the promise in the book of Jeremiah. You understand, Daniel didn't have a copy of the Old Testament in his pocket — you understand! So discovering this promise of Jeremiah, especially in as far away place as Babylon, where he had been taken as a young boy…. And Ezekiel had been taken there as a thirty-year-old man, we think. He discovers the promise of God. What is happening here is in fulfillment of a covenant word of promise: that God's word, God's promise never fails.

III. Pilgrimage.
You know, as you are standing there and you've got Mithredath and Sheshbazzar, the treasurer and prince of Judah, and they're receiving these pots and pans. And you can hear them clinking…you know, when they're putting them on the ground, and another one is put on the ground, and you've got them. If God cares for pots and pans that belonged in Jerusalem…if God has kept pots and pans in exile, how much more does He care for you? The God who cares for sparrows who fall to the ground, how much more does He care for you? He's the God of small things. He's the God of little things. He's the God of little details.

Israel Loken: The rise of Cyrus is one of the most amazing fulfillments of biblical prophecy. Identifying him by name, Isaiah prophesied the coming of Cyrus almost 200 years before he came to power:

> *It is I who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire." And he declares of Jerusalem, "She will be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid." Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him, and to loose*

> *the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze, and cut through their iron bars. And I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden wealth of secret places, in order that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.* (**Isa 44:28–45:6**)

In this passage, Yahweh identified Cyrus as His מָשִׁיחַ "*anointed*," a title customarily reserved for those who are appointed by God for a special purpose (cf. e.g., **1 Sam 2:10; 2 Sam 23:1; 2 Chr 6:42; Ps 2:2**). In this case, Cyrus is strengthened by the Lord and commanded to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and restore its temple. It should be noted that at the time of Isaiah's prophecy the city and temple were still functioning. As a result, the prophecy also predicts the future destruction of the city and temple. The accuracy of this prophecy is one of the major reasons why critical scholars attack the unity of the book of Isaiah. Although the Lord used Cyrus to accomplish His will, the text makes it evident that Cyrus did not truly believe in Yahweh: "*You have not known Me*." As the passage indicates, the reason the Lord made this stunning prediction was so that men would come to the realization that He alone is God.

Gary Smith: It appears that Cyrus's proclamation in **1:2–4** was also a politically designed proclamation using conventional terminology (possibly with the help of Jewish officials to get the name of their God right) to gain the support of his Jewish audience. This document had a different purpose from the building permit in **6:3–5**; it simply grants permission to return rather than spelling out details such as how big the Temple should be.

Whatever motivations Cyrus had, the fundamental testimony of Scripture is that God acts powerfully to cause people to do his will. This conclusion is based on the evidence that God had developed a plan that he partially revealed to his people many years earlier (**Isa 45:1; Jer 29:10**). In this predetermined plan, God indicated what he would do (send the people back to rebuild Jerusalem), who would be involved (Cyrus would send Israel home), and when it would happen (in 70 years). Such precision is exceptional, for most prophecies do not include a specific time of fulfillment in years or the names of specific individuals in the future. But in other ways this prophecy is like most other prophecies. In all cases God reveals a portion of his determined will to people so that they will know that they can trust him for their future. He rules over the affairs of men and nations and knows how things will turn out. This foreknowledge is predicated on his ability to control what people will do. If he could not rule over human existence, then uncontrollable forces would eventually interfere with what he planned to accomplish. **Ezra 1** assures the reader that God caused pagan kings to fit into his preannounced plans (**1:1**), caused them to be unusually generous (**1:2–4**), appointed

them to do his will to fulfill his plan (**1:2**), and revived his people's desire to worship him (**1:5**). God's sovereign rule explains why things happen as they do.

This implies that everything that happens has theological significance because it is a part of God's plan. Although most people today do not read the newspaper through the lens of God's sovereign plan, God is still actively involved in the details of his master plan for this earth. God has not forgotten what to do next, and he knows the timing for each point in the plan. He will complete that plan by moving people's hearts and minds to do amazing things to accomplish his will. As in the time of Ezra, people need to be ready to act in obedience when God stirs their hearts to follow his plan.

To the Israelites, as well as to God, the continuation of a worshiping community of believers in Jerusalem was of utmost importance. By releasing the precious Temple utensils, Cyrus affirmed the legitimacy of Israel's God and his right to have worship at his own Temple in Judah. Possession of these valuable items created continuity between the ancient past and the new worship activities in Jerusalem. These utensils also gave legitimacy to this new worship. The returnees would worship at the same place using the same Temple utensils as their forefathers.

God had totally rejected the sinful Israelite nation in the past because of their worship of pagan gods. If God's name was to be praised, certain things must be done. The holy God must have a certain kind of altar and a prescribed Temple with appropriate sacrifices offered by pure Levitical priests. The only way for this to happen was for God to establish a new community of believers who knew what would please him from his instructions in the Torah. So God brought his own people back to Jerusalem, not some new group of people. This continuity with the past would assure that the people would return to God's chosen place in Jerusalem (not to some other Temple site), that they would want to rebuild the Temple to worship him (not just rebuild their businesses), and that appropriate priests would use holy utensils to worship God (pagan worship must be excluded). Revival needed to happen among God's own people first if any of this was ever going to take place. Afterwards it would be possible for these people to reach out to others and invite them to observe the wonderful things that God was doing.

This theme of reviving the old community suggests that God will probably work this way in the future. Continuity with the past assures purity and the legitimacy of the new community. Although many look at the Old Testament, the Reformation, or even the old songs and behavioral requirements of their grandparents as outmoded, God connects his present work with his past revelation, his past works of redemption with his future acts of salvation, his past community of believers with his new followers, and his past worship with new ways to praise him. **Continuity with the past** gives believers the assurance that they are on the right track. The old-time religion is the true faith that is good enough for everyone today, even when it looks or sounds a little different in its modern dress. The same God who guided Israel in the past is in charge of world events today. Our faith does not need to be revised by modern philosophical concepts that destroy the simple truth that we can trust and worship God because he loves us and still rules over everything in our world.

Steven Cole: **God's Way of Renewal**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about God's renewing His errant people. They are put together as one book in the Hebrew Bible, although the fact that the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are virtually the same argues that originally they were separate. Ezra is about the return of the exiles from Babylon, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the restoration of God's people spiritually. Nehemiah is about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, as well as the spiritual renewal of God's people. . .

Spiritual renewal requires God's great power working according to His gracious promises for His glorious purpose.

1. God has His chastening purposes for dry times and He has His gracious purposes for spiritually renewing His people.

2. Spiritual renewal requires God's great power.

3. Spiritual renewal is according to God's gracious promises.

A. PRAYER BRINGS GOD'S PROMISES INTO PRACTICAL REALITY.

The prophet Daniel's meditation on Jeremiah's prophecy and his prayers for God to forgive and restore His captive people were behind these dramatic changes in history (**Daniel 9**). Daniel didn't read Jeremiah's prophecy, realize that the 70 years were almost up, and say, "Cool! Let's sit back and see what happens!" Rather, he humbled himself with fasting and he confessed his people's and his own sins.

B. GOD'S WORD REVEALS HIS PROMISES AND HIS PATH OF BLESSING.

Every true spiritual renewal is founded on and sustained by God's Word. The Reformation was a renewal of the Word. Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers began systematically teaching and applying God's Word in ways that had been grossly neglected by the Roman Catholic Church. The Puritan movement also was centered on God's Word, as pastors would explain and apply the great doctrines of Scripture, usually in hour-long sermons (J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* [Crossway Books], p. 280). In the preface of his wonderful book, *Calvin's Preaching* (Westminster/John Knox Press, p. x), British scholar T. H. L. Parker indicts the modern church that has abandoned Calvin's method of careful exposition of Scripture. He says, "What wonder that a Church which picks and chooses what it wants out of the Bible should become confused in its theology, flabby in its morals, and with little to state but the worldly obvious—the day after worldly liberals have stated it more convincingly?" If we want renewal, we must put a renewed emphasis on God's Word of truth.

C. GOD'S PROVISION SUPPLIES THE DEMANDS OF HIS PROMISES.

God had promised to restore His people after the 70 years, but it was a humanly impossible task. After 70 years in Babylon, with the city of Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins, how could things ever be restored? The Jews didn't have the resources to do it,

even if a royal edict permitted them to return to the land.

But what man could not do, God did. He had Cyrus put it into the royal edict that the people should contribute to those returning. And, Cyrus himself brought out the vessels from the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had put into his own temple.

4. Spiritual renewal is for God's glorious purpose.
The Temple at Jerusalem had been the place where God's glory was displayed. That place had been destroyed because of the sins of His people. He now is referred to as "*the God of heaven*." That title is used 9 times in Ezra, more than in any other book of the Bible. It is used 10 times in other post-exilic books (2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, and Daniel), and elsewhere in the Old Testament only 4 times (Martin, p. 655). It shows God to be the sovereign over all. But it also may hint at the fact that His glory was not now being revealed on earth, since the Temple had been destroyed.

Thus God's purpose was to manifest His glory through a rebuilt Temple where His restored people could worship Him in spirit and truth. His glory was supremely revealed in the rebuilt Temple when Jesus the Messiah appeared there as "*God's salvation, which [He] prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel*" (**Luke 2:32**).

God's purpose today is the same: He wants to reveal His glory through a renewed people, who by their holy lives and witness reveal His Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to all peoples. In other words, spiritual renewal is not for us, so that we can lead happy, fulfilled lives to the neglect of the world. **Spiritual renewal is for God's purpose, that His glory would be revealed to the nations.**

TEXT: Ezra 3:1-13

TITLE: FIRST THINGS FIRST -- RESTORATION OF WORSHIP AND LAYING THE TEMPLE FOUNDATION

BIG IDEA:
REVIVAL STARTS WITH RE-ESTABLISHING OBEDIENCE TO GOD IN WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION:
When you are starting from scratch, it is essential to focus on the matters of highest priority. For believers, our relationship to God can only be rekindled by obedience to God in worship. As the exiles returned to Jerusalem, their first order of priority was rebuilding the altar, establishing a regular pattern of sacrifices in accordance with Mosaic regulations and then laying the foundation for the building of the new temple. Their leadership guided them along this path and provided supervision for the mission. Their passion for worshiping God caused them to celebrate these foundational steps – even though some of the older guard struggled with comparisons to the glory of the former times.

Fensham: The connection between **chs. 2 and 3** is obvious. The previous chapter described the return of the Jews. This chapter pictures the beginning of a legitimate worship.

Loken: The central section of the book is an account of the rebuilding of Solomon's temple. This project was begun by the remnant shortly after it returned to Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Jeshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, the remnant commenced the project with the rebuilding of the altar so that it could offer burnt offerings on it according to the Law of Moses. The remnant also began to observe the religious calendar, beginning with the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. After hiring masons and carpenters to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to Joppa, the remnant rebuilt the foundation of the temple. This project was supervised by the priests and Levites. When the foundation was laid, the remnant praised the Lord with a grand celebration, shouting with a great shout of joy. Unfortunately, many who had seen the temple in its former glory wept at the sight of the rebuilt foundations, believing that the new temple would never be as glorious as the original.

Gary Smith: The Jews' desire to worship God at their own altar in Jerusalem brought the people together. With 50,000 people on hand, it is clear that they did not agree on everything, but all minor issues of disagreement were quickly put in the background so they could accomplish the main reason for returning to Jerusalem. Arguments and division would hinder their ability to bring glory to God, while a unified desire to worship God would promote unity and the accomplishment of their deepest spiritual desire.

Ray Pritchard:

- It is better to begin small with God than not to begin at all.
- It is better to rejoice over what you have than to weep over what you used to have.

I. (:1-6) RENEWAL OF WORSHIP OBSERVANCES – PRIORITY OF WORSHIP

A. (:1-3) Renewal of Morning and Evening Burnt Offerings

1. (:1) Corporate Commitment to the Priority of Worship

> "*Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.*"

Rata: It took the Jews about seven months to settle back into the land and now they are ready to reinstitute the sacrificial system. The fact that they come "*as one man*" points to their unity of heart and purpose.

2. (:2) Biblical Foundation for the Priority of Worship

> "*Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.*"

Breneman: Many times the hardest part of a project is getting started. Someone must take the initiative. In accordance with historical precedent, the returned exiles began by building the altar. David had built an altar here before there was a temple (**2 Sam 24:25**).

Loken: The first order of business for the returned remnant is the reestablishment of proper Yahweh-worship in the land. The foundational element in Yahweh-worship was the sacrificial system. The restored remnant naturally begins with the building of an altar. Without an altar it is impossible to offer sacrifices. This was also a way to thank the Lord for restoring them to the land. Abraham built an altar to the Lord immediately after entering the land for the first time (**Gen 12:7**). Joshua likewise built an altar to the Lord after entering the land following the exodus (**Josh 8:30–31**). Here the restored remnant follows the example of its forefathers and immediately builds an altar to the Lord upon entering the land. . .

The text notes that Jeshua and Zerubbabel work together to rebuild the altar. This is the only passage in the Bible where the name of Jeshua precedes Zerubbabel. This phenomenon is almost certainly because this section deals with the reinstitution of worship, the responsibility of the priests. There is no mention here of Sheshbazzar, a fact that suggests that he may have died by this time. It is also possible that he returned to Babylon after leading the remnant to Israel. The mention of Zerubbabel here shows that he is present in Jerusalem shortly after the return of the remnant.

Gary Smith: The people knew they needed to sacrifice on the right kind of altar (built of uncut stones), built in the right place (the original site God chose), with proper sacrifices (unblemished animals), offered by divinely appointed priests (Levitical priests) because they were using the instructions in the law of Moses as their guide. Some commentators believe this rebuilding of a new altar required them to demolish a makeshift altar that was built after the Babylonians destroyed the Temple (see **Jer 41:5**, in which a grain offering is brought after the fall of Jerusalem [**Jer 39:1–8**]; this perhaps involved a makeshift altar; cf. Myers 1965:26–27; Jones 1963:12–31) because it was defiled by heathen worship (Clines 1984:65). Nothing is said in the text about destroying an existing altar, so any opinion in support of this interpretation is rather speculative. The Jewish people put a high priority on purity of worship, so if there was an impure altar, it would not be used. A strict adherence to the law of Moses characterized the lifestyle of the returnees.

3. (:3) Priority of Worship Provides Protection in a Hostile Environment

a. Real Danger

"*So they set up the altar on its foundation,*
for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands;"

Obedience to the Word of God is the only protection for God's people against opposition from fierce enemies.

Breneman: "*the people of the land*." In earlier times it referred to the landowning families who made up the ruling class. But here it evidently refers to the surrounding peoples (e.g., Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, Edom), persons of foreign descent (including part Jews) living in Judah, and to Jews in the land who had not maintained their faith without compromise. Some were people established there by the Assyrians (**4:2**). Ezra-Nehemiah shows a growing animosity between these people and the Jewish community returned from exile. Therefore we have in these books an example of a **believing community living in a hostile environment**.

Constable: The "*law*" in view is the Mosaic Law. One reason the people began offering sacrifices again was their fear of their neighbors (**v. 2**). They called on the Lord to protect them.

b. Regular Devotion

"*and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD,*
burnt offerings morning and evening."

Rata: This daily morning and evening sacrifice consisted of a lamb prepared in flour and oil, with wine as the drink offering (**Exod. 29:38–42; Num. 28:3–8**).

Fensham: This altar was constructed on the place of the foundations of the altar of the temple of Solomon. We must accept that the altar which is referred to in **Jer. 41:5** was also built on the same place. The returnees demolished the old altar to build a new one

in its place. It is to be expected that such an act would kindle hostility among the old inhabitants of the land. . . Clearly at this stage a rift had been created between the returnees and the older inhabitants of the country. The author shows that the regular sacrifices as they are described in the law of Moses were instituted. In **v. 3b** the Tamid or morning and evening sacrifices are mentioned.

B. (:4-6a) Renewal of Feast of Booths and Other Burnt Offerings

1. (:4) Renewal of Feast of Booths

"*And they celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;*"

Loken: This physical continuity between the first temple and the second temple further reveals the covenantal continuity between the generation of the first temple and that of the second. In other words, this community felt that it was obligated to be obedient to the covenants given to its ancestors. The author reveals this theme by consistently referring to the writings of Moses throughout this passage (cf. **3:2, 4, 5**). . .

Now that the remnant has a legitimate altar, it can once again follow its ritual calendar. The narrative jumps to the fifteenth day of the month when the nation celebrates the Feast of Tabernacles. There is no mention in the passage of the Day of Atonement, celebrated the week before the Feast of Tabernacles. There is likewise no mention of the Day of Atonement in **Neh 8**, where the nation is once again pictured as celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. Surely the Day of Atonement would have been observed on both occasions. It is possible that there is no mention of the Day of Atonement in either instance because both passages are emphasizing the celebration of the remnant. The Day of Atonement was a solemn day, and as such it does not fit with the flow of the narrative. Therefore, it is not mentioned in either chapter. It is also possible that the Day of Atonement was not observed because the ark of the covenant was no longer in existence. The ark of the covenant was a necessary part of the Day of Atonement ritual since the blood of the sacrificed goat needed to be sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark. Without the presence of the ark of the covenant in the temple, the Day of Atonement lost its significance.

2. (:5) Renewal of Other Burnt Offerings

"*and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.*"

Loken: These verses describe the reinstitution of the other sacrifices and festivals. The festivals that had fixed dates included the new moon celebrations, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). . .

The offerings associated with these holidays, coupled with the freewill offerings, provided a continual burnt offering to the Lord. The sheer number of the sacrifices kept

the fires of the altar burning continuously. The "*freewill offering*" was a voluntary sacrifice that could be offered to the Lord whenever an individual felt led to do so (cf. **Lev 22:18–23; Num 29:39**). This was the only sacrifice that non-Israelites were allowed to offer to the Lord. The animals prescribed for this sacrifice included a male bull, a ram, and a he-goat. The poorest of the land were permitted to offer a turtledove or young pigeon without regard to sex. The freewill offering, with the exception of the skin, was entirely consumed upon the altar. It symbolized the complete surrender to God of an individual or congregation.

3. (:6a) Worship Calendar

"*From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD,*"

Fensham: The first part of this verse clearly refers to the fact that all the sacrifices, except those connected with the Feast of Tabernacles, were instituted on the first of the seventh month. According to the law of Moses the Feast of Tabernacles must be celebrated on the fifteenth of the seventh month.

Rata: Along with the Passover and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles was one of the three most important religious celebrations for the Jews. The Festival of Booths began on Tishri 15 (September/October), and it was primarily a thanksgiving festival showing gratitude for God's provision (**Exod. 34:22**). It also commemorated the wilderness wandering, the booths (Succoth) being a reminder that the Israelites lived in tents during the forty-year commute from Egypt to the Promised Land (**23:42–43**). It was to Succoth that the Israelites first came after leaving Rameses (**Exod. 12:7**). The Feast of Booths was observed during the post-exilic period (**2 Chron. 8:13; Ezra 3:4; Zech. 14:16, 18, 19**) and during the early church period. This is the only festival wherein the Israelites were commanded to rejoice before the Lord (**Lev. 23:40**).

Ross explains that the freewill offering "was an offering that could be made any time. The soul of the worshipper might simply be overflowing with joy over God and his benefits. Such freewill offerings were (and are) the essence of a living faith." It is easy to see how the returnees' feelings of gratitude translated into freewill offerings to the Lord. However, since the foundation of the Temple has not yet been laid, much more work remains to be done. After all, the temple had been central to Israel's worship and their understanding of God since Solomon first built it in 967 bc.

C. (:6b) Reminder that Work on the Temple Had Not Yet Begun = Pivot Point

"*but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.*"

Ron Daniel: Notice the order of that, because this is the model we find in the Scripture. People do not worship God because they have built a building. People build a building because they worship God. This is an important distinction. Moses and the children of Israel worshiped the Lord before they built the tabernacle. Solomon worshiped the Lord before he built the temple. The people of Israel are worshipping the Lord before they rebuild the temple. Too many people in the church today are of the mindset that the building is the thing.

II. (:7-9) RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SUPERVISING TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION – PATTERN OF OVERSIGHT

A. (:7) Paying the Craftsmen and Securing the Lumber

"*Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.*"

Fensham: The author wants to point out that the delivery of cedar wood for the temple was approved by Cyrus. We must keep in mind that we have here a transaction between two different provinces in the Persian empire, and permission for it had to be granted by the satrap of the Trans-Euphrates in the name of the king.

B. (:8) Putting the Levites in Charge Under the Leadership of Zerubbabel

1. Length of Time Before Construction Began

"*Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month,*"

Derek Kidner: It was fitting, again, that the work should start in the second month of the new year, for the first was dominated by the Passover. Besides—and this would hardly have escaped their notice—the second was the month in which Solomon's Temple had been started (**1 Kgs 6:1**).

Gary Smith: This was the logical time (April/May) to begin building a large construction project because the spring harvest of barley was over and the dry season was starting. Thus, the builders had already completed their agricultural responsibilities related to the harvest and did not have to contend with mud when moving lumber and stones.

2. Leadership of Zerubbabel and Others

"*Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work*"

Fensham: The enumeration of all the groups which began the work shows that the laity (Zerubbabel and his companions), priests (Jeshua and his companions), and Levites are clearly distinguished.

3. Levites Appointed to Oversee the Work

"*and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.*"

Loken: The priesthood assumed the role of overseeing the project. This was to make sure that the project was ritually correct. All Levites above the age of twenty were given

administrative responsibility. Evidently, the age of twenty was now regarded as the age at which the Levites could take on responsibility (cf. **1 Chr 23:24; 2 Chr 31:17**). Originally, the age had been set at twenty-five (cf. **Num 8:24**; the age was set at thirty for those who carried the tabernacle [cf. **Num 4:3, 23, 30**]). Perhaps the minimum age was lowered because the total number of Levites kept declining. This would ensure that there were always enough Levites to fulfill the temple duties. The phrase "*to supervise the work of the house of Yahweh*" is identical to that of **1 Chr 23:4**. Take note that the text is once again careful to distinguish between the laity, the priests, and the Levites.

C. (:9) Partnering with Other Supervisors of the Workmen

"*Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.*"

Derek Kidner: The careful planning and recording of the operation are impressive. There was enthusiasm, reflected in the '*all*' who came forward for the work (**8b**), but there was strict attention to standards, as is shown by the double mention of the oversight: first of the work (**8**), secondly of the workmen (**9**). Evidently the Levites as a whole supervised the work of the laymen, and were themselves directed by their leading families (**9**).

III. (:10-13) REACTIONS TO LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE NEW TEMPLE – PASSION OF PRAISE

A. (:10-11) Reaction of Joy and Praise

1. (:10a) Grand Mission Begun

"*Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD,*"

2. (:10b) Glorious Symphony of Praise

"*the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.*"

Ray Pritchard: I am struck by the fact that they did not wait until the building was done to praise the Lord. Even though laying the foundation was significant, there was a mountain of work left to do. Years would pass before the temple was finished. This was only the first step, but they stopped anyway and gave thanks to the Lord. What a lesson that is for all of us.

3. (:11a) Goodness of God Extolled

"*And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, 'For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.'*"

Derek Thomas: Workers in stone, that is, had come down from Tyre and Sidon to help in this project to clear away the stones that had fallen from the walls of the temple. Huge stones requiring enormous manpower and effort and then, all of the rubble that you can imagine would accumulate over 50, 60, 70 years, and all of this is cleared away and the foundations are laid and they can see now the structure of the temple before them and they burst into song. Because what did the temple represent to them? It wasn't just a building, you understand. To the Old Testament saint the temple represented the place where God was present, where worship was conducted, where sin was forgiven and atoned for, where blood was sprinkled, where the Holy of Holies was to be found, and the Shekinah glory was to be found and the Ark of the Covenant was to be found. But there is no Ark of the Covenant now.

4. (:11b) Great Shout of Celebration

"*And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*"

Rata: The focus here is not on the physical details of laying the foundation, but rather on the joyous ceremony that accompanied it. The details closely parallel the dedication of Solomon's temple (**2 Chron. 7:6**). The trumpets used were not the ram's horns, but rather the long, straight, metal instruments used for the assembly call (**Num. 10:2**), alarm call (**2 Chron. 13:12–14**), and for celebrations (**1 Chron. 16:6**). The refrain "*for His steadfast love endures forever*" points to God's character and nature, and occurs several times in the Psalms, as well as in Chronicles (**1 Chron. 16:34, 41; 2 Chron. 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21**), and Jeremiah (**33:11**). The love of God (*Hésed*) is a reminder of God's covenantal love and now they are celebrating it through shouting and singing. God's covenantal love has been manifested not just in their return to the land, but now in the reestablishment of the temple worship.

Breneman: These verses again show the theological interests of the author. He put worship at the center of community life and emphasized God's goodness and love. He also stressed continuity with the preexilic worship practices, emphasizing the importance of the priests and the sons of Asaph, whom David had assigned to worship with musical instruments (**1 Chr 16:5; 25:1**). The author even quotes from a psalm (**Ps 100:5**) frequently used earlier (**1 Chr 16:34; 2 Chr 5:13**). **Jeremiah 33:11** had prophesied that after Jerusalem was destroyed in this same place this psalm would again be sung with gladness, joy, and thank offerings. Though there was not yet a temple, God was enthroned upon the praises of Israel.

B. (:12) Reaction of Weeping and Lament

"*Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy;*"

Rata: The prophet Haggai gives us insight into why some people were crying in the face of what seems to be good news. In **Haggai 2:3** God is posing a series of questions, "*Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now?*

Is it not as nothing in your eyes?" It seems that the older people who have seen the glory of Solomon's temple were bitterly disappointed even though the temple had not yet been rebuilt. The foundation alone told them that the rebuilt temple would not rise to the level of the original. It could be that the smaller stones used here did not compare with the huge blocks used in Solomon's temple.15 The weeping of the older people clashed with the shouts of joy of those who saw the laying of the foundation not as a disappointment but as a great achievement.

Loken: A major theme of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the nation's commemoration of significant achievements with great celebrations. When the Israelites complete the altar, they celebrate (**3:10–11**); when the temple is rebuilt, they celebrate (**6:16–17**); and when the wall of Jerusalem is restored, they celebrate (**Neh 12:27–43**). Unfortunately, in our modern performance-driven society, we are too often in a hurry to rush on to the next project as soon as we complete a task. We rarely take the time to celebrate what the Lord has allowed us to accomplish. When you complete a major project in your life, take a lesson from the remnant and commemorate your achievement with great joy. Go out to dinner, have a party, take a vacation. Praise and give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness lasts forever.

Derek Thomas: It shows a terrible ingratitude for the present. God had come to them in mercy. God had come to them in kind providence and what they were saying was, "It's not like it used to be." And in saying that, in saying that, my friends, they were showing ingratitude for what God was doing in the present, in the here and now.
It's saying something more than that though, because those sounds of lamentation and woe were the seeds of discouragement; they were the seeds of discouragement. Little wonder that the building of this temple ground to a halt, little wonder. It is so discouraging to hear those words, "You know, we did it better in our day." O, for the spirit of Barnabas, the son of encouragement.

Alternative view:
Gary Smith: The emotional outburst also gave way to weeping. The text does not explicitly state the reason why some of the older generation that remembered Solomon's magnificent Temple wept. Were these people overcome with immense joy at seeing the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple, or were these tears of sorrow because this building would never match the glory and splendor of what they remembered from the past? Some commentators have interpreted this weeping based on later comments in **Haggai 2:3**. Haggai mentioned the complaints of the older people about the lack of glory in this new Temple (about 16 years later, when the Temple was actually finished), and many have read that same attitude back into this passage in Ezra (McConville 1985:210; Myers 1965:29). It seems better to see these as separate events, for Haggai 2:3 does not mention any weeping and Ezra mentions no negative comparative attitudes by the older people. There was no opposition by the older generation to rebuilding the Temple at this early date, so it is best to conclude that the tears in **Ezra 3** are tears of joy. Finally God was giving them the unbelievable joy of seeing the Temple in the process of being rebuilt. Their joy was probably similar to the joyful tears of the Israelis

who finally reached the Wailing Wall in the war for Jerusalem in 1967 (Yamauchi 1988:625).

C. (:13) Reaction Mixed and Indistinguishable as Loud Shouting

> "*so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.*"

Derek Kidner: So the crescendo continues, to the strange close of the chapter. Once again, there are conscious echoes of Solomon's celebrations, though there are contrasts too. This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no Temple: only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. But God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon's. Perhaps they were more so, for while they matched the earlier occasion, word for word and almost instrument for instrument (**2 Chr. 5:13**), they were sung in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride, and called for a faith that had few earthly guarantees to bolster it.

The last two verses have all the unexpectedness of actuality. The spontaneous cry of disappointment, breaking into the celebrations, was a foretaste of much that was to follow. Haggai would recognize that note and preach against it (**Hag. 2:3ff**.); Zechariah would have to challenge those who '*despised the day of small things*' (**Zech. 4:10**). But both those prophets did so with such memorable words that we can be grateful that they had to meet this mood and answer it.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) What should we do when our present circumstances seem discouraging and so far beneath our expectations?

2) In what ways are you making worship a priority – both individually and corporately?

3) In what ways do the different generations need to work together in the body of Christ to encourage one another (rather than discourage one another) and keep the body on task to accomplish the Great Commission while all the time praising the Lord?

4) How do you celebrate significant milestones or events or spiritual victories with your family? What importance does your church place on occasions of celebration?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Derek Kidner: This section emphasizes the eagerness of the remnant to reinstitute the sacrificial system after its return to the land. This system had begun almost a thousand years earlier with the building of the tabernacle. From 1446 to 586 b.c., the offering of sacrifices was a daily occurrence in Israel. The smell of burning flesh and the sight of rising smoke were perpetual reminders to the Israelites that they were a sinful people. The knowledge of their sin was always before them. One of the most important features of the sacrificial system was that it provided the Israelites with atonement for their sins. Through the offering of sacrifices the nation secured the forgiveness of God. Unfortunately, throughout the period of the exile, the remnant had been forced to wait for its sins to be forgiven. There was no altar on which to offer the prescribed sacrifices.

Thankfully, in the current dispensation, we never have to wait for our sins to be forgiven. If we confess our sins, the Lord immediately forgives us and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (**1 John 1:9**). Yet, quite often, we take this incredible gift for granted. Many modern Christians only pray for forgiveness at prescribed times; perhaps in the morning when one wakes or in the evening before going to sleep. However, confession of sin should be an integral part of our daily existence. As soon as we become aware of the commission of a sin, we should bow our heads and pray for the Lord's forgiveness. Immediately, we receive the grace of God and can rejoice in His mercy. There is no need to wait for a sacrifice to be offered upon an altar. The ultimate sacrifice has already been offered. Are you taking full advantage of the spiritual benefits of this dispensation? If not, develop a conscious habit of praying to the Lord for forgiveness. You will be amazed at the peace and joy it will bring to your life.

Steven Cole: **A New Beginning with God**
There are times in all of our lives when we need a new beginning with God. Maybe you have failed the Lord terribly through deliberate rebellion and sin. Perhaps you have drifted carelessly into the world and its ways, neglecting the things of God. Now you're far from Him. A disappointment or trial may have caused you to drift from the close fellowship with God and His people that you once enjoyed. You need a new beginning.

> **New beginnings with God are always possible and must focus on the cross, on obedience to God's Word, and on building His house.**

But you wonder if it's even possible. And if it is, where do you start? The thought of a new beginning is scary, because you don't want to risk another failure. But you're not content where you're at. You've come to realize that the idols of Babylon can't satisfy your soul. You're so dissatisfied in Babylon that you're willing to uproot yourself and make the difficult and perilous journey back to the land of promise. But you get there and discover that the land is just a pile of rubble. How do you begin again with God? Our chapter shows us four things:

1. New beginnings with God are possible no matter how spiritually low we have gone.

2. New beginnings with God must focus on the cross of Jesus Christ.

The first thing that the leaders, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, did when they saw the pile of rubble where the Temple once stood was to rebuild the altar (**Ezra 3:2**). From **verse 6** we learn that they had done this prior to the first day of the seventh month, when the returned remnant gathered in Jerusalem. So when the people got to the devastated city, rising out of the rubble they saw a restored altar. Even though the foundation of the temple had not been laid, the sight of that altar filled them with hope!

Why did they begin with the altar? Because our fundamental need if we want to draw near to God is forgiveness of our sins. God designated the altar so that the one bringing the offering would be "*accepted before the Lord*" (**Lev. 1:3**). Concerning the altar, God had said, "I will meet there with the sons of Israel …" (**Exod. 29:43**). The sacrificial animals pointed ahead to God's perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. New beginnings with God must focus on obedience to His Word.

The standard we need to evaluate everything is, does it line up with Scripture and properly glorify God as He is revealed in His Word? And, does it promote holiness in God's people, in line with His Word?

4. New beginnings with God must focus on building His house.

But, you may wonder, how do we build God's house? Our text reveals at least five factors:

A. BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE REQUIRES THE COURAGE TO STAND TOGETHER AGAINST THIS HOSTILE WORLD.

B. BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE REQUIRES GIVING OUR RESOURCES.

C. BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE REQUIRES WORKING IN UNITY UNDER GODLY LEADERSHIP.

D. BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE REQUIRES A RENEWED EMPHASIS ON CORPORATE WORSHIP.

E. BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE REQUIRES A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE YOUNG.

Derek Thomas: **What is the focus of the Feast of Booths**? Well, <u>two things</u>.

1. One, and this isn't difficult to imagine–of course it was to **commemorate the haste with which they had left Egypt**. It was to remember the time they were in the wilderness and they were wholly dependent upon the Lord. They had just come back

from exile. They had left Egypt. Now they've left Babylon, but they have come back to Jerusalem and they haven't got homes to live in. And they're living in booths. What a staggering way, what a breathtaking way to remind the people of God that they're pilgrims. That they're pilgrims! God has sent them into exile for two generations, and the first thing they do when they come back is they live in tents to remind themselves that they're pilgrims; that they're just passing through; that here they have no continuing city, but they seek one which is to come whose builder and maker is God.

They were to depend on the Lord. They were to depend on God's providence. They were to depend on God's provision for the future, just as they had to during the time of Moses and Aaron. The future may have looked grim and uncertain, but as they slept in those booths, and no doubt seeing the stars above Jerusalem, they would be reminded of the God who made the stars and was able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or even think. It reminded them, first of all that they were pilgrims.

2. But I want you to turn with me now to the prophecy of Zachariah. It's the penultimate book of the Old Testament…Zachariah, Malachi, and that ends the Old Testament. So, **Zachariah 14**, and the final chapter of Zachariah.

Zachariah of course is a prophet in the same time period as Ezra and Nehemiah. He's a post-exile prophet. At the end of **Zachariah 14** — the context is somewhat complicated, and we won't have time to go into all of the context — but I just want to lift one verse, because Zachariah refers to the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles, and he gives it a new twist. He gives it a new meaning. It was there before, but Zachariah is bringing it out now. Turn to Zachariah 14, and then in **verse 16**. Let me tell you that this final chapter is a depiction of the Day of Judgment. It's a picture of heaven and hell. It's a picture of those who are the Lord's people and those who are not the Lord's people. And in **verse 16**:

> "*Then everyone who survives [survives the judgment, survives the Last Judgment] of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths*."

Now there are some, of course, who think this will be literally true in Jerusalem one day. That Jesus will return and there will be a keeping of the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem. I don't think that is what Zachariah is saying.

I think Zachariah is speaking metaphorically here, and he is using the language of the Feast of Booths, he's using that language to depict something that was significant about the Feast of Booths. When did the Feast of Booths occur? After harvest. After ingathering. After the ingathering, they would celebrate the Feast of Booths. And at the end of Zachariah, Zachariah is saying there is going to be **a final ingathering**. And he uses the language of Egypt. There are those who are going to come from Egypt — the inveterate enemy of Israel, you understand. There are those who are going to come from Egypt, and they're going to come up to Jerusalem and they're going to keep the Feast of

Booths. They are going to be part of the pilgrim people of God.

Now do you see what it's saying? It's all about **missions**. It's about the nations of the world being gathered in to celebrate, along with the people of God in Jerusalem, to worship Him. And so this Feast of Booths was not only a reminder of their pilgrim status, it was also a reminder that as pilgrims they would gather one day before the throne of God, and there would be peoples of every tribe and every tongue and every nation — from north and south and east and west — in answer to the request of the Father to the Son: "*Ask of Me, and I will give You the uttermost parts of the world for Your inheritance.*"

As they gathered in Jerusalem in that seventh month, sacrificing over two hundred bulls and lambs and offering all kinds of daily and evening offerings, they were reminding themselves that they were a people in need of God's forgiveness, in need of atonement, in need of the forgiveness of sins; that the problem lay within themselves, and the solution to their problem lay outside of themselves in the provision of atonement: an atonement that could never come, of course, from these bulls and these lambs, and could ultimately only come through the Lord Jesus. Because it's only by the shedding of His blood that forgiveness will come.

But it was also a reminder that they were to gather together one day not just as Jews, but Jews and Gentiles, redeemed by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone…from every tribe, and every tongue, and every nation of the world.

Phil Newton**: Reordering Worship**
What's involved in **starting from scratch** when it comes to worship? What has to happen to re-establish God-centered worship? Worship involves much more than going through the mechanics of worship motions.

Just imagine a people that had been uprooted from their homeland where they were accustomed to worship corporately. They were taken a thousand miles away and put into a cultural and religious setting drastically different from their own. They lived under the thumb of others, learning to live, think, act, and even worship as the other godless culture did. Those who had known the former worship were, for the most part, a dying breed so that few were left to instruct or model worship. This went on for seventy years. That meant that the ones left of the generation that had been part of the corporate worship in Jerusalem as they returned to reorder and rebuild their worship lives, would have been under ten or fifteen before the exile. The last images they retained for the corporate worship were mixed with wrong motives, idolatry, unfaithfulness, pride, and form without substance. Yet they were now the ones who were to re-tell the story and help to bring reformation to the worship of the 42,360 returning exiles.

Do you see something of the daunting task ahead of them? It's certainly not that they had copies of the Book of Church Order! Their parents and grandparents had rejected Jeremiah's warnings and instructions, yet now, that prophetic book became a key to their return, as did the writings of Ezekiel, as well as their reading of the Torah. What

we find is striking. The Lord God mercifully leads His people to reorder worship where it has been neglected or misused. What we see happening in **Ezra 3** serves to instruct any believer or people in need of reordering worship.

I. What had Israel lost?

1. No place to worship

Ironically, with the temple being the central place of worship, Israel sinned against the Lord in depending upon the temple and their liturgy rather than the Lord. This was part of the problem that led to their exile in Babylon. The exile allowed them to see the temple and its environs in new light: as the divinely prescribed place and means of covenant worship—not the focus of worship.

Psalm 137 gives us a good summary of the emotions that flooded their hearts when thinking about Jerusalem while still in exile.

2. No practice of worship

Without the temple and Jerusalem, they had no festivals or holy days. That which Moses had prescribed in **Leviticus 23** for the year of worship, was only a fading dream of those that had known the celebrations in better days.

3. No propitiation

Without the altar and the temple there would be no place to atone for their sins. God met Israel in the temple, particularly in the holy of holies at the mercy seat. But the mercy seat was gone, as was the holy of holies and the temple.

II. What had to take place for worship to be restored?

1. Worship restoration begins with leadership.

Jeshua or Joshua served as high priest while Zerubbabel served as the provincial governor. The first descended from Aaron, so was qualified to serve as high priest; the latter descended from David, so was qualified to serve in the position as leader and a prefiguring of the Messianic King.

What would it have taken to get people that had traveled for several months to a homeland that had been left in shambles, to focus on worship? The tendency would have been to seem totally overwhelmed with the mess in front of them. Our lives can get similarly overwhelmed, so we must begin at the right point. How can you worship when there are so many other things to take care of? Where would they live? What kind of work would they do? Where would they find food? How would they regain access to their family's inheritance? Who would negotiate the legal issues? Who would protect them from the inhabitants of the land?

Were these important questions? Indeed they were! Yet good leadership recognizes priorities, and the one great priority missing in their lives was worship. The leaders asserted, exemplified, instructed, and led by example the need for setting their priorities on worship.

2. Worship restoration demands tearing down and removing the debris from the past.
Most scholars agree that an altar would have remained in the demolished temple area. That would have been the practice of the inhabitants of the land to put their own altar there where the old one had been. They might have even used some of the old stones for erecting it.

But if others rebuilt the altar according to their designs, then they also worshiped according to their designs. This meant tearing down someone else's altar! That meant not just ruffled feelings but anger and animosity. That's why "they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands." Yet **Deuteronomy 12:1-7** demanded that they "*utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods…you shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars*…" The inhabitants were likely a mixture of Samaritans, Ammonites, Edomites, Moabites, and others. They may have included worship of Yahweh in their worship along with Baal, Chemosh, Molech—but it would have not been according to revelation in the Torah but in syncretistic fashion.

What kind of old altars, old habits of false worship, useless traditions, and cherished practices need to be removed for us to reorder our worship? When the form becomes more important than the substance then it needs to be torn down. New wine cannot be contained in old wineskins. That does not mean that we are to change for the sake of change but rather when our form of worship is meaningless and empty liturgy, then it has become our worship and not the Lord.

3. Worship restoration demands rebuilding and re-consecrating the altar.
The altar was large—about 40 x 40 feet square and 20 feet high with a ramp leading to it rather than steps (**Exodus 20:26**). Before they could begin the celebrations of the seventh month they had to rebuild the altar and re-consecrate it and the area to the Lord. The whole area had been defiled so they had to set it apart once again as the Lord's and for the service and worship of the Lord.

We have no need for a physical altar upon which to offer sacrifices because Jesus Christ's offering of Himself as the final sacrifice ended the sacrificial system. All of the sacrifices pointed to Him; their whole existence foreshadowed the day that He would atone for our sins upon the altar of the cross. So, did any of those sacrifices take away sin? No, they only looked to the One who would accomplish it **(Heb. 9:11-14; 10:1-10**). They were reminders to depend upon the mercy and provision of God for sin.

How do we rebuild the altar in our own lives? I would suggest that it begins with our reliving in our minds and hearts the cross of Christ. It is a returning to the cross as the foundation to worship.

4. Worship restoration demands orderliness and attention to details.
That is certainly one thing that we do not need to miss. There was no carelessness in restoring worship! **Verses 2-6** help us to see that attention was given to make sure that

they did everything "*as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God*." Worship is not haphazard; it is not shooting from the hip; it is not careless. Worship calls for order and preparation, giving attention to all that is done so that the Lord might be magnified.

Does this mean that the Lord might not break into the orderly worship with something unplanned? Certainly not but it does mean that there is attention to biblical instruction and sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit. Worship planning demonstrates that we deeply care about how God is worshiped so that we make sure both form and content bring honor and glory to the name of the Lord.

5. Worship restoration demands renewed sacrifice and dependence upon the Lord.
Ezra details the restoration of the daily sacrifices. What did these sacrifices do? They reminded the people that they were dependent upon the Lord as their Redeemer. Each of the festivals they celebrated had similar thrust to snatch them from the concerns for temporal issues to focus upon things eternal.

6. Worship restoration spurs generosity and intensifies service (**vv. 6-7**)
After worship they gave. The giving had the purpose to rebuild what had been lost and restore worship so that the name of the Lord might be glorified among all people. Interestingly, they called upon foreigners to provide the wood, just as Solomon had done, which also brought these foreigners into a new awareness of the Lord as God.

III. What does reordered worship look like?

We catch a glimpse of what takes place when worship becomes central again among a people. When worship is peripheral, when it is something that we do if we find the time or if it is convenient, then we will not see these kings of things in our midst. Remember, we were made for worship. That is our highest good, the chief aim in our existence. If someone asks you, 'Why do you exist?' give them a short, quick answer: "I exist to worship God through Jesus Christ the Lord!" After their jaw drops, then explain what you mean.

I notice at least four areas that help us think about biblical worship.

1. Reordered worship—biblical worship follows revelation (**vv. 2-5, 10**).
Notice the details that Ezra gave us: They "*built the altar…as it is written in the law of Moses*." "They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required." And once they reordered worship, when the practice began, they do so "*according to the directions of King David of Israel*."

What do these phrases imply? It means that they did not just sit around in a worship committee meeting and offer ideas on how they could get their worship services pumped up and rolling! They did not order the latest pop-worship manual to find out the newest fads that would appeal to the masses to participate in worship. They did not try anything novel even though they were two generations removed from the exile.

They returned to the Scripture.

Biblical worship takes its cues from the Scripture rather than from the world. I realize that this sounds so out-dated. However, worship is not for impressing the world but for honoring the God of creation and redemption.

2. Focuses on the Lord (**v. 11**)
Do you notice that Ezra does not say anything about how impressed the local Samaritans were with the worship? Oh yes, he does later in **chapter 4**; they were totally unimpressed. But here he shows what worship is about. "*They sang, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever"*."

Here was no entertainment mentality or just bare liturgy so that they could get the worship service over. They sang, praised, and gave thanks to the Lord. He was the focus. Study the great passages on worship in the book of Revelation or ponder the worship passages in the Psalms or Isaiah. They are never man-centered. They are always God-centered.

3. Reflective on the Lord's work among them (**v. 11b**).
I think it is interesting that a good portion of their energy in praise focused on praising the Lord "*because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid*." Who were they praising? The builders? Of course not, they praised the Lord.

That tells us something of what we are to do in worship. We are to notice what the Lord has done and delight in it, rehearse it in our minds, and express it in our voices.

Christian worship has its foundation in the death and resurrection of Christ. We have much to think on concerning the Lord's work! With that cross-perspective, we are to exult in the works of the Lord; we are to notice what He is doing in the world and give thanks; we are to consider what He is doing in our lives and give thanks.

4. Worship is emotionally engaging (**vv. 12-13**)
The weeping could be two-fold. They wept because they remembered what they had lost; they thought of the former beauty and grandeur and realized that it was not what it had been before. Or it could be weeping because they never thought that they would see this day. In light of **Zechariah 4:8-10**, the former is probably the reason. The prophet rebukes them, ultimately, for living in the past instead of seeing the good hand of the Lord at work in the small things of that day. We learn here not to live in the past or the grand experiences of days of great spiritual experience. Those were wonderful and blessed in their own day. But we are to learn from the past but not live in it (as Paul expressed in **Philippians 3**).

The shouts of joy show the satisfaction at the Lord's work in their midst. It also demonstrates their vocal exuberance in the Lord.

Emotions are part of worship. Sometime weeping, sometime joyous exuberance, yet all because the whole person is given over to worshiping the living God through Christ.

Does your worship life need **reordering**? Then it's time to tear down those things that do not accord with biblical revelation; rebuild your worship according to the instruction of Scripture; focus on the Lord and His work; engage your whole person in worship.
http://archive.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/ezra_03.01-13.php

TEXT: Ezra 4:1-24

TITLE: OPPOSITION TO GOD'S WORK

BIG IDEA:
GOD'S ENEMIES USE FAMILIAR TACTICS TO OPPOSE GOD'S WORK AND ACHIEVE TEMPORARY VICTORIES

INTRODUCTION:

When God's people respond to the call to focus on God's work, the enemy will quickly rise up in opposition. Fortunately, their tactics can be easily recognized and combated as long as one has the discernment and conviction to stand on biblical convictions. But that does not mean that the road will be easy or painless. Quite the opposite. There will be temporary short-lived victories by the enemy that are designed to discourage God's people and distract them from persevering from the task at hand. We are called to do battle with the enemy, trusting in the faithfulness of our conquering God.

Loken: With the progress of the rebuilding project comes the antagonism of those who had previously controlled the land of Israel. This section builds on the previous chapter by detailing the response of the neighbors to the efforts of the Jews. One might anticipate that the foreigners of the land would be hostile to the growing Jewish influence in the province. By this time, they had lived in the province of Judah for decades, many perhaps being born in the land of Israel. Now, a group they currently regarded as "foreigners" was taking their land and influence away.

Williamson: Finally, at this point, when the community seems to be making progress in restoration, the first ominous note of opposition is struck, and it is one that will dominate much of the rest of these books. The message is made clear from the outset: however attractive the offer of help might seem, the work can only proceed on the basis of God's revealed will, expressed in this case through the decree of Cyrus. Individuals might certainly join the community by their complete identification with it, but the community cannot conversely jeopardize its identity by merging with other groups as such. Time and again, the sequel is to show that this seemingly unattractive stance was nevertheless the correct one.

Rata: Opposition to God's work did not originate, nor did it cease with Ezra and Nehemiah. While this opposition was accompanied by lies, pressures, and persecutions, God's work succeeded because it was of God and not of man. This truth should be a great comfort and encouragement to Christians in all times and all places when confronted with opposition to God's work. Even so, today's Christian leaders should always be on guard, being ready to deal with opposition, being mindful that the Christian does not spend his/her life on a playground, but rather on a battlefield.

I. (:1-5) GOD'S ENEMIES USE FAMILIAR TACTICS TO OPPOSE GOD'S WORK

A. (:1-2) Deception Offers Cooperation that Really Leads to Compromise

1. (:1) God's Work Stirs Up Opposition from God's Enemies

"*Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,*"

Whitcomb: These two tribes are mentioned in particular because they now constituted the majority of the nation, and it was in their old territories that the remnant now lived.

Loken: The foreign policy of the Assyrians involved the exile of vanquished nations and the transplantation of foreigners into the conquered territories. This was done in hopes of preventing rebellions throughout their vast empire. The mixture of different cultures, languages, and religions made a unified rebellion nearly impossible. It must be remembered that at this time victorious nations did not have the resources to leave a standing army in each of the regions they conquered. As a result, they had to resort to other measures in an effort to control their subjects. Deportation served as the most severe of these techniques.

The foreign policy of the Assyrians, and subsequently the Babylonians, would eventually have a dramatic effect on the ethnic and religious population of the land of Israel. The foreigners transplanted to Israel intermarried with the Jews who had remained in the land. Although most of the Jews had been deported, and still more had journeyed to Egypt under Johanan, there was still a significant number of Jews who were left in the land. It has been estimated that the remnant of Jews who remained in Judah during the Babylonian exile numbered about twenty thousand souls. This remnant managed to eke out a meager existence as farmers and herdsmen.

The offspring that resulted from the union of unfaithful Jews and heathen colonists became known as the Samaritans, a mixed breed in both race and religion. The religion of the Samaritans was a syncretistic blend of the Hebrew form of Yahwism instituted by Jeroboam I and the pagan mysticism brought in by the colonists. This syncretistic form of worship was denounced by Ezra and Nehemiah with the result that the Samaritans were excluded from the worship activities performed in the temple. The Samaritans, led by Sanballat, erected a sanctuary on Mount Gerizim (near the ancient town of Shechem) in 409 b.c. following the expulsion of Manasseh from Jerusalem by Nehemiah. They also instituted their own priesthood (most of the Levites remained in Jerusalem) and regarded the Pentateuch alone as authoritative. The rift between the Jews and the Samaritans continued throughout the intertestamental period. During the time of Christ, the Jews and Samaritans had little social and commercial contact (cf. **John 4:4–9**).

2. (:2) God's Enemies Like to Disguise Themselves as God's Friends

a. Sly Approach

"*they approached Zerubbabel*
and the heads of fathers' households,"

b. Seductive Appeal

"*and said to them, 'Let us build with you,'*"

c. Seamless Aspirations

"*for we, like you, seek your God;*"

d. Shameless Argumentation

"*and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.*"'

Rata: Esarhaddon ruled Assyria from 681–669 bc and repopulated the land after many were taken into exile. Such repopulations were not so unusual since other Assyrian kings such as Sargon II (722–705 bc) and Ashurbanipal (669–633 bc) did it during their respective reigns.

B. (:3) Discernment Reinforces the Conviction of Separation in God's Work

1. Making Distinctions that Necessitate Separation in God's Work

"*But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, 'You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God;*"'

Derek Thomas: And you're shocked by the suddenness, the outright, no holes barred rejection. What is the motivation? And the motivation, you see, is perfectly clear — that these people of the land were pluralists, they were syncretists, to be sure they worshiped the God Israel, but they worshiped several other gods as well. And there've been excavations of this period in the region of Samaria giving evidence of the multiplicity of gods that were worshiped by these people. They are saying "no" to this offer because it's an offer that coming from syncretists and pluralists.

2. Maintaining Solidarity to Stay on Mission

"*but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel,*"

3. Mandating Conformity to Their Mission Authorization

"*as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."*

Gary Smith: There were two rationales for this decision:

(1) In contrast to their neighbors' claim, the Jewish leaders believed that they did not worship the same God. Thus, there was no basis for cooperation.

(2) A literal interpretation of the decree of Cyrus indicated that authorization to rebuild the Temple was granted only to the Jews who returned from Babylon.

Both points naturally lead to the conclusion that Israel's neighbors could not be allowed to join in the rebuilding project.

C. (:4-5) Deployment of Familiar Tactics

1. Discouragement

"*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah,*"

Derek Thomas: One of Satan's stratagems, you know, Satan doesn't have many stratagems. Some of us are dull enough to fall for the same one time after time after time. And as C. S. Lewis so eloquently pointed out in *Screwtape Letters* when an older demon is teaching one of his apprentices, saying to his apprentice, "Have you tried discouragement because it always works?" And that's the very stratagem that Satan is employing here.

Rata: The opposition's first weapon is discouragement, which then led to fear. This fear was supposed to paralyze the people of God, and in some respects it did, but only for a while (**4:24**). Corruption was alive and well even then, and the opposition found corrupt counselors to carry out their plan. Blenkinsopp suggests that these counselors were "officials in the imperial bureaucracy." The people of God had a divinely appointed purpose which the opposition tried to frustrate. We are reminded that opposition is not necessarily a sign that we're doing something wrong, but it can be a sign that we're doing something right. The Chronicler shows the opposition as being constant and continuing throughout Cyrus' reign (559–530 bc), until the reign of Darius (522–486 bc).

2. Intimidation

"*and frightened them from building,*"

3. Disinformation

"*and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.*"

Fensham: It is not expressly stated what had disheartened and frightened the people of Judah. If we take counsellors as referring to the Persian governors, the whole issue becomes clear. The Persian officials were bribed to frustrate the plans of the returnees. Bribery as a practice was well known in Persian times.8 This lasted from … Darius king of the Persians. This phrase shows that the author had a correct view of the historical sequel. Through the reign of Cambyses up to the time of Darius the enemies of Judah9 succeeded in stopping the building operations.

Derek Kidner: The resulting campaign of harassment by the local people had the double force of **persistence** (the Heb. has a string of participles: they kept doing these things) and of **variety**. Discouragement (**4a**) relies on the subtle weapons of suggestion and sneers; intimidation (**4b**) and threats. Not content with these, they must get their victims discredited and on the wrong side of the authorities—and they were prepared to buy professional help (**5**) to achieve this.

It is small wonder that they succeeded. The supply-lines from Lebanon (**3:7**) were long and vulnerable, the new community felt exposed and surrounded; besides, as Haggai's preaching was to reveal, the excuse to postpone something as expensive and burdensome as building the house of God was rather tempting (cf. **Hag. 1:2ff**.). For

about sixteen years, to 520 bc, the pressure against them was kept up, and as **verse 24** will show, it was wholly effective.

Gary Smith: By bribing Persian officials on the provincial and national level, permission to cut and haul wood could be delayed, Persian financial assistance could be cut off for a time, and an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion could develop.

II. (:6-23) HISTORICAL PARENTHESIS – FLASH FORWARD – GOD'S ENEMIES CAN ACHIEVE TEMPORARY VICTORIES – STOPPING THE JEWISH BUILDING ACTIVITIES OF THE CITY WALLS

A. (:6-10) Context of the Letter of Accusation Addressed to King Artaxerxes

1. (:6-7) Historical Timeframe for the Composition of the Letter

a. (:6) Complaint Originating in Reign of Ahasuerus

"*Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*"

b. (:7) Letter Written to Artaxerxes in Aramaic

"*And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.*"

Whitcomb: Probably Samaritans who hired two high Persian officials – Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe (**v. 8**) – to write the letter of **4:11-16** to Artaxerxes accusing the Jews of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Derek Thomas: So, in the space from **verse 5** to **verse 7**, we've jumped ahead almost 100 years. We've gone from 537 to 520. We've gone to the reign of Xerxes and now we've gone to the reign of Artaxerxes. And again during Artaxerxes' reign there's another opposition, there's another stratagem attempting to bring the work of God to a halt. The work of God that's being brought to a halt in **verses 7** and following is a different work from the work that was being referred to in **verse 5**.

In **verse 5** what is being brought to a halt is the rebuilding of the temple. Now, that temple was actually built again, but in **verse 7** and following what is being brought to a halt is not the rebuilding of the temple, it's the rebuilding of the city and the city walls. What Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah is largely concerned with. It's crucial to understand that because from **verse 23** we jump all the way back 100 years. In **verse 23**, the reference to the stoppage, they made haste by force and power and made them cease–that's the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the time of Artaxerxes.

Now, in **verse 24**, we've gone all the way back to where we were in **verse 5** and where the plot line and story of the book of Ezra is in the rebuilding of the temple. Then the work of house of God, the temple of God that is in Jerusalem stopped.

2. (:8-10) Historical Figures Composing the Letter

"*Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows-- 9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River.*"

Loken: There is an obvious reason for most of the Aramaic in Ezra. It is mainly composed of copies of official correspondence, for which Aramaic was the customary language. Fifty-two of the sixty-seven verses fall into this category. The other fifteen verses serve as connecting passages. There are two main views as to the reason for this occurrence. First, the Aramaic material may be extracted from an Aramaic history of the period. In this case, the entire section would have been copied from a single source document. Second, since the original readers of Ezra obviously knew Aramaic, the author simply keeps the connecting passages in Aramaic to avoid transitioning from one language to another. As Allen notes, "The extensive quotation in the following verses from four letters written in Aramaic led the narrator to pen framing and bridging material in that language. Such linguistic attraction also occurs in the Mishnah." Either view is equally plausible.

B. (:11-16) Content of the Letter of Accusation Addressed to King Artaxerxes

1. (:11) Personal Address

"And now this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: 'To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River,'"

2. (:12) Primary Accusation

"*and now let it be known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.*"

Constable: Artaxerxes was the successor of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and ruled the Persian Empire from 464 to 424 B.C. Clearly the incident reported in these verses took place long after the temple was complete. It really involved the attempt by Israel's enemies to halt the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall in the days of Nehemiah. It evidently took place about 446 B.C. (cf. **4:21-23**; **Neh. 1:1-3**). The writer's purpose in inserting this incident in the text was evidently to show the continued antagonism of Israel's enemies and the faithfulness of God in giving the Jews victory over them.

3. (:13) Potentially Damaging Consequences

"*Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.*"

4. (:14-15) Praiseworthy Motivation

a. (:14) Concerned for the King's Honor

"*Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,*"

Fensham: The second consequence, couched in a metaphor, refers to the fact that such a rebellion will put the king to shame. In **v. 14** the close relationship between the officials and the king is expressed by a metaphor, "*we eat the salt of the palace*" or "*we salted with the salt of the palace.*" The king put to shame. In Aramaic, "we do not want to see the shame of the king." **Verse 14** shows that the Samaritans were also interested in their own future. There is a strong egoistic tendency in what they wrote. Did they believe in what they wrote? It was a typical lie, clad in the clothes of "genuine" anxiety for the case of the king—a method of approach not unknown in our own time.

Breneman: Salt was often used to seal covenants; thus it implies loyalty (cf**. Lev 2:13**; **Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5**). "*Eating the salt of*" came to be an idiomatic expression for "*being in the service of*" or "*receiving a salary from.*" Our word "*salary*" is derived from Latin *salarium*, "*salt money*." A pretense of loyalty and concern for the king's honor is used with no mention of the true motives of personal gain.

b. (:15) Calling for Historical Research

"*so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books, and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste.*"

5. (:16) Pessimistic Outcome

"*We inform the king that, if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River.*"

Presenting the worst case scenario; exaggerating the potential loss of dominion

Constable: Israel's enemies presented three reasons Artaxerxes should withdraw the Jews' building permit. They warned that the Jews would stop paying taxes when their fortifications were complete (**v. 13**), and the consequent decline in revenue would hurt the king's reputation (**v. 14**). Moreover, if the Jews continued to rebuild a city that had a reputation for rebellion, their actions might encourage other peoples in other parts of the empire to revolt (**vv. 15-16**).

Fensham: In **v. 16** a typical example of the exaggeration of the Samaritans occurs. They wanted the king to believe that the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem would create such a dangerous position in the province of the Trans-Euphrates that at the end nothing would be left for the king. This could only happen if a rebellion in Jerusalem could

spread over the whole province. It is obviously an exaggeration of the real circumstances.

C. (:17-23) Response of King Artaxerxes

1. (:17a) Targeted Recipients of the Response

"*Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River:*"

2. (:17b-20) Testimony of Due Diligence

a. (:17b) Polite Blessing

"*Peace.*"

b. (:18) Document Receipt

"*And now the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me.*"

c. (:19-20) Detailed Responses

1) (:19a) Issuing of a Decree

"*And a decree has been issued by me,*"

2) (:19b-20) Investigating the Historical Background

"*and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it, 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom, and toll were paid to them.*"

Loken: Artaxerxes next described the steps he took upon hearing the interpretation of the letter. To his credit, Artaxerxes carefully researched the claims of Rehum. After a thorough search of the Assyrian and Babylonian annals, the king discovered that Jerusalem did indeed have a long history of rebelling against its suzerains. He also discovered that some of Jerusalem's kings had been quite powerful, even to the point of receiving tribute. This seems to be a reference to David and Solomon (and perhaps even to Uzziah and Hezekiah). If Jerusalem had been that powerful in the past, it could certainly rise to prominence again in the future, thereby posing a threat to the Persian Empire and Artaxerxes himself.

Gary Smith: This raises questions about the basis and objectivity of the king's decision, for it seems to be based on a limited amount of information and not the full history of Israel. Was it a political move made out of fear, or a reasoned response based on factual information about the behavior of the people who now lived in Judah?

Breneman: The sentence begins, "*Powerful kings were over Jerusalem*." The phrase is ambiguous and can be taken as powerful kings of Jerusalem, such as David and

Solomon, who ruled a large area; or it could refer to other powerful kings who ruled over Jerusalem and received taxes from Jerusalem. There is more irony at the end of Artaxerxes' reply when he ordered the Samarian officials not to neglect the very thing they wanted to do in the first place.

3. (:21-23) Tackling the Main Accusation Head-On

a. (:21-22) Sending Out the Stop Work Decree

1) (:21) Careful Order

"*So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that the city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.*"

Whitcomb: This final clause left the door open for the king to change his mind, as we find in **Nehemiah 2**! Truly this was providential, for the laws of the Medes and the Persians changed not!

2) (:22) Urgent Execution

"*And beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter;*
why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?"

b. (:23) Stopping the Jewish Building Activities of the City Walls

"*Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.*"

Fensham: After the Samaritan officials received the letter of the king, they hurried to Jerusalem to stop building activities. By force of arms quite probably refers to a contingent of soldiers they took with them. This was a day of great shame to the Jewish population because their honest endeavor was thwarted by their archenemies, the Samaritans, and it was forced on them by Samaritan soldiers.

Gary Smith: What we learn from this section is that opposition to God's people, God's holy place, and the worship of God takes many forms. Persecution can involve threatening God's people to discourage them (**4:4**) or slyly influencing political authorities to frustrate believers so that some will eventually stop following God's divine plan (**4:5**). Persecution often happens when those who hate God's work gather their friends together to make a concerted effort to oppose what God is doing (**4:7–9**). This oppression can involve false statements or exaggerated claims that paint believers with false generalizations or raise unfounded fears (**4:13–16**). Those who persecute believers may be motivated by the desire for greater political power or any number of prideful or revengeful attitudes. Believers throughout the ages have faced opposition like this, and the Bible indicates that those who put their faith in Christ will continue to face the hatred of the world (**John 15:18–19**; **17:14–17**). Jesus encouraged his

followers by telling them that those who suffered persecution would be blessed (**Matt 5:10**), while Peter encouraged his readers to expect persecution, for Christ also suffered for things he did not do (**1 Pet 3:13–18**).

III. (:24) RESUMPTION OF THE NARRATIVE – GOD'S ENEMIES CAN ACHIEVE TEMPORARY VICTORIES – STOPPING THE JEWISH BUILDING ACTIVITIES OF THE HOUSE OF GOD

> "*Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*"

Fensham: Thus **ch. 4** is not meant to be in chronological sequence; rather it supplies us with a logical thought pattern wherein the most important actions of the Samaritans against the Jews are enumerated. In **v. 24** the author comes back to his chronological sequence, interrupted by **4:6–23**.

Wiersbe: The king ordered the Jews to stop rebuilding the city. In fact, it's likely that the Persians wrecked the work the Jews had already completed, and the report that Nehemiah received from his brother described what the Persians had done, not what the Babylonians had done (**Neh. 1:1-3**). It wasn't until the arrival of Nehemiah in 445 that the work was resumed and the walls were finished and the gates restored.

Breneman: The author so skillfully crafted his account that **v. 24** appears to logically follow **v. 23**. The connection, however, is with **v. 5**. As noted earlier, **vv. 6–23** are a parenthesis to show the real attitude of those who offered help in **v. 2** and to show the continuity of the opposition to the Jews even after the period of temple construction. The surrounding peoples obstructed the rebuilding of the temple, and later they would obstruct the rebuilding of the city.

Darius I (522–486) took over the Persian Empire after the civil war following the death of Cambyses (see Introduction). As often happens in such times of uncertainty, the empire was threatened with dissolution. There were revolts in every direction. But by Darius's second year (520 b.c.), he had put down the rebellions and stabilized the empire (except for trouble in Egypt in 518–519). Under his rule the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and splendor.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How should we evaluate pleas for ecumenical cooperation in spiritual missions?

2) Do we expect opposition when we are engaged in the Lord's work?

3) What are some of the same strategies that Satan continues to use to try to put an end to God's kingdom agenda?

4) What are some strategies for fighting against the tactics of the enemy?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Steven Cole: **Spiritual Setbacks**

> **Whenever you make a commitment to the Lord, be prepared to face the enemy's unrelenting attempt to set you back.**

Verse 1 says that the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that they were building a temple to the God of Israel. We cannot build, whether a church building to further the ministry or building our own spiritual lives, without the enemy hearing about it. He will come prowling, subtly at first, but more aggressively if we resist his first attempts. To be forewarned is to be forearmed:

1. Our spiritual enemy will vigorously oppose every attempt at spiritual advance.

Satan has a number of tricks or tools in his bag:

> (1) THE ENEMY'S MOST DANGEROUS TRICK IS TO LURE US INTO COMPROMISE UNDER THE GUISE OF COOPERATION.

The danger of the appeal of these enemies was that their words were not absolute lies. They were partially true. They *did* worship God and sacrifice to Him. The problem was, they did not worship God *alone!* Some of the returned remnant could have accused Zerubbabel and Jeshua of being too hard on these men: "They believe in God, just as we do. Why not make peace with them and let them work together with us?" The answer is, for the same reason that you don't drink water that is only a little bit polluted. It will poison you!

> (2) THE ENEMY OFTEN USES THE TOOL OF DISCOURAGEMENT.

Satan often uses the tool of discouragement. He whispers to us, "What you're doing won't make any difference in this world or in eternity. Those kids you teach don't appreciate your efforts. Why bother? Just quit and enjoy yourself." He tries to discourage pastors when people we have worked with turn against us, spread unjustified criticism, and lead others out of the church. "You see! You're just laboring in vain!"

> (3) THE ENEMY OFTEN USES FEAR TO FOLLOW DISCOURAGEMENT.

> (4) THE ENEMY USES MISINFORMATION AND FALSE ACCUSATIONS

TO OPPOSE AND UNDERMINE GODLY LEADERS.

In **4:6-23**, we have a long parenthesis where Ezra shares examples of the opposition that came later. He carefully names the different kings that he is referring to so that his readers would not misunderstand. These later examples did not concern the rebuilding of the temple, but of the city and the walls during the reign of King Artaxerxes (**4:12**), whom Nehemiah served. Israel's enemies wrote this letter to Artaxerxes that was filled with false accusations and half-truths. They said that if the city were rebuilt, the Jews would stop paying taxes (**4:13**). That will get any king's attention!

(5) IF NEED BE, THE ENEMY WILL FORM COALITIONS TO OVERWHELM THE GODLY BY SHEER FORCE OF NUMBERS.

(6) AT TIMES, THE ENEMY WILL USE GOVERNMENT EDICTS AND SHEER FORCE TO BLOCK OUR SPIRITUAL ADVANCE.

King Artaxerxes issued a decree to stop the work, providentially adding, "*until a decree is issued by me*" (**4:21**). Thankfully, that decree was issued after Nehemiah tactfully sought the king's permission to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But on this occasion, king's decree in hand, Israel's enemies went quickly and stopped the Jews by force of arms (**4:23**). **Verse 24** goes back chronologically to **verse 5**, not to **verse 23**. The result of the opposition was that the work on God's house ceased for 16 years.

(7) THE ENEMY DOES NOT GIVE UP IN HIS OPPOSITION TO OUR SPIRITUAL PROGRESS.

Verses 6-23 chronicle events that happened up to 80 years after the events of **verses 1-5** & **24**. Ezra may have included these later events not only to give examples of opposition, but also to prove that the decision to reject the help of the enemies (**4:1**) was right. Also, these verses show that Ezra's later strong contention against the mixed marriages of the returned exiles was well-founded (Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* [IVP], p. 48). They also show the unrelenting nature of Satan's opposition. He does not give up after one setback. He keeps on countering whatever the Lord's people try to do to move ahead spiritually. If he can get you to kick back and give up, he has achieved his objective. That leads to…

2. There are many wrong ways to respond to the enemy's attacks.

(1) GIVE UP ON YOUR SPIRITUAL GOALS AND GO BACK TO YOUR OLD WAY OF LIFE.

(2) SETTLE FOR SECOND BEST SPIRITUALLY.

Some of the Jews may have thought, "Well, at least we're out of Babylon and back in the land. If we can't have a temple, we'll have to do without." But without the temple,

the Jews couldn't worship God as they should have. They wouldn't have had the spiritual center for the nation. Some Christians try to make a new beginning with the Lord, but the enemy attacks. They back off and decide to settle into a mediocre spiritual existence.

(3) BLAME GOD OR GOD'S LEADERS FOR NOT DOING WHAT YOU THINK THEY SHOULD HAVE DONE.

Perhaps some of the people grumbled against Zerubbabel and Jeshua for their scheme of rebuilding the temple: "Things were going okay before we started this project. Why did our leaders ever get us into this battle? Maybe it wasn't God's will."
We need to keep in mind that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the unseen spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (**Eph. 6:12**). Otherwise, when things go wrong at church or in your relationships with other Christians, it's easy to grumble against God or against the leaders God has put over you. Instead of working together, praying together, and moving ahead with what the Lord wants done, the church can fragment into angry factions, each blaming the other for problems that really are coming from the enemy.

(4) CONCLUDE THAT IT MUST NOT BE GOD'S TIME AND THAT WHEN HE WANTS IT DONE, IT WILL GET DONE.

3. There are some biblical strategies for overcoming the enemy's tactics.

There are many more strategies than I can list here but, for sake of time, I will mention four:

(1) KNOW THE ENEMY.

(2) RESIST THE ENEMY.

(3) SUBMIT AND DRAW NEAR TO GOD.

(4) PERSEVERE IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION.

Derek Thomas: Let me suggest three very quick things here as a kind of three-pronged strategy for opposing discouragement and dealing with discouragement – **be realistic**, my friends, be realistic. There will always be opposition. There will always be difficulty. There will always be Satan's men who do his bidding in every age–in times past, in the present, and in the future. When Jesus was crucified there were a dozen believers, twenty perhaps. Let's be generous, 100 in Jerusalem. Be realistic. Jesus says, "*I build My church and I build it in enemy occupied territory*." There will always be opposition. It is nothing new.

But secondly, what's missing here? What's missing from this story?–**Prayer**. There is no prayer here. There's no mention of it. What do the people of God do when they're

discouraged, when they face discouragement? Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? You should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
It doesn't bode well, I think, for the church in the 21st century because we don't make use of collective prayer as we ought, I think. It's one of my personal discouragements about the church in the 21st century. We have seemed to have lost sight of the value of collective, corporate prayer in coming before the throne of grace and making our wants and needs and petitions known to Almighty God. Learn from that here–the mighty powerful weapon of all prayer.

But, thirdly, **be faithful**. Exercise faith, faith in God, faith in His Word, faith in His promise, faith in His covenant, faith in the victory of His Son, faith in Easter, faith in the empty tomb, faith in Jesus who sits at God's right hand and who ever lives to make intercession for us. . .

I want to say three or four things about opposition, about trial, about difficulties in the kingdom of God:

I. It's tough and it's difficult and there are moments of severe opposition and trial.

II. Sometimes, in God's providence, several generations may pass before you see strong leadership.

III. Trials can make us lose sight of God

Phil Newton: **Don't Let Opposition Surprise You**
Every period of significant growth, maturity, and useful for the church, seems to be preceded by opposition. Even when the growth and usefulness transpires, opposition most often accompanies it. If we would be used of the Lord, if we would go on into spiritual maturity, and if we would see more people brought into God's kingdom, then we should not be surprised by opposition accompanying it.

Opposition will come so be prepared to remain faithful to Christ in all things.

That's the lesson that shouts from our text. The writer leaves the tight chronology evident in the first three chapters and takes on a **thematic angle** in chapter four. He returns to his chronological re-telling of the returning exiles and the rebuilding of the temple, and ultimately, the wall of Jerusalem (**4:24ff**.). But here he gives us a quick look ahead. Why does he do this? To put it in more modern terms, he wants us to see that following the Lord's will does not mean a walk in the park! Life is difficult for God's people. We are not to become so trapped in mind and affections for this world that we lose sight of eternity ahead with Him. Yet that is what happened to Israel in earlier generations; and it still happens today. That's why Christians seem to whine and complain and murmur when opposition or affliction comes. We think that this life is to be easy. Yet how can it be while sin reigns about us? How can it be when men love darkness rather than the light? How can it be when men hate the Creator and seek to throw off His sovereign rule (**Psa. 1**)? How can it be when truth exposes the darkness of the human heart and need for redemption through Christ alone?

I. Opposition is real

We suffer with disillusionment in modern America. The thought that we might suffer for the Christian faith or encounter great difficulties and trials as believers seems foreign to our thought. Yet that is the pattern evident throughout Scripture. Ezra and Nehemiah make this clear. From this chapter through the end of Nehemiah, a stretch of 80 years, opposition, adversity, and trials accompany the people of God. Did this mean that God was not working among them? On the contrary, it indicates one of the means that the Lord uses to strengthen His people and demonstrate His grace in our lives. As Paul told the young churches in Asia Minor at the end of his first missionary journey, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (**Acts 14:23**). Has that changed? Though we may have been spared many things in our cultural setting, we dare not get comfortable and presumptuous. Our afflictions still come, testing the veracity of our faith and building our confidence in the faithfulness of our God through Christ in the gospel. We are constantly reminded that this world is not our home!

1. Nature of the adversaries

Who were "*the enemies of Judah and Benjamin*"? The returning exiles, the remnant, are identified as Judah and Benjamin. That was due to this being the Southern Kingdom of Judah that was exiled, first into Babylon and then taken over by the Persians.

The enemies were those who had been settled in the land of Palestine by the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal. The typical pattern of conquering kings was to remove the people of the conquered land to another part of the kingdom in order to cut ties with their inheritance, change their culture so that they assimilated into the new culture, reorient their loyalties toward the new kingdom, and destabilize any possibility of mounting opposition to the new kingdom. This particular group would have originally settled in Samaria or in that region. They could have come from any number of places so would have been from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds.

They brought their idolatry with them and the practices associated with their religion. When Zerubbabel and Jeshua rejected their overtures for assistance on rebuilding the temple, it had nothing to do with racism or anti-foreign sentiments. They knew, instead, that these men were enemies to them because they were enemies of the Lord God.

2 Kings 17:24-41 gives the description of how these people groups were dispersed to the northern kingdom of Israel and began to carry on their lives. They added a syncretistic practice of Yahwism or the worship of the Lord God. So, should the returning exiles have welcomed their volunteering to help rebuild the temple? Consider, what got Israel into trouble in the first place. They embraced other gods and tried to syncretize the worship of Yahweh with other religions. It cost them everything. What were the issues at hand?

- They rejected the exclusive worship of the Lord alone.
- They rejected worship as prescribed by the Lord in His Law.
- They rejected any need for atonement before God; so they would have mocked

at the Jewish Day of Atonement and the sacrifices as useful.
- They rejected the judgment by the Lord.
- They had viewed the Lord as the means to a comfortable life not as the divine sovereign to whom they owed all allegiance (**2 Kings 17**).
- They were not satisfied with allowing the worship of the Lord to take place without coloring its details with their own preferences.

Do we not need to learn something from this, especially in a day when it is politically and socially incorrect to be single-minded in devotion to Christ?

2. Response to opposition

> "*You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us*."

Were they being racist by this remark? Were they unkind and uncharitable at such an offer as made to them?

The reality is that they knew what got them into exile in the first place; and they did not want to repeat it by watering down their worship and devotion to the Lord by allying with syncretists.

This brings up the question: how far do we go in separating from others? This is touchy! Some have taken this too far and have become isolationists, trying to totally separate from everyone in the world. Paul rebukes that mindset in 1 Corinthians 5, pointing out that we would have to go out of the world to really do that. Rather the point is that Christians need to make sure that they do not ally themselves for any labor with those that would be in direct conflict with the gospel.

The issue before the exiles was clear. It was not nationality, ethnic background, or cultural distinctions that caused separation. It was belief and practice. Here is where "cooperation" in spiritual endeavors is limited to those who agree on the central tenets of the Christian faith, particularly on the gospel. . .

There is a price to pay when exercising separation from those groups that would try to water down the gospel and destroy the foundation upon which our faith rests. We see this in the reaction in **verses 4-5**. The enemies "*hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king do Persia*." That's fifty-years of opposition by the same people.

Should the exiles have just gone along with the proposal in **verse 2**? It would have destroyed them in the end. What were the goals of the "*enemies*"? Were they going to build up the worship of the Lord alone? Were they going to look to Him for redemption from their sins? Would they be for worshiping the Lord according to the prescription in the Law? Would they have lived in dependence on Him? Would they faithfully practice the moral tenets of the Law? The answer is obvious just as it is in our day with those

that would cozy up to Christians while rejecting the solitary truths of the gospel. We need the same courage as shown by the returning exiles.

3. Effects of opposition

The effect that the enemies had on the exiles is threefold:

> **Discouragement**: the word conveys the relaxing of the hands or the weakening of the people's morale [D.J. Clines, The New Century Bible Commentary: Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther, 75]. Discouragement takes the wind out of our sails, saps the energy from our lives, and deflates the passion and heart that we have for a work.
>
> **Fear**: notice the point of fear—"*and frightened them from building*." It had to do with their worship not their living. The world does not bother us if we make little of our Lord and His gospel. But do so and the world threatens us with slander and accusations of bias, prejudice, bigotry, homophobia, etc.
>
> **Multiplied opposition**: this is where the "counselors" or maybe a more apt term, "lobbyists" began a relentless political campaign against the exiles. They regularly spoke against them in the halls of power back in Susa.

The work stopped: that's the fruit of the other effects (**v. 24**). The people lost heart for continuing on in the work.

II. Opposition is unending

That's the point that is made by adding the "sidebar" in **verses 6-23**. It came in the form of letters of opposition. By this time, the temple had been completed at the urging of prophets Haggai and Zechariah. After the rough start and then the stoppage of the work, they resumed after a 20-year hiatus. Many of their priorities had caved to the discouragement and fears so that they had to repent of self-centered ways and greed before returning to the work.

The letters began in the reign of Ahaseurus or Xerxes (486-465). Evidently, after the temple was built there was some movement to begin rebuilding the wall around the city. That would have been natural, not for any kind of rebellion against Persia but for normal protection. The second letter came during Artaxerxes' reign (464-424), which was nearly 100 years after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. There is some debate as to whether **verse 8** introduces a third letter or whether it is amplification on the second letter. Whether it was one or two or many is not of great importance. But the fact that the opposition seemed unending is what is driven home. The thing that made the letter or letters during Artaxerxes' time so critical was that there was a rebellion concurrent with the early part of his reign (460) in Egypt supported by the Greeks. It lasted for 12 years and ended with the Peace of Callias. So Artaxerxes would have listened closely to any news that Jerusalem might be rebelling against him [Mervin Breneman, NAC: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, 101].

Interestingly, from **4:8** until **6:18**, the book of Ezra is written in Aramaic, which was the

lingua franca of the Assyrian Empire and then was passed on to the Babylonian Empire so that the Persian Empire used it too. That's why it had to be translated into Persian for the king [Breneman, 102].

Did the letter tell the truth? We must realize that enemies of the Lord God (and enemies of the gospel) are not interested in truth. They only want to stop forward movement for the faith. So they will justify lies in order to accomplish their end game. Notice what they did.

1. Exaggeration v. 12
That's not exactly the right picture of old Jerusalem!

2. Playing loosely with the truth v. 13
That is the nature of the world. Truth means nothing; getting their way means everything. This is at the very core of depravity because the world will ultimately stop at nothing to achieve its lusts.

The Jews were insignificant in number, weak in political strength, poor in resources, and yet, the charge was made that they would not be loyal to the king (**v. 13**).

Those making the charge puffed up their own resumes as in the "*service of the palace*," or literally, they considered themselves to be those who "eat the salt." That was an exaggeration as well. They schmoozed the king because they were out for selfish desires. The king's honor meant nothing to them but crushing and defeating the rise of the Jews and their worship of Yahweh meant everything.

3. Record books v. 15
What would they show? Hezekiah defied Assyria by trusting the Lord—no fight ensued, yet the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 in their own camp. Beyond that, the stance against Babylon by Jehoikim only resulted in the destruction and capture of Jerusalem.

Ultimately, if the records were accurate, they would show that Jerusalem fell because they rejected the Lord their God (e.g. **2 Kings 22:14-20; 23:26-27; 24:1-5**).

4. More exaggeration v. 16
"*You will have no possession in the province beyond the river*" (which was the Euphrates). What a stretch! The tiny area of Jerusalem could not deny the king the larger region of Syria and Palestine. But due to it being a time of threat, the king acquiesced. Possibly, some of this took place "c. 448 when Megabyzus, satrap of Abar-nahara, was in rebellion, and it therefore was bound to be acted on by a nervous Persian administration" [Cline, 77]. This is where the story in **Nehemiah 1:2ff** enters the scene.

But how do God's people respond to such times?

III. Opposition is bread for us

Here's where Judah needed to learn from their history. **Numbers 13:25-14:10** gives us the perspective of those caving to fear and those who relied on the Lord in times of opposition. The latter decided that opposition was bread or food for God's people—a source of growth and maturing in the Lord. We can summarize it as follows:

1. Reliance on the Lord (Numbers 14:8)
"*If the Lord is pleased with us*…"
Here is the call for prayer and dependence on the Lord.

2. Attentiveness to obedience (Num. 14:9a)
"*Do not rebel*…"

3. Opportunity in opposition (Num. 14:9b)

So, don't let opposition surprise you. See it as an opportunity to grow in grace, faithfulness, and dependence on the Lord.

Gary Smith: Nevertheless, the radical choice of maintaining a holy separation from the worship of other gods was and is a fundamental dividing marker between those who love God with all their hearts and those who do not. All people must answer the question: Whom do we serve? Is God the supreme Lord and master of my life? Although some will speak the name of Jesus and know all about the Gospel parables and the exodus from Egypt, knowledge about the Bible is not what God requires. God will not share his glory with any other gods or persons, so absolute dedication to the glorification of God must motivate behavior and put a limit on cooperation. There is no wiggle room when it comes to a person's commitment to God. People are either for God or against him. Those who are for him love him with all their hearts and minds and obey his commandments (**John 14:15**). Jesus also warned that the world would hate us because it hated him (**John 15:18**). Persecution is not something a true believer can avoid. Thus, people must choose: Will we say no to the world that hates God and be persecuted, or will we compromise our faith and enjoy peace with those who hate God?

This stance does not exclude evangelism or require seclusion into a separatist community. It requires total dedication to the process of drawing other people into the community of those who truly worship God. Friendship with unbelievers is not excluded but required by the nature of everyday life. Nevertheless, friendship and care for unbelievers is drastically different from accepting their theological beliefs and behavioral standards as one's own. When believers let friendships with unbelievers influence them toward unchristian behavior, those who are mature in the faith should be doing everything possible to transform their minds (**Rom 12:1–2**). Having clear convictions about the truth should motivate believers to reach out to win others to trust in God.

TEXT: Ezra 5:1-17

TITLE: RESTARTING MINISTRY AFTER DISCOURAGEMENT

BIG IDEA:
RESTARTING MINISTRY IN THE FACE OF DISCOURAGING OPPOSITION REQUIRES MOTIVATION FROM GOD'S WORD AND CONVICTION REGARDING THE SIGNIFICANCE AND LEGITIMACY OF THE MISSION

INTRODUCTION:
Discouragement is a powerful tool of Satan. God's people had returned from exile – excited about their commission to rebuild the house of God. But after repeated opposition and defeat, they had been diverted to less important priorities (like home improvement projects) for the past 16 years. Discouragement and acceptance of the status quo had set in. The prophets powerfully delivered God's Word of exhortation to motivate the people to restart the temple building project and to persevere and remain on task despite further opposition. Their conviction regarding the significance and legitimacy of their mission helped them in their interactions with the government officials that were raising critical questions.

Williamson: (**Chaps 5-6**) -- Although this section is longer than most, it has a transparent **unity** not only in the fact that it all deals with the **rebuilding of the second temple**, but also in the fact that, apart from the introduction and conclusion, it centers entirely on Tattenai's inquiry and its outcome. To attempt a division into smaller independent units would thus be a quite arbitrary procedure. Of course, the narrative is made up of a number of easily recognizable paragraphs, but these relate closely to one another and so cannot be treated exegetically in isolation.

The work of building comes to its conclusion by **6:15**. The reference in **v 14** to the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah and the command of the God of Israel forms a clear narrative inclusio with the start of the section in **5:1**, while the allusion to the decrees of the Persian kings acts as a summary recapitulation of the section as a whole. In terms of content, however, this can hardly be separated from the next paragraph, which describes the dedication of the temple (**6:16–18**), so that appropriately enough the author continues here in Aramaic, the language he has used throughout the account of the rebuilding.

Only **6:19–22** may thus be recognized as somewhat less closely attached. It describes the first Passover immediately following the dedication of the temple. The reference to the Lord's changing the attitude of the ruling king toward the Jews so that he supported them manifests exactly the same theological outlook as seen already at **1:1**, while others have noted the similarities with the end of **chap. 3**. This little paragraph thus serves as a most appropriate conclusion to the whole of **Ezra 1–6**. Consciousness of this fact, we may suggest, caused the author to revert to Hebrew. He thereby drew attention to the nature of this paragraph as a conclusion to his whole account and not just that of the

events of 520–515 b.c. He may have also considered it more fitting to round off his narrative in Hebrew, it being the traditional language of his people and the language in which he had presented most of his material.

Gary Smith: This change [from negative events of **chap. 4** to positive in **chap. 5**] came about because God sovereignly worked in the hearts of everyone; and in particular, his word through the prophets changed the hearts of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. As a result, they saw themselves as sinful but dedicated servants of God and developed a new attitude of cooperation and submission to government officials. The broadest theological theme that encompasses and explains everything that takes place on earth is the **sovereign work of God**. The prophets spoke because God sent them at just this time to deliver his message (**5:1**). The people's attitude changed because of God's sovereign work of stirring up the hearts of the people to fear and obey God (**Hag 1:12–14**). The Persians did not stop the work on the Temple because "*God was watching over*" everything (**5:5**). God's powerful working in the history of the nations was confessed when the leaders recognized that God's anger caused him to abandon them and let Nebuchadnezzar exile them to Babylon (**5:12**). In Ezra's eyes, God was the main power directing history (Breneman 1993:108). His anger can bring disaster and destruction, but at other times he marvelously intervenes to allow people to succeed in very surprising ways. God worked with enemies, armies, and his own stubborn, sinful people, and no matter how powerful or sinful these human beings were, he was always in charge of each step along the way.

When things do not go well because of opposition, sinfulness, or the laziness of his people, God can direct history by changing people's attitudes so they repent (**Zech 1:1–6**), fear God (**Hag 1:12**), and become his servants (**5:11**). God empowers people to change their theological perspective toward himself and their enemies by revealing his will through chosen prophets who boldly confront the false ideas that derail godly action (**Hag 1**). Haggai and Zechariah's prophetic words challenged the status quo and showed the inconsistencies in the people's perverted theological paradigms. When the Spirit anointed God's prophetic word, people's hearts were stirred. The word of God encouraged those who were weak and afraid to act in spite of opposition (**Hag 1:14**). Without God's words of guidance, correction, and instruction, people tend to wander around in self-pity and hopelessness, not knowing what to do.

Once they have the word of God, people change their view of themselves and others. The Jewish leaders confessed that they had failed their God and that he was just in punishing them (**5:11–12**). They did not hide their faults and did not blame others for their difficult situation. But they did not see themselves as rebels, but as servants of the living God of heaven and earth (Holmgren 1987:43). As servants, they submitted their will to God's instructions and his plans for their lives. They understood it was their responsibility to construct a Temple for worship of this God of heaven and earth. Their attitude toward their Persian overlords also changed: The people did not view them as the enemy and were not antagonistic or defiant toward them. They saw themselves as cooperative (Williamson 1985:87) and as obedient to the instructions in Cyrus's decree (**5:13**; cf. **Rom 13:1–5**), and they wanted the new king, Darius I, to check the

government records for this decree that Cyrus gave them. They did not try an end run around anyone or try to pervert the decree to make it say more than it actually said. Tattenai and Darius I were not demonized as the enemies of the people but viewed as the means God would use to grant approval for the rebuilding of the Temple. As long as the people were faithful servants of God and the king, God could work out the political details to finish the Temple according to his own timing.

I. (:1-5) RENEWAL OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT TO REBUILD THE TEMPLE DRIVEN BY THE WORD OF GOD

A. (:1-2) Prophetic Support for the Rebuilding of the Temple

1. (:1) Exhortation of God's Word Re-Commissioning the Project

"*When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them,*"

MacArthur: The book of Haggai is styled as a royal administrative correspondence (cf. **Hag 1:13**) sent from the Sovereign King of the Universe through the "*messenger of the Lord*," Haggai (**Hag 1:13**). Part of its message is addressed specifically to Zerubbabel, the political leader, and Joshua, the religious leader, telling them to "*take courage . . . and work*" on the temple because God was with them (**Hag 2:4**). These two prophets gave severe reproaches and threats if the people did not return to the building and promised national prosperity if they did. Not long after the exiles heard this message, the temple work began afresh after a 16 year hiatus.

McConville: There is always an effective answer to discouragement in the bold proclamation of the word of God.

2. (:2a) Leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua Restarting the Project

"*then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem;*"

Fensham: These verses set the scene in the second year of Darius, viz., the beginning of 519 b.c. At this time everything was still uncertain. From a political viewpoint this would have been the right time to restart building activities on the temple. Strict supervision in the Persian provinces was not possible. Nobody was certain who would be the next king. Accompanied by the political insight in the situation was the religious zeal of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (**Hag. 1:2, 12; 2: 1ff.; Zech. 3:1, 6**). From their prophecies it is clear that the rebuilding of the temple was regarded as the only priority for the Jews. Haggai castigated the Jews for living in well-built houses and pursuing prosperous economic and agricultural activities while the temple was still in ruins (**Hag. 1:2ff**.).

3. (:2b) Partnership with the Prophets Re-Invigorating the Project

"*and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.*"

Rata: After sixteen years of the reconstruction work being at a standstill, it is the Word of the Lord that jumpstarts the process anew. The prophetic office did not die during the Babylonian exile and God's prophets did not become extinct. A prophet was an intermediary who communicated God's message to His people, and during this time of crisis God uses Haggai and Zechariah to reinvigorate His people. The book of Haggai focuses on the necessity of rebuilding the temple while Zechariah focuses on God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Both Haggai and Zechariah speak "*in the name of the God of Israel*" who was "*over them*." God was over both the prophets and the people, and believing that He is sovereignly in control gives the leaders incentive to resume the work of rebuilding. Zerubbabel is identified as "*governor of Judah*" by Haggai, and he plays an important role both in Ezra and Nehemiah. Jeshua (Joshua) is identified by Haggai as a high priest, so Zerubbabel and Jeshua served both as civic and spiritual leaders. The prophets continue to offer support to the leaders and the people as the rebuilding continues—both spiritual and material help—illustrating the concept of teamwork being characteristic of doing God's work.

B. (:3-5) Governmental Oversight Investigating the Rebuilding of the Temple

1. (:3) Legitimacy of the Project Questioned by Tattenai

> "*At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'*"

Loken: Immediately upon hearing the news that the Jews have resumed work on the temple, the governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates approached the remnant and questioned it regarding the project. His chief concern was assuredly whether or not these actions involved subversion. The Persian Empire had been teeming with revolts since the death of Cyrus, and the political situation became even worse at the time Darius took the throne. Since Darius was not an obvious heir, revolts erupted throughout the Persian Empire. It took nineteen different battles and a little more than a year, but Darius finally succeeded in solidifying his throne. These types of revolts were common in ancient times. There was always a period of uncertainty whenever a change in the monarchy occurred, especially when the new monarch was not a natural heir. Vassal nations frequently used opportunities like this to rebel against their suzerain. . .

It was the provincial governor's duty to question the activity of the Jews. His responsibilities included the protection of the interests of the Persian king. From his point of view, it was entirely possible that the Jews were rebuilding portions of their city as part of a subversive plot to rebel against the Persians. As detailed in the previous section, the Jews had a history of rebelling against their suzerains. While Tattenai himself should not be regarded as an enemy of the Jews, he was likely informed of their efforts by those who were.

2. (:4) Leaders of the Project Documented for Tattenai

> "*Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.*"

Fensham: Tattenai arrived in Jerusalem and did two things expected of an able official: first, he asked the Jews who gave them permission for the rebuilding of the temple, and second, he took down the names of those responsible for it.

3. (:5) Labor Continued During the Investigative Process

"*But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report should come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.*"

Williamson: "*The eye of God*" is certainly a somewhat unusual expression (cf. **Ps 33:18; 34:16 [15]; Job 36:7**) that speaks of his caring watchfulness over his people. It may be contrasted with the more common "*hand of God*" which occurs frequently in the narratives of both Ezra and Nehemiah. There may be a hint in this difference of usage that the narrator of **Ezra 1–6** is to be distinguished from the one who gave the remainder of the books their present shape.

Perhaps the expression was intended to suggest a contrast with the Persian inspectors. These were known popularly as "the king's eye," and must have been regarded as somewhat threatening and sinister. The biblical author knows, however of One whose care overrides even their potential menace.

Breneman: The Jews continued the work even though there was a possibility the king would stop the project and thus nullify all their efforts. This persistence and perseverance indicates the people's faith that God would continue to keep the door open for continuing the work. It also shows the influence of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

II. (:6-17) RESOLVE TO PURSUE THE MINISTRY PROJECT WHILE TESTIFYING TO ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND LEGITIMACY

A. (:6-7) Letter Sent from Tattenai to King Darius Investigating the Project

1. (:6) Political Authors of the Report

"*This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.*"

2. (:7) Personal Address to the King

"*They sent a report to him in which it was written thus:*
'To Darius the king, all peace.'"

Constable: In contrast to Rehum and Shimshai's letter to Artaxerxes (**4:11-16**), Tattenai's letter to Darius was fair and objective. He gave no indication of wanting to stop the Jews' project. He only wanted to know if Cyrus had really given permission for the Jews to rebuild the temple and if Darius wanted that edict to stand.

B. (:8-10) Listing of the Major Questions Requiring Investigation

1. (:8) What is the Objective? – Significant Building Project

"*Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.*"

Gary Smith: The Persian word *ʾasparnaʾ* (in full measure, thoroughly) describes more the care and quality of the work than the energy expended by the workers (although great care does require great energy). It was a positive commendation on the progress being made on the Temple. No negative comments or prejudicial statements were made against the Jews in this letter.

2. (:9) Who Authorized It?

"*Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'*"

3. (:10) Who is Leading the Effort?

"*We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.*"

C. (:11-16) Legitimacy and Significance of the Project Attested to by the Jews

1. (:11) Significance of the Project to Rebuild the Temple

a. Significance Tied to the Greatness of God

"*And thus they answered us, saying,*
'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth"

b. Significance Tied to Historical Precedent and Continuity

"*and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago,*"

c. Significance Tied to the Reputation of King Solomon

"*which a great king of Israel built and finished.'*"

Williamson: In their reply to Tattenai's inquiry the Jews were anxious to emphasize the continuity of their project, both with the existence of the first temple and with the authorization of Cyrus to rebuild which had been granted quite a number of years previously. These two considerations were not unnaturally considered to be most likely to secure Tattenai's approval, and they account for most of the features of this paragraph.

Rata: The Jews introduce themselves as "*the servants of the God of heaven and earth*," thus exalting God as the Creator God, a notion that was novel to the Persians who worshipped Zarathustra. The Jews give Tattenai a compressed history lesson dating back to Solomon, who is declared "*a great king of Israel*." Their historical account is complete in the sense that it does not omit the sins of the people which caused their loss of country and temple. Breneman correctly points out that "the Jews, understanding the

theological reasons for their calamity, did not hesitate to tell their neighbors why they had suffered that exile."

2. (:12) Sinfulness that Led to the Destruction of the Temple and Deportation

"*But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.*"

Williamson: In their reply to Tattenai's inquiry the Jews were anxious to emphasize the continuity of their project, both with the existence of the first temple and with the authorization of Cyrus to rebuild which had been granted quite a number of years previously. These two considerations were not unnaturally considered to be most likely to secure Tattenai's approval, and they account for most of the features of this paragraph.

Breneman: The returned exiles saw the relation between history and theology. What their ancestors did determined their history. The Christian faith is tied to the fact that God made promises and fulfilled them in history, exemplified by Jesus, who actually came, died, and rose again. Although God is sovereign, decisions we make do affect history. History is a dialogue between God and humankind.

3. (:13-15) Seal of Cyrus Authorizing this Project

a. (:13) Issuing the Royal Decree

"*However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.*"

Fensham: The reference to Cyrus as king of Babylon was made in order to connect him to his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the temple, whereas Cyrus commanded the rebuilding of it.

Gary Smith: The temporal marker ("*during the first year*") helped authenticate the decree and caused the Persians to associate it with the general decree in the Cyrus Cylinder that allowed all the exiled people to return to their homelands and build their temples. The claim that it was a "decree" gave them official permission from the king. This idea was not hearsay or a suggestion by a lower-level official, but a decree that carried the signature of the king himself. This was the heart of their defense; everything was legal. Of course, appealing to a decree gave the Persians a means of checking the authenticity of the Jewish leaders' claim. They could look up the various decrees Cyrus issued in his first year and see if he gave permission to rebuild this Temple as the Jewish people were claiming.

b. (:14-15) Verifying the Royal Decree

1) (:14) Origin of the Gold and Silver Utensils

"*And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in*

Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor."

Gary Smith: The importance of mentioning the gold and silver utensils at this point was to verify the royal decree: Since everyone knew that the Babylonians stripped temples of their valuable objects and took them to Babylon, the presence of these objects in Judah at this time had to be due to a royal decree releasing them. Their presence in Jerusalem was a silent witness to the truthfulness of the claim that Cyrus had decreed that the Jews should go back home and rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. If there were no decree, the utensils would not be in Jerusalem.

2) (:15) Order to Return the Utensils to the New Temple

"*And he said to him, 'Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place.*'"

4. (:16) Summary of the Persevering Construction Efforts

a. Open Initiation of the Construction

"*Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem;*"

Nothing hidden or secretive about the project

b. Ongoing Construction on a Consistent Basis

"*and from then until now it has been under construction,*"

Nothing new or unusual to report – project has been going on in the same manner and with the same objective as when it began

c. Objective of Construction Not Yet Completed

"*and it is not yet completed.*"

Loken: In accordance with the decree of Cyrus, Sheshbazzar led a return to Jerusalem and laid the foundations of the temple. The governor is clearly given credit in this verse for the initial stage of the rebuilding project. As mentioned earlier, Sheshbazzar's part in the project may have involved the securing of the funds necessary to do the work (cf. **1:5–11**). Since the project could not have been started without the necessary financing, Sheshbazzar is given full credit in this letter. However, from other passages we see that it was actually Zerubbabel and Jeshua who were primarily responsible for the success of the project (cf. **3:8–11**). It is also possible that Sheshbazzar is identified because he would have been the individual named in the Persian records.

D. (:17) Lawfulness of the Project Investigated by King Darius

1. Search the Records

"*And now, if it pleases the king let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem;*"

2. Send Back Your Decision

"*and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter.*"

Andrew Swango: Up to this point, Tattenai proves himself to be a very smart and fair governor. He didn't come to the Jews in hate, but asked them questions. He listened to them and decided to investigate their claims. He sends his letter to king Darius to look into their claim. And we will see in the next chapter that Tattenai accepts the truth. He certainly was a very smart and fair governor.

Loken: Tattenai expected that the matter would be resolved with a search of the king's records in the treasure house located in Babylon. Time will show that the supporting documents would actually be found at a remote fortress in Media called Ecbatana (**6:2**). The final line of the letter is a request for the king's instructions concerning the entire matter. Tattenai wanted to know if the claims of the Jews were accurate and, if so, whether or not Darius wanted to allow the project to continue. Note the difference between this letter by Tattenai and the letter penned by Rehum in **4:11–16**. Rehum's letter was obviously biased and full of false accusations while Tattenai's letter fairly and accurately described the events as they had occurred.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How do you see the sovereign hand of God's Providence promoting His kingdom agenda today and how does that help you deal with ministry discouragement?

2) Are your missional projects rooted in the Word of God for their commissioning and motivation?

3) How can we better work with governmental officials to testify to the legitimacy of our missional efforts?

4) How do our missional efforts make new advances while also maintaining historical continuity with previous generations?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Thomas Constable: The text does not say if the Jews' antagonistic neighbors had provoked Tattenai, the governor of the Persian province in which Jerusalem stood, to

ask to see the Jews' temple building permit. It simply says he asked to see it. The Jews kept the construction work going while Tattenai determined whether they had authority to build.

Tattenai had reason to question the Jews' actions without prodding from the Samaritans. The Persian Empire had undergone political upheaval since Cyrus' death in 530 B.C.3 Cyrus' son and successor, Cambyses, had to put down several rebellions against his authority. This involved his executing his brother, Smerdis. An Egyptian nobleman, Gaumata, then claimed to be the true Smerdis and revolted against Cambyses. Popular opinion swung behind Gaumata, and Cambyses committed suicide in 522 B.C. However, the Persian army supported a distant cousin of Cambyses named Darius I (the son of Hystaspes). Darius was able to overthrow Gaumata and to put down several other claimants to the throne, as well as rebellions in many different parts of the empire.4 In view of these events, it is easy to see why Tattenai would have been suspicious of any attempt to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and why he wrote to Darius for instructions.

Another reason for Tattenai's concern may very well have been what Zechariah was prophesying. He said that the "*Branch*," the long-expected descendant of David's line, would soon appear and sit on David's throne (**Zech. 3:8; cf. Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6**). What Zechariah predicted of Messiah seemed to fit Zerubbabel to a tee (**Zech. 6:9-15**).

Derek Thomas: **Bureaucratic Meddling**
Various governorships — twenty of them, or more — were established throughout the Persian Empire. One such terrain governorship was the governorship known here in the ESV that we read together here this evening, as Beyond the River. Beyond, that is, the Euphrates River. It's referring to a region established by the Persian king partly in order to secure the taxation policies of the king. It would include Judah, and Jerusalem and it would include maybe some outlying areas, the river in this case of course being the Euphrates River.

Tattenai is the governor of this region in which Judah (and more particularly Jerusalem) is to be found. Tattenai and his perhaps under-secretary Shethar-bozenai and their associates…there's an impressive delegation then that make their way now to Jerusalem. And what is it that they see when they come to Jerusalem? Well, what they see when they come to Jerusalem is a building project. . .. Stones, massive stones…did you pick up in the reading "*huge stones*" in **verse 8**?

I. An act of God's prevention.
He prevents the work from coming to a stop.

II. A confession of sin.
Why were they in this condition in 520 B.C.? Why are they doing what they're doing, rebuilding this temple? Why had the exile occurred? For the last century they'd known nothing but trouble and trial and difficulty. And do you notice what they say when they write their responsive letter to Tattenai? They say in **verse 12**, "*Because our fathers had*

angered the God of heaven….” We are in this condition, we are where we are today because our fathers angered the God of heaven.

III. A vision of God.
A vision of God, and you see it again in **verse 11**. This was their reply: “*we are the servants of the God of heaven and earth*.” I love that!

You see, as far as the Persians were concerned, this great God that they refer to is just a local tribal deity. It's the Jewish God. They had respect — you know, what worked for them was fine. But these Jews are saying, no, our God is the God of heaven and earth. He's the God of all creation. He's the God who made all things and sustains all things. He's the God of providence. He's a God who brings things about, and He's a God who prevents things from coming about. . .

They’re establishing a line of continuity that goes back not just to King David who built this temple, but as we shall see in chapter six, the form of worship that they will instigate is the form of worship that Moses had laid down. They’re establishing a line of continuity from Moses to David to themselves. They’re the people of God. They’re not a Johnny-come-lately, they’re the people of God! They’re God's covenant people! That's why I think the author here must have had just a little twinkle in his own eye when he wrote **verse 5**, that the eye of their God was on them. This God of heaven and earth was looking after them, and watching over them and helping them, and supporting them, and encouraging them. And He was to be worshiped, and He was to be glorified.

Phil Newton: **Prophets and Providence**
I. Back to work
1. No progress
4:24 work stopped during time of Cambyses (Cyrus’ son) due to accusations by Judah’s enemies and internal issues in the empire.

Question had to arise: When would they start again? The work was idle for 15-16 years.

2. Impact of preaching
5:1 shows critical change to move Judah from despondence to action. What had taken place in the interim?

(a) They had grown cold in their fervor for the work of restoring worship as central to the people of God.

(b) They had become preoccupied with their own needs and wants, as evident in **Haggai 1**.

(c) Consequently, the world took center stage instead of worship.

If we evaluate Haggai and Zechariah, we see that they took two different approaches. Haggai dealt straight forward with the immediate problems at hand:

- you're preoccupied with your own desires
- you put comfort over faithfulness
- you fear the world not Yahweh
- you fail to learn from God's chastening hand
- you have forgotten that the Lord is with you (**1:13**)

Haggai does point to the future messianic glory as motivation but deals primarily in the present need to trust the Lord and move forward with building the temple.

Zechariah calls for repentance—returning to the Lord by reminding them of how their fathers learned that Yahweh would fulfill His purposes and promises (**Zech 1**). The balance of the prophecy uses apocalyptic language that focused primarily on the future Messiah. It is one of the most quoted and referenced OT books in the NT. He ends by demonstrating that the Lord reigns as King over all. That message lifted the thinking of this small group of Jews who lived under Persia's thumb.

3. Responding to Preaching

The people listened to the prophetic words! Zerubbal and Jeshua led the way with "*the prophets of God…supporting them*." They "arose and began to rebuild the house the house of God."

What did they have to overcome?

- fear
- lethargy
- discouragement
- preoccupation
- coldness
- spiritual laziness

How did they overcome?

- They listened to and valued the proclamation of God's Word.
- They heeded the Word of the Lord.
- They trusted the Lord to be faithful to His Word.

II. Courage boys, courage!

1. An official inquiry

There's not the same tone of opposition noted in **chapter 4** but rather a governor of the province just making sure that the king's interests were served.

What did Tattenai the governor do?

(a) He wanted to know who gave them permission to build and finish
(b)Who were the men responsible for the project?

2. The Eye of God

Tattenai's tactics were not out of line but were nonetheless intimidating. Government

and religion were in a standoff. Who would triumph? The ones upon whom the eye of God rested.

That's a beautiful phrase to express God's intervention, sustaining grace, and power to accomplish what He had given them to do. What does this mean?
You have omnipotence on your side "*If God is for you*…"
You have providential governance working on your behalf (note, "*they did not stop them*")
You have Him who orchestrates the universe for His glory and our good.

3. Revealing Correspondence
vv 7-10 Tattenai states his case and procedure

vv 11-16 The Jews respectfully respond:

- Who are we? "*Servants of God of heaven and earth*"
- What are we doing? Rebuilding the temple that one of our great king's had built
- Why are we in this predicament? Our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath
- How did it happen? Our God gave us into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar who consequently, destroyed the temple and departed us.

Note the theological confluence–man works while God also is at work; the greater work supports the lesser.

Why are we rebuilding? King Cyrus decreed it. This was critical because Darius had great admiration of Cyrus, the George Washington of Persia. Evidence of the decree could be found in the temple utensils and the Persian appointed governor leading the way.

The Request
v. 17 Check it out to see if this is true.

Sweet Providence
Would there be a record of these events some 16 years before? The record was located in an odd spot—the treasury in Ecbatana rather than in Babylon or Susa. These three cities served as residences for Persian kings at various times of the year. The scroll revealed the truth.

1. Cyrus' Memorandum
vv 2-5

2. Darius' decree
vv 6-12

(a) Let them build without problem from the government or anyone else **v 6-7**
(b) Pay the tab from your local taxes **v 8**
(c) Make sure that everything needed for worship is available to them **v 8** (the

details give evidence that he probably had a Jewish assistant writing for him. Could it have been Daniel?)
(d) Offer sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the King and his sons **v. 10**
Darius and other kings did the same with other deities so we cannot take this as a profession of faith—yet what he asks is later echoed by Paul in **1 Tim. 2:1-6**, yet with Paul showing the need for the Mediator-Jesus Christ.
(e) Beware of hindering these Jews in their work! **v. 11**
(f) May this God show Himself mighty against any opponents **v. 12**
(g) Make haste, finish the temple, and get to praying!
http://archive.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/ezra_05.01-06.12.php

Steven Cole: **Overcoming Discouragement**
In **Ezra 4:4**, we read, "*Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building*." The work on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem stopped for about 16 years. According to **Haggai 1:4-9**, the people's focus shifted to building their own houses, and they neglected building God's house. If the subject came up, they responded, "We tried that. It didn't work!"

How could this dismal situation be reversed? How could the Lord's people put their discouragement behind them so that they could finish the task of rebuilding the temple? To turn things around, the Lord raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who spoke to the people in the name of the God of Israel (**Ezra 5:1**). Under the renewed leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the people began to rebuild and in spite of further opposition, the work was finished in a little over four years. So our chapter gives us some clues on how to overcome discouragement in our work for the Lord:

To overcome discouragement, we need a fresh encounter with God's Word, we need to get back to work for Him and to persevere, trusting Him to accomplish His will through us.

1. To overcome discouragement, we need a fresh encounter with God's Word.

Derek Kidner writes, "Like every spiritual advance, from Abraham's to the missionary expansion in Acts, this venture began with a word from the Lord. And in common with the rest, it was quickly tested and threatened" (*Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* [IVP], p. 53). The Old Testament prophets did not so much expound on God's already-written word; rather, they received new revelation directly from God for His people. When these prophets spoke, the Jewish people realized that God was speaking through them.

We no longer have prophets to give direct revelation from God. But in this case, we have the heart of the prophets' messages preserved for us in the Old Testament canon. When we are discouraged, the thing that will most refresh us is to hear God speaking to us in our particular circumstances through His Word. Although some will testify that the "open the Bible at random" method has worked, I would not recommend it. I

recommend reading the Word consecutively or systematically. I have often found that the passage of that day has particular relevance to the very circumstances I am going through at the time. . .

A. GOD'S WORD CONFRONTS OUR SIN.

That is the main thrust of Haggai. He directly confronted the people with their sin of building their own houses while neglecting God's house. God used him to stir up Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the people so that "*they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God*" (**Hag. 1:14**).

You may be thinking, "When I'm discouraged, why would I want to be confronted with my sin? That doesn't sound very encouraging!" It may not be pleasant at the moment, but it's the medicine we all need. Sin destroys us and damages those who are close to us. To neglect the Bible because it confronts our sin is like avoiding the doctor when we know that we have cancer. It may not be pleasant to go through the treatment, but without it we will die. Scripture is profitable for reproof and correction (**2 Tim. 3:16**).

B. GOD'S WORD CONFIRMS HIS GRACE IF WE WILL REPENT.

While Haggai confronted the people's sin, Zechariah gave them hope that God would remember them and keep His covenant promises to send the Messiah. Zechariah's name means "*whom the Lord remembers*." His father was Berechiah, which means "*the Lord blesses*." His grandfather (mentioned in **Ezra 5:1**) was Iddo, which means "*at the appointed time*." Those three names sum up the message of Zechariah: "*Whom the Lord remembers, He blesses at the appointed time*."

Although Zechariah was the prophet of hope and encouragement, he began his message by talking about God's fierce wrath because of His people's sin (**Zech. 1:2**). But immediately he follows it with the Lord's gracious invitation, "'*Return to Me,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'that I may return to you,' says the Lord of hosts*" (**Zech. 1:3**). If we will repent, God will be gracious to us.

This is illustrated in our text: **Ezra 5:1** is a *new*, new beginning. The first new beginning was in **chapter 3**, when the returned exiles gathered in Jerusalem, set up the altar, celebrated the Feast of Booths, and laid the foundation of the temple. Then the opposition discouraged and frightened them, resulting in 16 years of doing nothing about the temple. But now, we have a second new beginning. Thank God that He allows for *new*, new beginnings, and *new, new,* new beginnings!

C. GOD'S WORD REORIENTS OUR PRIORITIES UNDER HIS LORDSHIP.

These two prophets spoke "*in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them*" (**5:1**). "*Them*" is grammatically ambiguous. It could and certainly does refer to the prophets, who were under God's lordship. But it also refers to the people who were God's chosen nation. Haggai exhorted them to get their priorities in order by putting God's house first. Wherever we turn in God's Word, it confronts our skewed priorities. We're all prone to let the things of this world crowd the things of God out of first place in our

lives. The Word keeps calling us back to the basic priority: "*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*" (**Matt. 6:33**).

D. GOD'S WORD SHOWS US HOW TO LIVE IN A MANNER PLEASING TO HIM.

Without the word from these two prophets, most of the Jews back in the land probably thought that they were doing okay. They may have congratulated themselves for giving up their comfortable lives in Babylon and making the long and dangerous journey across the desert. Perhaps they thought, "Sure, we don't have a temple yet, but these things take time. The Jews back in Babylon don't have a temple, either. We're better off than they are. At least we came back to the land!" But then the prophets spoke and the people realized that to please God, they needed to commit themselves to rebuild His temple. . .

2. To overcome discouragement, we need to get back to work for the Lord.

Discouragement had led the people to abandon work on the temple for 16 years. These prophets called them back to work. There is something encouraging about serving the Lord, especially if you've been on the sidelines for a while. There is the encouragement that He can even use me, in spite of my previous failures. Whether it's physical labor or being used spiritually in someone's life, there is joy in knowing that you are laboring for God's eternal kingdom, and that someday you will hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

One cause of discouragement is that we become self-focused. Often that self-focus generates self-pity and self-justification for why we quit serving the Lord. With Elijah, we begin to say, "*I have been very zealous for the Lord*," but everyone else has "*forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets …. I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away*" (**1 Kings 19:10**). That kind of self-focus prevents us from seeing the needs of others and ministering to those needs. . .

3. To overcome discouragement, we must persevere in the face of opposition.

As we saw last week, the enemy will not be idle when we make a new beginning with the Lord. No sooner had the people begun to build than Tattenai, the governor over Israel, and his sidekick and their colleagues came and challenged them (**5:3**). In their defense, they were only doing their job. They reported to King Darius, who began his reign with a number of challenges to his rule. These men were making sure that the Jews were not plotting rebellion against the king. But even so, the enemy was using them to threaten the people to abandon the work again.

But in this case, they did not demand that the work stop until a word came from the king. Rather, they permitted the people to continue building until such a word came back, which would have taken four or five months. The reason given is, "*The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews*" (**5:5**). Joseph Parker observes, "The eye of the enemy and the eye of God are continually upon us in all the work of life" (*Preaching*

Through the Bible [Baker reprint], 10:174). Knowing that the eye of God is upon us, we can persevere even when the enemy is watching and trying to get us to quit.

Tattenai sent a letter to Darius, which our text quotes. It reveals several interesting things. For one, it is surprisingly accurate. Unlike the letter of **4:11-16**, which distorted the truth to make the Jews look worse than they were, this letter just states the facts, asking for verification. I don't know whether the governor assumed that the Jews' story was so far from the truth that the king would easily disprove it, or whether he was a man of integrity who was just doing his job. But he states the Jews' claims accurately and asks the king to confirm or deny those claims.

Also, the letter shows that the Jews gave a strong testimony to Tattenai and his colleagues of God and His ways. They let them know that they were servants of the God of heaven and earth (**5:11**). They give a brief history of Israel, that formerly they had worshiped at a temple which a great king of Israel [Solomon] had built. But because of their sin, God had given the nation into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the temple and deported the people to Babylon. But King Cyrus had issued a decree to the Jews to return and rebuild the temple. He had even restored the gold and silver utensils and entrusted them to Sheshbazzar (who was either a co-leader with Zerubbabel or another name for Zerubbabel). Perhaps the Jews even showed these utensils to Tattenai as proof. But the point is, the Jews had given Tattenai and his colleagues a strong witness about God and His covenant faithfulness to His people.

There is an application for us in overcoming discouragement. One way to persevere in the face of opposition is to give a strong witness of our faith in Jesus Christ. That commits us so that we know others will be watching us. If we will be bold for the Lord, we can know that His eye is upon us in whatever response our enemies come back with. Thus the first thing we need to overcome discouragement is a fresh encounter with God's Word. If our discouragement has caused us to quit, we need to get back to work for Him. And, we need to persevere when opposition hits, as it will, knowing that His eye is upon us. Finally,

4. To overcome discouragement, we need to trust the sovereign God to accomplish His will through us.

Behind these events of the renewal of God's people, God was sovereignly at work. Mervin Breneman writes, "Ezra-Nehemiah constantly reiterates God's providence in the life of his people. The reestablishment of the covenant community was the result of a continuing series of God's providential acts" (*The New American Commentary* [Broadman], pp. 108-109). The fact that this governor allowed the work on the temple to continue while inquiry was sent to Darius was due to God's eye on His people. Breneman continues, "In order to fulfill his purpose, God used and coordinated the preaching of the prophets, the work of the leaders, the determination of the whole community, and the decisions of 'pagan' government officials" (*ibid.,* p. 109).

It's also obvious that the Jews saw God's sovereign dealings with them in history, and this knowledge enabled them to put the current opposition in proper perspective. As Joseph Parker observes, "They went back to the beginning with certainty, and traced the whole providential line most distinctly and vividly, thus always keeping memory and imagination abreast with the facts on which they relied as proofs of the divine election and rule" (p. 175).

Along the same lines, Breneman applies the Jews' history to us by saying, "The Christian faith is tied to the fact that God made promises and fulfilled them in history, exemplified by Jesus, who actually came, died, and rose again. Although God is sovereign, decisions we make *do* affect history" (p. 111). As Paul exhorted, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (**Phil. 2:12-13**). We can know that as we work for the Lord, we are working in harmony with the sovereign God who is working out His purposes in history through His people.

Conclusion

As we'll see next week, the temple was completed on March 12, 515 B.C., a little over 70 years after its destruction. There was great joy as the returned exiles gathered there to celebrate the Passover. We read the source of that joy (**6:22**): "*for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel*." When our discouragement is turned to encouragement, it is because of God. He gets all the glory.

To modernize a familiar legend, the devil had a garage sale. He marked all his tools with their appropriate price: hatred, envy, lust, deceit, lying, and pride. Laid apart from all of these was a rather harmless looking but well-worn tool marked much higher than the rest. A buyer pointed to it and asked, "What is that tool?" The devil replied, "That is **discouragement**."

"Why is it priced so high?" the man asked.

"Because it is more useful to me than the others. I can pry open a man's heart with that when I can't get near to him with the other tools. Once inside, I can make him do whatever I choose. It's badly worn because I use it on almost everyone. But few know that it belongs to me."

The devil's price was so high that the tool of discouragement was never sold. He still uses it on God's people. By God's grace, through His Word, we can overcome discouragement. "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord*" (**1 Cor. 15:58**).

TEXT: Ezra 6:1-22

TITLE: PERSIAN SUPPORT FOR TEMPLE COMPLETION

BIG IDEA:
GOD FINISHES WHAT HE STARTS –
GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CONTROL OF HISTORY DEMONSTRATED IN PERSIAN SUPPORT FOR THE COMPLETION AND DEDICATION OF THE JEWISH TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM AS WORSHIP IS RENEWED

INTRODUCTION:
This first half of the book of Ezra concludes with the successful rebuilding and dedication of the new temple in Jerusalem. The project faced serious obstacles and potential roadblocks, but in the end the Providence of God made possible the renewal of temple sacrifices under the leadership of the appointed priests and Levites. The level of support from the pagan kings of Cyrus and Darius is nothing short of remarkable. After 70 years of exile and frustration, the Jewish people can now joyfully celebrate their key annual feasts and reestablish their testimony of God's glory to a watching world. But such worship can only be sustained as they continue to separate themselves from the surrounding pagan culture, maintain personal and corporate purity, and follow the divine directives of the Word of God.

Loken: These verses are the climax of the first half of the book. The nation is now resettled in the land, and proper worship of Yahweh has been restored. The hero of the story is God. The narrative of the first half of the book begins when the Lord "*stirred up the spirit*" of the Persian king (**1:1**) to allow the Jews to return to the land of Israel and ends when the Lord "*turned the heart*" of the Persian king (**6:22**) to encourage the Jews to finish the temple. The fact that God influences the hearts of human monarchs is a common theme throughout Scripture. . . The Lord moves the hearts of men, even the most powerful men on earth. As Nebuchadnezzar observes, "*All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He [God] does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?*' " (**Dan 4:35**).

Andrew Swango: I'm curious if God's purpose behind this story of Tattenai is for the sake of king Darius. We learn that Darius will conduct the search. Perhaps God caused all this to happen so that God's goodness and His fulfillment of prophecies will come to Darius' attention. God is always working on nations, being Lord over all nations. This may be God giving Darius his opportunity to learn about the Jews and learn that the God of heaven is the true and real "great God." Or, this was so that the Jews could receive more wealth, this time from Darius (see **Ezra 6:8-9**).

Wiersbe: Once again, Jewish worship would take place in the Holy City in a restored temple dedicated to the Lord. No wonder the People were rejoicing! And it was all because of the faithfulness of God. He had "*turned the heart of the king*" to assist the people, and new the work was completed (**Prov. 21:1**).

I. (:1-5) REVISITING THE DECREE OF CYRUS WITH ITS EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONS

A. (:1-2) Locating the Original Decree of Cyrus

1. (:1) Command to Search for Cyrus' Decree

"*Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.*"

2. (:2) Copy Found of Cyrus' Decree

"*And in Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows:*"

Whitcomb: Possibly all the ancient scrolls were stored in the library at Ecbatana because the air was not so hot and humid there as it was in Babylon.

Loken: This passage contains an account of the actions of Darius following the receipt of the letter of Tattenai recorded in **5:6–17**. The Persian king searched his archives and found a copy of the original decree of Cyrus at Ecbatana. As a result, he replied to Tattenai and instructed him to allow the work on the temple to continue. He also issued his own decree providing support for the project and a request that prayers be made on his behalf. The text unit ends with a threat against those who fail to honor the king's edict. . .

Fortunately, the search continued. As it turns out, a scroll containing the original decree of Cyrus was found at the fortress of Ecbatana, the summer capital of the Persian kings during the reign of Cyrus. Ecbatana was situated in a mountainous region with a temperate climate. Xenophon informs us that Cyrus lived in Babylon during the winter, in Susa during the spring, and in Ecbatana during the summer (Anabasis 3.5.15; cf. Cyropaedia 8.6.22). Ecbatana (modern Hamadan; Ecbatana is the Greek form of the Persian Hagmatana) was located in the province of Media and was the capital of the Medes until they fell under the control of Cyrus in 550 b.c. Cyrus had stayed in Ecbatana in the summer of his first year as king of Babylon, the same year he originally made the decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

B. (:3-5) Listing the Provisions of the Original Decree

1. (:3a) Contents Contained in a Memorandum

"*Memorandum -- In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree:*"

MacArthur: A particular kind of document called a memorandum (**Ezr 4:15; Mal 3:16**). Administrative officials often kept these documents of administrative decisions made, or issues remaining to be settled, to retain the details of administrative action for future reference.

2. (:3b-4a) Construction Details Impressive

'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits; 4 with three layers of huge stones, and one layer of timbers."'

Loken: The decree of this passage provides a few additional details concerning the actual building of the temple.

- First, the original foundations were to be retained. It is likely that the foundations of Solomon's temple remained relatively intact and thus were to be used for the rebuilt temple. It is possible that the reference here is to the entire temple platform as opposed to the foundations of the actual building.
- Second, the decree provided the exact dimensions of the new temple, i.e., sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide. A normal cubit was about 17.5 inches. A "royal" or "great" cubit was 20.4 inches. These dimensions called for the rebuilt temple to be twice as high and three times as wide as Solomon's temple (cf. **1 Kgs 6:2**). This would make the new temple six times larger that Solomon's! Perhaps Cyrus wanted the glory of this temple to surpass that of Solomon's. Evidently, the Jews did not take advantage of this opportunity (cf. **3:12–13; Hag 2:3**).
- Third, the decree authorized the use of three layers of "*huge stones*." The sheer size of these stones likely concerned Tattenai when he first inspected the building project since he specifically mentioned the "huge stones" being used in the construction (**5:8**).
- Fourth, the edict called for a new layer of timber. It is unlikely that new (unseasoned) timber is the intended idea. The reference here is probably to a new course of paneling on the wall (cf. Fensham, 88).
- Fifth, the decree allowed for the expenses incurred in the construction to be taken from the royal treasury. This note provides an additional reason why the dimensions are recorded in the decree. In other words, the funds provided for the project are limited to those needed to create a building of the specified size. The offer to cover the expenses of this project fits well with what is known of Cyrus' policies regarding foreign religions.
- Sixth, the decree called for the return of the gold and silver temple utensils that had been taken by King Nebuchadnezzar. While the fulfillment of this portion of the decree was recorded in **1:7–11**, it was not recorded in the decree itself (cf. **1:2–4**).

3. (:4b) Cost Funded from Royal Treasury

"*And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.*"

4. (:5) Captured Gold and Silver Utensils Ordered Returned to New Temple

"*And also let the gold and silver utensils of the temple of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.*"

II. (:6-12) REINFORCING PERSIAN SUPPORT FOR THE JEWISH TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION VIA A NEW DECREE OF DARIUS

A. (:6-7) Protecting the Project from Governmental Interference

1. (:6a) Addressing the Governmental Officials

"*Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River,*"

2. (:6b-7a) Advocating for Independence – No Interference

"*keep away from there.*
Leave this work on the house of God alone;"

3. (:7b) Approving of:

- Jewish leadership of the project
- Design of the project = temple construction
- Site of the project

"*let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.*"

B. (:8-10) Providing Resources for the Project

1. (:8a) Royal Authorization of Support for the Project

"*Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God:*"

2. (:8b) Royal Treasury Support from Tax Revenues

"*the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.*"

3. (:9a-10) Recurring Provisions to Support Ongoing Sacrifices

a. Blank Check to Support Sacrificial System

"*And whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,*"

b. Basis for the Support

1) Religious Integrity

"*that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven*"

2) Royal Intercession

"*and pray for the life of the king and his sons.*"

Loken: Darius added a decree of his own to that of Cyrus. It is at once obvious that Darius has the help of a Jewish religious authority as he writes this edict. The decree of Darius called for five things. First, Darius ordered the funds for the temple to be drawn from the royal treasury and paid to the Jews. The treasury alluded to here was that of the province of Trans-Euphrates. This treasury was probably located in Babylon.

Second, Darius provided for the sacrificial system of the Jews to be restored. This system involved the offering of livestock on an altar, including bulls, rams, and lambs. These animals were the most valuable and important sacrifices in the cultic worship of the Jews (cf. **Num 7:87–88; 1 Chr 29:21**). The decree also provided for a supply of wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil. The reason these specific items are identified is so that the Jews could offer נִיחוֹחַ "*acceptable*" sacrifices to the Lord. This term is certainly of Jewish origin; it corresponds to the "soothing" aroma offerings (cf. **Lev 1:9, 13, 17**, etc.). The Persians placed a high degree of importance in following exact procedures so as not to offend specific gods.

Third, Darius instructed the remnant to pray for him and his family. Once again, this is in keeping with Persian policy. The Cyrus Cylinder records a similar decree by Cyrus: "May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries address a daily prayer in my favor before Bel and Nabu, that my days may be long." According to Herodotus, it was customary among the Persians to utter a prayer for the king whenever a sacrifice was offered (Hist. 1.132). The practice of praying for the king is also attested in the Elephantine papyri.

Fourth, Darius revealed the punishment that was to be given to anyone who violated his decree. This punishment takes the form of poetic justice. If anyone harmed the house of God, then his own house would be destroyed. The lawbreaker would also receive retribution. The form of this retribution is debated. The Aramaic literally reads "and lifted up he shall be smitten upon it." This phrase could be a reference to flogging (cf. neb, reb; Williamson, 83). Taken this way, the punishment would involve tying the criminal to a beam and beating him. This beating would not necessarily result in the loss of the criminal's life. The phrase could also refer to impalement (e.g., nasb, niv, nkjv, nrsv). In impalement, one end of a beam was sharpened and inserted through an individual's chest from the bottom to the top. The other end was then planted in the ground. The person was subsequently left to hang until he died. Darius, in the so-called Behistun Inscription, claims to have impaled an enemy after cutting off his nose, ears, and tongue. Fensham (91) notes that there is a relief of Sennacherib's attack on Lachish in the British Museum that shows how certain Israelites were impaled. Because of the reference to the ultimate destruction of the offender's house, this latter option seems best. In other words, the offender was to be impaled on a timber from his own house. Obviously, this judgment would take the life of the lawbreaker. After his death, the offender's house was to be made into a "refuse heap" (lit. "dunghill;" cf. **2 Kgs 10:27**). If the guilty party was still alive at this point, one would expect him to attempt to rebuild his house. The type of penalty clause included here was common in Ancient Near Eastern laws and treaties.

Fifth, Darius called on the Lord to invoke divine judgment on all who attempt to destroy the rebuilt temple. This invocation is in the style of an Ancient Near Eastern

curse formula. Fensham (91) elaborates, "The curse formula was used throughout Ancient Near Eastern history to protect what was regarded as precious, e.g., the sarcophagus of a king. It was also used to protect a treaty. The overturning of a king meant the overturning of his throne, as we know from the curse formula. In the Bagistan Inscription Darius invoked the hostility of Ahuramazda [his favorite god] against anyone who would destroy the inscription."

The final line of the decree contains a sort of signature by the king: "*I, Darius, have issued this decree.*" Also included is a command that the king's orders be carried out אָסְפִּרְנָא "*diligently*." This word is used in the sense of "completely" or "thoroughly" as opposed to "quickly," though this idea is certainly implied.

C. (:11-12a) Proclaiming a Curse on Obstructors of the Project

1. (:11) Curse Backed by Royal Judgment

> "*And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.*"

Derek Kidner: The common ground between such punishments was the public spectacle they afforded for disgrace and warning. It is a relief to know that Israelite law put two crucial restraints on such a practice: the victim was executed before this, not by means of it (**Deut. 21:22**; note the sequence), and the display of his corpse must not be prolonged (**Deut. 21:23**).

Whitcomb: Keil cites Herodotus (III. 159) as saying that Darius impaled 3,000 Babylonians after conquering their city. Therefore this was no idle threat!

2. (:12) Curse Backed by Divine Judgment

> "*And may the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem.*"

Breneman: This verse contains an additional curse. The phrase "*caused his Name to dwell there*" reflects an understanding of biblical theology (cf. **Deut 12:5**), a strong indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this decree. Darius was in fact speaking almost prophetically. As Daniel prophesied, God would do this very thing, destroying the king and kingdom that would oppose him and his people and then would establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness (**Dan 7:23–27**).

D. (:12b) Promoting the Importance of the Decree

> "*I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!*"

- Important because of who issued it
- Important because of the nature of a royal decree
- Important because of the urgency of comprehensively carrying out the commands

III. (:13-18) RECORDING THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION AND CELEBRATORY DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE

(:13) Prologue – Carrying Out the Decree of King Darius

"*Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River,*
Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues
carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent."

A. (:14-15) Successful Completion of the Temple

1. (:14a) Successful Completion in Accordance with Prophetic Encouragement

"*And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.*"

Fensham: The command of Darius is carried out to the letter by the Persian officials. In one of his inscriptions Darius exhorted his followers to believe what he had written and not to disobey his laws.1 As we may expect, after the order of Darius the work on the temple was tackled with eagerness. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were still there to inspire the workers with their prophecies. We know that the prophecies of Haggai written in the biblical book of Haggai were delivered not later than the beginning of 519 b.c. Those of Zechariah could not have been pronounced later than 518 b.c. For some scholars this is a problem.2 How could they have inspired the completion of the temple, if their prophecies had stopped three or four years earlier? It is probable, however, that they pronounced prophecies which were not taken up in the canonical books of the Bible. We must accept that not every pronouncement of a prophet has been transmitted to us.

2. (:14b) Successful Completion in Accordance with Divine and Royal Decrees

"*And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.*"

Fensham: It is of importance that in **v. 14** only the Jewish leaders are mentioned and Zerubbabel is not. This might point to the fact that he died during the building activities. In **v. 14b** we have a piece of pure Jewish theology. According to this verse, the work was finished by the order or command of God and the Persian kings. God commanded it through his prophets and the Persian kings were instruments of God in commanding the completion of the work. This verse thus shows that God works through history and historical processes. It is therefore of importance to note that the name of God had been given priority in the list of names.

Derek Kidner: We paused at **5:1, 2** to notice the seminal role of the two prophets, whose words brought a dead situation to life and two quiescent leaders into faith and action. Now the scene gains depth and momentum as we are shown the elders, the lesser leaders, taking up the work and pressing on to finish it, while in the background are the successive kings with their decrees, and at the apex the command (or decree63) of the God of Israel. It is a model of the way God works and of the means he uses.

Whitcomb: Ezra is careful to add the name of his own king, Artaxerxes, because he helped in the maintenance of the Temple (**7:15, 16, 21**).

3. (:15) Successful Completion in Accordance with Historical Timetable

"*And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.*"

Rata: The sovereignty and providence of God are clearly displayed as His plan is fulfilled with the help of pagan, syncretistic people. Man's efforts are successful because of God's divine intervention and communication of His message through His prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The absence of any mention of Zerubbabel leads some to believe that he died before the completion of the temple. Even though Artaxerxes reigned much later (465–424/3 bc), he is mentioned to reinforce the argument that the reconstruction was accomplished due to divine providence which goes beyond one king's reign. Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes each played a role in the rebuilding of the temple and of Jerusalem. Cyrus gave the edict which began the reconstruction, the temple was completed during Darius' reign, and the city walls were completed during the reign of Artaxerxes.

Loken: At this point, the importance of the temple must be discussed. The Jews were quite unique in the Ancient Near East because they were monotheistic. All of the nations surrounding Judah were polytheistic. Since the Jews worshipped a single God, namely, Yahweh, and believed that He was intimately involved in their daily personal and national existence, they viewed their successes and failures, both personally and nationally, as a direct consequence of their faithfulness or disobedience to their God. As a result, the place where they worshipped Yahweh, the temple, became the most significant symbol of the restored community.

Along with its importance as a religious institution, the temple played an important role in the political, economic, and social spheres of Jewish culture. Blenkinsopp asserts that "the decisive political event in the establishment of a viable Jewish community in the homeland was the rebuilding of the temple and organization of its cult[]." The cost of maintaining the temple was obtained by means of the tithes of the people as well as an annual levy of one-third of a shekel (**Neh 10:32**). The sacrificial system itself took a considerable toll of livestock, grain, and other commodities, including wood (Blenkinsopp, 68). This system would soon become an overwhelming burden for the population, with the result that many either stopped offering sacrifices or offered sacrifices of low quality (cf. **Neh 13:10–11; Mal 1:8, 13; 3:8–10**).

The social rifts present in the Jewish community were exacerbated with the rebuilding of the temple. Those who controlled the temple in Jerusalem exercised political control over the entire Trans-Euphrates region. The successful rebuilding of the walls of the city would serve to further intensify the rift between the Jewish community and the foreigners, including Samaritans, living in the region.

Wiersbe: On the twelfth day of the last month of 515, the temple was completed, about seventy years from the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 586, and about five and a half years after Haggai and Zechariah called the people back to work (**5:1**). God had been faithful to care for His people. He provided encouragement through the preaching of the prophets and even used the authority and wealth of a pagan king to further the work.

B. (:16-17) Celebratory Dedication of the Temple

1. (:16) Outpouring of Abundant Joy

> "*And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.*"

Fensham: We have reached the point in the description where the final consummation of the expectations of the exiles was experienced. Handicapped by the hostility of the Samaritans, they waited for a long time to reach this ideal, namely, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstitution of temple worship. Twenty-one years after the laying of the foundations, the temple was completed. Since the temple of Solomon had been destroyed in 586 b.c., the Jewish religious community could not have functioned satisfactorily, because during the almost four hundred years of its existence, the temple of Solomon had such a firm hold on the cultic and liturgical practices that religion without it seemed unthinkable. Now all these religious practices could be exercised again. No wonder that the dedication of the temple was received with joy.

Loken: The Jews celebrate the completion of the temple by having a ceremony of "*dedication*." The word used here is חֲנֻכָּה *hanukkah*. This word will eventually lend its name to an annual festival commemorating the reconsecration of the temple after its defamation at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes (25 Chislev 167 b.c.). The celebration was held "*with joy*," a theme repeated at the end of this text unit when the remnant celebrates the Feast of Unleavened Bread "*with joy*, for Yahweh had caused them to rejoice" (**6:22**). In this verse, the sons of Israel are once again divided into three categories: the priests, the Levites, and the laity (cf. **1:5; 2:70; 3:8**). This ceremony of dedication continues the theme of celebrations in the books of Ezra (**3:4–13; 8:35**) and Nehemiah (**8; 9; 12:27–47**).

2. (:17) Offering of Initial Animal Sacrifices

> "*And they offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel.*"

Andrew Swango: Compare the amount of animals sacrificed to what Solomon sacrificed for the first temple (**1King 8:63, 2Chr 7:5**). Solomon sacrificed about 73 times the amount of cattle and 300 times the amount of sheep. How far have the Jews come from being the wealthiest nation around to being a distant province in the Persian Empire. Sometimes, even after repenting, the consequences of past actions can still linger.

C. (:18) Appointment of Priests and Levites for Temple Service

"*Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.*"

Derek Kidner: The book of Moses laid down the basic duties of priests and Levites, and the distinctions between them (cf. e.g. **Num. 18**); but the divisions and courses were the work of David.

Andrew Swango: The Jews do not want to make the same mistake they did before. This time, they are going back to the books of Moses for their guide on everything they do with the temple. Many, many things have changed for the Jews over the course of their history, but their Scriptures remain the same. The words of God have been and should still be their standard in all things.

IV. (:19-22) RENEWING KEY RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

A. (:19-21) Renewing Observance of Passover -- Purity

1. (:19) Proper Day of Observance

"*And the exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.*"

Rata: It is only fitting that they celebrate the Passover since that celebration reminds them of their greatest deliverance, the one from under the Egyptian yoke. Moses instructed the people who would enter the Promised Land to keep the Passover (**Num. 9:4**). After entering the Promised Land, the Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, celebrated the Passover at Gilgal (**Josh. 5:10**). During the monarchy period, the Passover seems to have been neglected, because the people celebrated it after Josiah's reform around the year 627 bc (**2 Kings 23:21**). The community of the Jews who returned from the exile keeps the Passover, as God commanded through Moses, on the fourteenth day of the first month, the month of Nissan (**Lev. 23:5**). The Israelites' commitment to obeying the Law of Moses is evident in their inviting non-Jews to their celebration and worship. These outsiders followed the purification rites as instructed in the Law (**Num. 9:14**). Some rabbis affirm that these "*are proselytes, who were separated from the defilement of the nations to cleave to Israel*." The Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated in conjunction with the Passover (**Exod. 12:15–17**) as in the time of Moses and Hezekiah (**2 Chron. 30:21**).

2. (:20a) Purity in Observance

"*For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure.*"

3. (:20b) Passover Lamb Slain

"*Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.*"

4. (:21) Passover Lamb Eaten

"*And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.*"

Breneman: This decision involved two basic determinations, one negative and the other positive—similar to those a Christian must make today. First, they "*separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors.*" In order to follow Christ, we must reject an immoral lifestyle. The biblical faith is an ethical faith. God is holy and demands that his children be holy. The other decision is a positive one: "*To seek the Lord.*" This means turning to him, seeking communion with him, seeking to do his will. Time after time the prophets condemned the people and announced God's judgment because the people did not seek the Lord (**Isa 9:13; 31:1; Hos 7:10; Zeph 1:6; Jer 10:21**).

MacArthur: These were proselytes to Judaism, who had confessed their spiritual uncleanness before the Lord, been circumcised, and renounced idolatry to keep the Passover (**v. 22**).

B. (:22) Renewing Observance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread -- Joy

"*And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.*"

Whitcomb: Since the Persians now ruled the former Assyrian territories, it could be said that Darius was king of Assyria, even as Cyrus was king of Babylon.

Gary Smith: The joy of the people was full and exuberant, not only because of what they had finally done, but also because of what they could now do. Once they cleansed the site and dedicated the priests to their appropriate duties, the regular operation of the Temple could begin again. As long as the priestly leaders and the worshiping Israelites followed the instructions "*prescribed in the Book of Moses*" (**6:18**), God's name would be glorified through their worship. The great dangers for every past or present place of worship are that the leaders may not be fully dedicated to the spiritual work God has given them, the worship may not follow the instructions in the word of God, and the people may have no joy or awe as they enter the Lord's presence.

John Martin: Since the temple worship was restored, it was important for people who wanted to be in fellowship with God and live according to the covenantal obligations to be in the place where the sacrificial system was being practiced.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How did the sovereign Providence of God use the investigation by government officials (on the surface, a threat to the ongoing temple construction) to actually push the project forward rather than impede its progress?

2) Why were both of the Persian Kings (Cyrus and Darius) so amenable to supporting this Jewish religious project?

3) What is the significance of celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread on this occasion of temple dedication?

4) How do we maintain the purity and joy of our worship?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Breneman: In summary, these two Persian decrees by Cyrus and Darius indicate what the Persians were told about some aspects of the theology of the Jewish people. They knew that the Hebrew God was a high "*God of heaven*," had a Temple that he chose to place in Jerusalem, and received daily sacrifices to bring honor to his name. They believed this God should have his Temple restored, the proper Temple utensils returned, and acceptable sacrifices reinstated. They also wanted prayers offered on their behalf so that they would receive the favor of this God. They called on the Hebrew God to curse anyone who might fail to follow the king's decree or interfere with the Jewish work to rebuild the Temple. Although these words might sound astonishingly orthodox, as if the king were a true believer in the God of Israel, they probably reflect common Persian political policies toward other religious groups rather than some special affinity toward Israel's God. Nevertheless, the wording of these statements testifies to the fact that faithful Jews had communicated the tenets of their faith to high government officials in a way that gained the respect of the Persians. Jewish people (like Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah) were bold enough to tell the Persian rulers about the God of heaven whom they worshiped in Jerusalem. This followed the example of Joseph and Moses, whose witness about God to the Egyptian pharaohs (**Gen 41; 47; Exod 7–11**) had a role in the salvation of Israel from famine and slavery. This kind of open testimony played an important part in preparing the pagan rulers to follow God's sovereign plan. In a similar manner, the information we share about God may play an important role in the lives of people in minor as well as major positions of authority.

The Scripture thus reminds us that the decisions of Cyrus and Darius were not just wise political judgments, but acts directed by the sovereign power of God (**1:1–3; 5:5; 6:22**). These decisions of Cyrus and Darius were not made in a vacuum; they came about because key people faithfully sowed the seed and God miraculously produced good fruit. In light of the questions raised by Tattenai, the Persian approval was not a dream come true right out of the blue. As Haggai said, God would soon shake the political

world and bring all the gold the people needed to finish the Temple (Hag 2:6–8). God was faithful and fulfilled his promise at this time in order to bring greater glory to this Temple and to his name (**6:12; Hag 2:9**).

Steven Cole: **God, the Cause of Our Joy**
How high is the pursuit of joy on your priority list? Do you view it as something that is not only nice to pursue, but absolutely necessary? Many Christians view the Christian life primarily in terms of duty and obedience, and those are not minor themes in the Bible. But how many Christians view the pursuit of joy, gladness, and delight in God as a prime duty?

All too often, we view God as a stern, cosmic killjoy, who doesn't want anyone to get too carried away with having a good time in life. The Puritans are often falsely caricaturized as being against joy and pleasure. Someone lampooned a Puritan as a person who suffers from an overwhelming dread that somewhere, sometime, somehow, someone may be enjoying himself. That's a false view. It was the Puritans who said, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and *enjoy* Him forever."

John Piper has helpfully modified that classic sentence: "The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever" (*Desiring God* [Multnomah Books], 10th Anniversary Edition, p. 15). He also rightly says, *"God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him"* (*ibid.*, p. 9, italics his). Thus if glorifying God is our highest aim, then finding joy and satisfaction in God must be our deliberate, lifelong, consuming pursuit. To the degree that we fall short of fullness of joy in God, we fail to glorify Him as He deserves. . .

In **chapter 6**, Darius makes a search and eventually finds the decree of Cyrus in the government archives. He respects that decree and sends back a ruling that not only should the work go on, but also it ought to be supported by government funds. Thus the temple was completed on March 12, 515 B.C. The Lord's people gathered to celebrate the dedication of this temple with joy (**6:16**). This was followed by a celebration of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread "*with joy*." Ezra explains the source of that joy: "*for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel*" (**6:22**). We learn:

God's aim is to give us great joy in Him and His sovereign ways.

1. God wants us to know the joy of His providential care for us.

2. God wants us to know the joy of His provision for us.

3. God wants us to know the joy of productivity in our service for Him.

4. God wants us to know the joy of praising Him corporately.

5. God wants us to know the joy of purity and obedience to Him.

For there to be true joy in our worship, there must be holiness in our lives. We must separate ourselves from the impurity of the nations. It is hypocrisy that the Lord hates if we live "like the nations" all week and then put on a pious front to worship Him on Sundays. Contrary to popular opinion, purity of life and obedience to God do not rob us of joy. Purity and obedience are at the heart of true joy. Sin gives brief pleasure but lasting scars and pain. Obedience may be difficult at the moment, but it yields "*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*" (**Heb. 12:11**).

Phil Newton: **Celebration! (6:13-22)**

I. Two decrees (vv. 13-15)

II. A time to celebrate (vv. 16-18)

Is this too casual of a word? Not at all when we consider the grandeur of what our God has done and the overwhelming expressions of praise that burst from the heart!

1. Goodness of celebration

This is so important for believers. The church should be a place of celebration. That does not mean that we ought to manufacture a certain type of feeling or atmosphere. That kind of faulty mood manipulating approach is worldly through and through. Celebration in the truest sense can only happen when we revel in the glory of our God through Christ. What are we doing in celebrating?

1. Recognize the hand and provision of God.

2. Acknowledge grace upon grace in the Lord's working in our midst.

3. Find satisfaction in knowing that we've accomplished what God has given us to do (in this case, rebuilding the temple; in our case, perhaps service, missions, evangelism, or even seeing incremental victory over besetting sins). Do we pause to consider how the Lord has worked in our lives this week? Do we think about what He has done, how He has intervened, and how He has provided? Do we think about the strength He has given for the tasks of daily life?

4. Contemplate with joy the value of God's work through God's provision. When God grants the power to do something then He is pleased. Wow! How small we are and yet our great God is pleased to use us for some seemingly menial task! Yet all of the small tasks are part of the bigger picture of what He is doing in history to bring about the great day of final redemption. Notice how Paul expresses something of this same amazement in 1 Corinthians 3:6-9 and 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20, 6:1.

2. Corporate celebration v. 16

1. "*Sons of Israel*" is an inclusive term showing that this victory was ultimately for all Israel.

2. There were no "big shots" in the picture: there's level ground in corporate celebration; e.g., think of David wearing the linen ephod in the throng celebrating the return of the ark to Jerusalem and the center of Israel's life.

3. Corporate celebration cements the corporate way that God works in the church: we have common standing in God's uncommon grace shown to us in Christ.

3. Substance of celebration v. 17

1. Thanks leading to feasting.

2. Atonement leading to forgiveness.

3. They had not forgotten the rest of Israel.

4. This celebration was small compared to Solomon's extravagance (22,000 cattle, 100 bullocks, 120,000 sheep and goats), but theirs was substantial for their smaller number of worshipers.

4. Authority in celebration v. 18

- They returned to Scripture, "*in the book of Moses*."

- They were ordered by the Word, "*as it is written*."

- This gives us a good pattern for the Regulative Principle in worship.

III. Worship restored (vv. 19-22)

1. What did they focus on in worship?

1. Redemption **v. 19** (pictured in Passover)

2. Consecration **vv. 20-21a**

3. Worship **v. 21b** (ESV rightly translates "seek" as "worship")

   What does this involve?

   - Contemplation (Passover was the means to do this)
   - Confession
   - Humility/contrition
   - Exultation

4. Joyful celebration **v. 22a**

   For 70 years they had not celebrated Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread; now the celebration returned because the central focal point of worship was restored in their lives. No more harps hung on the willows!

2. Why did they turn to the Lord in worship v. 22b

1. The Lord made them glad!

The Lord worked sovereignly on their behalf.

Mike Herrin: **God's Will Is Done:**
As we learned last week, the people of God had, after some 16 years, finally gotten started on the project of rebuilding the Temple. They were doing what God wanted them to do, what His prophets had told them to do. They had permission from the governing authorities for their project – in fact, King Cyrus had allowed them to return from exile precisely for this reason. And yet, as soon as they got going again, they ran into serious bureaucratic roadblocks. The local governor was suspicious, and he fired off a letter to King Darius to try to put a stop to their efforts. They just couldn't seem to catch a break.

Maybe you can relate to these folks in their frustration and disappointment. Maybe you've been trying to do the right thing for a long time, and wonder why it always seems so hard. Maybe you've tried to run an honest business or maintain a struggling institution or repair a broken relationship, with little success. And maybe you're wondering, "I'm trying to do God's will, so why doesn't He make things easier?" Well, the sobering truth is that on this side of glory, we'll never know how everything fits together in God's plans. Sometimes, we can get a glimpse of what God is up to, especially after some time and distance provide us with perspective. But some things happen to us or our loved ones that never will make sense. Nevertheless, today's passage should give us some comfort in the midst of our difficulties. For in the first place, we find that God is able to bring great good even out of the hardest circumstances we encounter. . .

But here's the important part for us – it was precisely the opposition of Tattenai that led to the discovery of this royal grant. That means that if God's people hadn't first faced a frustrating bureaucratic hassle, they wouldn't have gotten any of that government support for their project. And so we see that God brought great good out of opposition to His people. . .

So, no matter how imperfect we may be, let us join in the service of the saints today. No matter what tribulation, what opposition we may face, let us endure. If there is no human king who can stop us, let us not allow any disappointment to deter us. Let us rise up and build the Temple, knowing that God's sovereign power cannot be thwarted, and God's sovereign will cannot be denied.
http://www.fpcportgibson.com/wp-content/uploads/Sermon-Text/God's%20Will%20Is%20Done%20-%20Ezra%206a.031917.pdf

TEXT: Ezra 7:1-28

TITLE: GOD'S HAND OF BLESSING ON HIS CHOSEN LEADER

BIG IDEA:
THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN SERVING GOD IS ALWAYS GOD'S HAND OF BLESSING

INTRODUCTION:
There is a lot of talk about the "IT" factor when it comes to leadership in any realm. In sports or in politics or in business, you might describe the characteristics of an individual and then conclude with whether or not that person has that key defining element of success = the "IT" factor. For success in spiritual service, that key element is **God's hand of blessing and favor**.

McConville: What makes the Jews' restoration so remarkable is not simply that they should return, but that kings should supply their needs in relation to worship (cf. **7:27**). It is this that makes the 'new exodus' so evidently an act of God's salvation.

Alexander Whyte: Ezra was a great student, a great statesman, a great reformer, and a great preacher.

Derek Kidner: This letter, like the others in the book, is given in Aramaic (**12–26**), the language of official correspondence. It authorized Ezra, accompanied by any of his people who so wished (**13**), to go to Jerusalem to ensure the proper observance of the divine law (**14, 25ff**.). It also dealt with two matters of supply: first, a grant towards the cost of sacrifices (**15–18**), and an issue of Temple vessels (**19**); secondly, an order to the provincial treasurers, empowering Ezra to claim certain extra supplies (**21–23**), also exempting Temple officials of every grade from tax (**24**). Its final paragraph (**25f**.) called on Ezra to set up a judicial system with full powers of punishment, but also to see that people were not left in ignorance of the law.

I. (:1-10) GOD'S HAND OF BLESSING ON HIS CHOSEN LEADER EMPOWERED BY THE WORD OF GOD

A. (:1-6) Evidence of God's Hand of Blessing Qualifying Ezra as a Leader

1. (:1-5) Qualified to Lead Due to His Priestly Pedigree

> "*Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.*"

Loken: The phrase "*now after these things*" introduces a significant shift in the narrative, effectively separating the events of **chaps. 7–10** from those of **1–6**. The

events of these chapters take place during the reign of Artaxerxes, almost 58 years after the events of **chap. 6**. In the meantime, the events of the book of Esther have taken place in Susa. It is unknown how many, if any, returns took place in these intervening years.

Life during this intervening period seems to have been rough on the returned remnant. From the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah it can be assumed that they were constantly threatened by their enemies (cf. **4:6–23; Neh 4; 6**). There is no doubt that the vast majority of the remnant was poor (cf. **Neh 5:1–5; Mal 2:9; 3:14**). These poor were even being mistreated and abused by their fellow Jews (cf. **Neh 5:1–5; Mal 3:5**). Many of the sons of Israel had forsaken the Law of Moses and had married foreign women (cf. **9:1–2; Mal 2:11**). Even the religious leaders were failing their God-given responsibilities (cf. **Mal 1:6–8; 2:7–8**). As a result, the Lord was afflicting His people, allowing them to suffer because of the presence of sin in the community. The nation needed to reform its ways. The nation needed the help of the Lord. The nation needed Ezra.

Derek Thomas: Artaxerxes the Long-armed, he was known as. His nickname was Artaxerxes the Long-armed. Plutarch, the historian, describes how Artaxerxes apparently had one arm…his right arm was longer than his left arm.

Constable: Ezra's genealogy (**vv. 1-5**) shows that he was a man of importance whom his fellow Jews would have respected. His name is a shortened form of "*Azariah*," meaning "*Yahweh Helps*." He was a descendant of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel (**v. 5**). There are gaps in this genealogy (cf. **1 Chron. 6:3-15**). "*Son of*" occasionally means "descendant of," as elsewhere in the Old Testament. The purpose of this linear genealogy was not to record all of Ezra's ancestors but to trace his lineage from **Aaron.**

Fensham: The point the author wants to make is that Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron and thus has the right to act as a priest and to introduce certain reforms.

Guzik: 'Zadok' was a priest under David whom Solomon appointed chief priest in place of Abiathar, who supported the rebel Adonijah (**1 Kings 1:7-8; 2:35**). Ezekiel regarded the Zadokites as free from idolatry (**Ezekiel 44:15-16**). Zadokites held the office of high priest till 171 b.c. The Sadducees were named after Zadok, and the Qumran community looked for the restoration of the Zadokite priesthood. (Yamauchi)

Rata: This is also the first time the name of Ezra appears in the book. Ezra is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew Azariah and means "*Yahweh helps/has helped*." His lineage traces back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, who is introduced here as "*the chief priest.*" Ezra is not presented in the Bible as a high priest, although there are some who suggest that Ezra "came to Jerusalem as the real high priest of the family of Aaron." His ancestor Seraiah was killed by Nebuchadnezzar about 130 years before (**2 Kings 25:18–21**), so the genealogy presented here skips a couple of generations. Ezra is introduced as a "*scribe skilled in the Law of Moses*," but according to the genealogy given, it is certain that he was both priest and scribe. Schaeder postulates that "Ezra was

secretary for Jewish affairs in the Persian government." We cannot dispute the fact that he held an important position in the Persian Empire since the king entrusted him with an important mission. Ezra's status when he comes from Babylon suggests that the Jews prospered even in the Babylonian exile and that God even allowed them to be educated. Again it is emphasized that Ezra's success was not due to his own strength, intelligence, or connections, but rather because "*the hand of the Lord his God was on him*."

2. (:6a) Qualified to Lead Due to His Skill in the Revealed Word of God

"*This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given;*"

David Guzik: To us a **scribe** sounds like a glorified secretary, someone who simply writes. That is not the idea of this description of Ezra. For the Jewish culture of that day, a skilled scribe was an expert in the Law of Moses, someone who was like a highly trained lawyer in the word of God.

i. "In his case it is emphasized by the word skilled, or literally 'rapid' (cf. **Psalm 45:1**) – suggesting a quickness of grasp and ease of movement amid this complex material which was the fruit of the devoted study described in **verse 10**." (Kidner)

ii. Scribes were important and influential, and one might say that they had three main duties: to preserve the Word of God, to teach the Word of God, and to administrate the Word of God (in the sense of interpreting and applying it).

iii. By the time of Jesus there were many scribes and they were respected as lawyers of the law of God among most of the Jews of that time. However, they had degenerated greatly from the ideal originally established by Ezra, so much so that they were active opponents of Jesus and His ministry and targets of His rebukes (**Matthew 7:29; Matthew 23**).

iv. "As messengers of the will of God, they took the place of the prophets, with this difference: instead of receiving new revelations, they explained and applied the old. Of this new order, Ezra was at once the founder and type." (Morgan)

Loken: The primary duties of a scribe were threefold.

- First, they served as the copyists of the law. This duty also involved the interpretation of the law. When the law did not speak to a specific case, then the scribes created precedent. As a result, they in effect became legislators creating new law.
- Second, they served as the teachers of the law. It was their duty to make sure that every Israelite was acquainted with the rules and regulations of the law.
- Third, they served in a judicial capacity, passing sentence in the court of justice. Their knowledge of and skill in interpreting the law made them ideal candidates for the position of judge. Scribes were routinely found among the ranks of the Sanhedrin.

3. (:6b) Qualified to Lead Due to His Reputation Before the King – as Granted by God's Favor

"*and the king granted him all he requested* ***because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him***."

Derek Thomas: Ezra is an important man. Take note of him. He comes on official business. He comes on the king's business. Yes, he's come to engage in spiritual reforms, many of which King Artaxerxes wouldn't have understood at all, but this Persian king wanted stability in Jerusalem, and who best to send to Jerusalem but somebody who understands Jerusalem and understands the laws of Jerusalem? And in the strange and wonderful and extraordinary providence of God — and what a providence it is — this heathen King Artaxerxes sends as his official representative and delegate this godly man, Ezra.

B. (:7-9) Enablement of God's Hand of Blessing Returns Ezra and Key Worship Leaders Safely to Jerusalem

1. (:7) Key Worship Leaders Return to Jerusalem

"*And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.*"

Derek Thomas: We're told this journey took — and Ezra's a youthful man at this point — it took him four months. It was a difficult journey. He describes some of the difficulties that it involved. They were beset probably by bandits and marauders along the way, particularly since they were known to be taking along with them family heirlooms and gold and silver and so on. Some of the very best of Old Testament saints were evidently not in Jerusalem, but still in Babylon. And if Ezra is typical of them, and shortly, Nehemiah (some twenty years ahead again)…Nehemiah will return to Jerusalem. He's the cupbearer to this king, king Artaxerxes. Some of the godliest men, some of the finest men and women of faith are actually not in Jerusalem, but in Babylon.

2. (:8-9) Key Leader Ezra Arrives Safely in Jerusalem

"*And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem,* ***because the good hand of his God was upon him.***"

Guzik: "*came to Jerusalem*" -- Though the direct distance between Babylon and Jerusalem is about five hundred miles, the travelers would have had to traverse nine hundred miles, going northwest along the Euphrates River and then south. (Yamauchi)

C. (:10) Essence of God's Hand of Blessing = Connected to His Commitment to the Word of God

1. Commitment to Study the Word of God

"*For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD,*"

2. Commitment to Apply (Obey) the Word of God
"*and to practice it,*"

3. Commitment to Teach the Word of God
"*and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.*"

Constable: Ezra's personal resolve provides an excellent example for every believer (**v. 10**). He first purposed to study (lit. seek) the law (Heb. *torah*) of God, then to apply that teaching to his own life, and then to teach others the revealed will of God. This was the key to Ezra's impact.

Loken: First, Ezra "*set his heart*." The scribe determined within his heart that he would faithfully and resolutely commit himself to the habits detailed in the rest of the verse. Second, Ezra studied the law of the Lord. The scribe devoted his life to the reading and analysis of God's Word. Third, Ezra practiced the law of the Lord. The scribe's examination of the Scriptures was not simply a growth of knowledge. He applied that knowledge to his life. And fourth, Ezra taught the law throughout Israel. The scribe did not keep the things he learned to himself. He taught them to others.

Kidner: He is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.

Breneman: We can be thankful that Ezra's influence helped the Jewish community maintain its biblical "worldview." The scribal tradition became too legalistic, however, and ended up in a pharisaism that missed the spirit of the law. In fact, the Jewish leaders took pride in their theological correctness and meticulous observance of outward ritual so that they did not even recognize their Messiah when he came. How does the church in any generation maintain the correct balance? The other extreme—assimilation or syncretism with a "pagan" worldview—also loses the biblical message. This latter appears to be the greatest danger in our time. Few people think "Christianly" in our modern Western world. All religion, even Christianity, is evaluated from the viewpoint of "scientific naturalism" when a biblical perspective demands that the reverse be true.

II. (:11-26) GOD'S HAND OF BLESSING ON HIS CHOSEN LEADER ENABLED BY THE AUTHORITY AND APPROVAL OF THE PAGAN PERSIAN KING

A. (:11-12) Authority of the Pagan Persian King Reflecting God's Blessing on Ezra

1. (:11) Reputation of Ezra (Priest/Scribe) Shown in the Issuing of the Decree
"*Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra*

the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:"

Fensham: This verse is written in Hebrew while the letter of Artaxerxes (**7:12–26**) is written in Aramaic. **Verse 11** is to be regarded as an introduction, stating to whom the letter was given. The term used for letter can also mean "a diplomatic note." This is not an ordinary letter, but a letter with certain remarks on the official function of Ezra as well as commands to be carried out.

2. (:12) Reputation of Ezra (Priest/Scribe) Shown in the Initial Greeting

a. Author of the Decree

"*Artaxerxes, king of kings,*"

b. Subject of the Decree

"*to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven,*"

c. Greeting of the Decree

"*perfect peace.*"

B. (:13-20) Approval of the Pagan Persian King Reflecting God's Blessing on Ezra

1. (:13) Approval of the King in Granting Permission for the Rebuilding Mission

"*And now 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.*"

2. (:14) Approval of the King Confirmed by Investigative Mission of 7 Civil Servants

"*Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,*"

Derek Thomas: Ezra is given **investigative powers**. Now he comes with a privy council. We know from outside of Scripture, from our studies of the Persian Empire, that Persian kings had a habit of sending seven counselors — seven civil servants, if you like — to various cities. It was like a privy council, and Ezra came with these seven official (and no doubt Persian) counselors to investigate what's going on in Jerusalem, to investigate what's going on in the lower parts, perhaps, of Judea…those parts of Judea heading in the direction of Egypt, no doubt.

What's going on not so much from a religious point of view, although I think Artaxerxes was in favor of the Jews complying with every command that their God had given to them, but from a **civil point of view**. Was there civil disobedience? Was there civil unrest? Were there signs perhaps of rebellion? Were there signs of disorder and

anarchy within the society? And they're given powers now to investigate, and investigate they will.

Fensham: For the Persian king, in the circumstances described above, it was a necessity that peace should prevail in Judah, a territory which was always easily influenced by Egypt.

3. (:15-18) Approval of the King Shown by Donations of Silver and Gold

a. (:15-16) Donations Sourced from both Babylon and Jewish Offerings

1) (:15-16a) From Babylon Offerings

"*and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, with all the silver and gold which you shall find in the whole province of Babylon,*"

2) (:16b) From Jewish Offerings

"*along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem;*"

b. (:17) Donations Targeted for Sacrificial System Expenses

"*with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their libations and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.*"

Guzik: Ezra carried with him government money that was meant to advance the interests of Artaxerxes. This money was to be spent on sacrificial animals and the promotion of temple worship at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Ezra was commanded to be careful, but also given latitude to make his own decisions about how to best spend the money he came with.

c. (:18) Donations to be Used at the Discretion of Jewish Leaders

"*And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God.*"

4. (:19) Approval of the King Shown by Donations of Temple Utensils

"*Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.*"

Fensham: *The vessels*. These could not have been the vessels removed by Nebuchadnezzar, because they had been restored long ago. It might have been vessels provided by the king and the Jews in exile (cf. **8:25–27**).

Derek Kidner: The vessels may have been some which had been overlooked when the

captured vessels were restored by Cyrus (**1:7ff**.), but it is just as likely that they were a goodwill gift, newly presented.

5. (:20) Approval of the King Shown by Ongoing Financial Support for Temple Needs

"*And the rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.*"

Constable: Artaxerxes' decree promised provisions for the temple worship (**vv. 14- 20**), authorized Ezra to withdraw funds from the provincial treasury (**vv. 21-23; cf. 4:12**), and permitted him to establish judicial and educational systems in Judah (**vv. 24-26**). The reason Artaxerxes permitted all this was evidently so there would be peace and good will among his Jewish subjects, and so he might appease Yahweh's wrath (**v. 23**). The king's seven counselors (**v. 14**) evidently constituted the supreme court of the land (cf. Esth. 1:14).

C. (:21-24) Approval of the King of Additional Needed Resources

1. (:21-22) Authorization of Requisition of Needed Resources Within Limits

a. (:21) Decree to Outlying Provinces

"*And I, even I King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,*"

Derek Thomas: It was written to give **permission**: permission to Ezra to give him authority for what he had come to do. His Aaronic descent in the priestly line of Aaron gave him much-needed credentials, but the letter from the Persian king gave him all the clout that he would ever need in Jerusalem.

b. (:22) Designation of Requisition Limits

"*even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.*"

Loken: Ezra's rights of requisition were considerable but not unlimited, the king having provided a ceiling on each item except for the salt, a very cheap commodity in Israel. The amount of silver is enormous. A Babylonian talent weighed approximately 75 pounds (ca. 34 kg.). Therefore, 100 talents of silver would have weighed almost four tons. Herodotus informs us that the annual income from the entire satrapy was 350 talents (Hist. 3.91). Therefore, the amount provided Ezra is almost one-third of the annual income of the entire province. As a result, Clines (104) suggests the possibility of a transmission error for "*minas*," one-sixtieth the weight.

2. (:23) Motivation of Appeasement of the God of Heaven

"*Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, lest there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.*"

Derek Thomas: [Goal of king = **Appeasement.**] Artaxerxes was a **pluralist**. He believed that there was truth to be found in many religions. All forms of religion, even if they contradicted one another there was still truth to be found there, and better to "bet" on the safe side than to find oneself incurring the wrath of a god who might just be a true god.

John Martin: In return for granting these privileges the king was to receive some benefits from the expedition. He wanted to avoid uprisings or feelings of anger against him (**v. 23**) and to have order in that part of his empire (**vv. 25-26**).

3. (:24) Exemption of Temple Officials from Taxation

"*We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God.*"

Derek Thomas: How best to gain the support and compliance of a group of people who could make life very difficult for the king than to give a tax break to a "faith-based initiative" in Jerusalem! It's a brilliant…you have to put it to the king, this Persian king. That was one stroke of genius!

D. (:25-26) Authority for Judgment and Enforcement Delegated to Ezra and His Appointees

1. (:25) Authority for Judgment

"*And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.*"

Derek Thomas: Ezra has come to enforce Judaic law, Bible law, and Persian law. He's come to impose the rule of law within Jerusalem and within Judea, and Ezra is a faithful, loyal, **civil servant**, like Joseph in Egypt. Like Joseph working for Pharaoh, Ezra is working for King Artaxerxes.

2. (:26) Authority for Enforcement

"*And whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment.*"

Loken: Ezra and his judges are given permission to punish lawbreakers in four ways.

- First, the judges were permitted to execute those who refuse to follow the law.
- Second, they could banish evildoers from the province.
- Third, they were allowed to confiscate the offender's possessions.
- And fourth, the judges were able to imprison those who were found guilty.

Williamson (105) notes that "the passive construction suggests that Ezra himself may not have been empowered to enact the punishments, but rather that the Persian authorities were to support his work with the force of law (note especially imprisonment, which was not a typically Jewish penalty)."

(:27-28) THANKSGIVING TO GOD FOR SUPPORTING AND STRENGTHENING EZRA

A. (:27-28a) Thanksgiving to God for Supporting Him via the Pagan Officials

1. (:27) Support of the King

"*Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers,*
who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart,
to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem,"

Derek Kidner: We are suddenly aware of Ezra the man, his own voice breaking into the narrative with a grateful delight which time has done nothing to diminish. He will take up the history himself to the end of **chapter 9**; and Nehemiah, like him, will do most of his own narrating in the next book, sprinkling his story with even more vivid interjections and asides.

Whitcomb: The beautifying of the Temple was the chief cause for thanksgiving, for the re-establishment of divine worship was the key to revival.

Fensham: Although the king was instrumental in the adornment of the temple, it was actually God who did it. He is the real subject of the verb "*adorn*." It is not clear what is meant by adorn. Does it refer to the offerings in the temple, or to the renovation of the temple? One may be tempted to think of the latter possibility in the light of **Isa. 60:13**, where the wood of the Lebanon is mentioned, but the letter of Artaxerxes mentions nothing of such a venture. Or must we accept that not all the orders of Artaxerxes were given in his quoted letter? At the same time we must keep in mind that in Isa. 60:7 the adornment of the temple is associated with offerings. We are thus not able to reach any definite conclusion in the light of Isaiah. Because both possibilities are open, it is better to accept that the adornment must be connected with the offerings, as also in the light of the letter of Artaxerxes.

Rata: The credit for the things that are being accomplished does not go to Ezra or to the Persian king. Rather, the credit goes to the Lord, the God of the exiles, the God of those who lived during the monarchy, the God of those who lived in the time of the Judges, the God of those who conquered Jericho and settled the Promised Land, the God of those who wandered in the wilderness, and the God of the patriarchs. It is the Lord who directed the heart of the king to rule in favor of His people. The expression "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers,*" appears only here in the Old Testament, although the expression "*Blessed be the Lord*," appears twenty-seven times. "*Blessed be the Lord*" introduces a prayer or doxology, which emphasizes the sovereignty of God along with His steadfast love (*ḥesed*). "*I took courage*" is better translated with the Hebrew passive "*I was strengthened*," because Ezra's strength came from God and it was not something

that came from within himself. The strength that he received from the Lord led him to encourage and motivate others to go with him, thus proving himself to be a true leader. **Verse 27** resumes the Hebrew portion of the book and here Ezra speaks in the first person, prompting some to suggest that this is the beginning of the so-called Ezra memoir.

2. (:28a) Support of the King's Officials

"*and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes.*"

Williamson: God's grace is to be seen in the measure of freedom and responsibility entrusted to Ezra for the regulation of both cultic and wider, social affairs concerning his people in the land.

Loken: Ezra also thanked the Lord for his חֶסֶד "*lovingkindness*" to him personally in the midst of the Persian courts. Here, the word may simply mean "benevolence" or "goodwill." However, the word often carries the inherent meaning of "*loyal lovingkindness*" in the OT, especially when applied to the Lord keeping His covenant (cf. **Neh 1:5; 9:32; Dan 9:4**). This may be a further indication of the fact that Ezra believed that his return was a partial fulfillment of the promises of the Lord to regather His people (**Mic 2:12; Zeph 3:20; Zech 10:10**). The final fulfillment of these promises awaits the institution of the Millennial Kingdom following the Second Coming of the Messiah.

B. (:28b) Thanksgiving to God for Strengthening Him -- both Personally and Nationally

1. Personal Strengthening

"*Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me,*"

All credit must go to God.

2. National Strengthening

"*and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*"

Breneman: Ezra recognized God's goodness to him and God's work on his behalf. He also realized that his work was in accordance with God's promise. Furthermore, he chose leaders and shared the responsibility in God's work.

* * * * * * * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How do you recognize God's hand of blessing in your own life and ministry?

2) Where in your experience has God's blessing and support come from unexpected sources?

3) What is the explanation for the "over-the-top" level of support provided here by the King of Persia for the temple rebuilding project under the direction of Ezra?

4) In your worship, how do you express your thanksgiving to God for supporting and strengthening you?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Thomas Constable: A period of 58 years separates **Ezra 6** from **Ezra 7** (515-458 B.C.). During this time the events in the Book of Esther took place in Persia and, in particular, Susa, one of the Persian capitals.

Darius I (the son of Hystaspes; 521-486 B.C.) became a very capable ruler who united the vast reaches of the Persian Empire under his control. He organized the empire effectively into 20 satrapies, each of which functioned under a satrap appointed by the king. The satraps, who were usually from the Persian noble families, were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the emperor. Darius also built a huge palace at Persepolis, a canal that connected the Nile River with the Red Sea, and a system of roads that greatly facilitated travel and communication within the empire. "…

"…under Darius, Persia reached her zenith." (Bright)

Darius' son, **Xerxes** I (486-464 B.C., known as **Ahasuerus** in **Ezra 4:6** and the Book of Esther), succeeded this great king. He was not as successful as his father militarily. He was, however, able to subdue rebellions in Egypt and Babylon, but lost a third of the Persian fleet to the Greeks, and eventually had to withdraw Persian troops from Europe. He died at the hand of an assassin.

The next Persian king was **Artaxerxes I** (Longimanus, lit. "long hand"; 464- 424 B.C.), the younger son of Xerxes who killed his older brother to obtain the throne. During his reign the empire continued to decline in strength. The Greeks attacked Cyprus, Egypt rebelled, and parts of Asia Minor achieved independence. The Persian province of Yehud (Judah) was part of the larger satrapy of Eber Nari (lit. "beyond [i.e., west of] the [Euphrates] river"). The larger satrapy included Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine to the border of Egypt, and Cyprus. Herodotus identified the satrapy "beyond the river" as Darius' fifth satrapy.

In Judah, the Jews did not continue to fortify Jerusalem. They were content simply to worship at the temple. Their earlier zeal to return to the Mosaic ordinances that included separation from non-Jews waned. Over this 58- year period some of them intermarried with unbelieving Gentiles (**9:1-2**). Evidently the Levites neglected the

teaching of the law (**7:25**; cf. **Neh. 8:1- 12**), and temple worship became more formal than sincere (**7:23**).

Derek Thomas: **5 Characteristics of Ezra:**

- He was a priest
- He was an important man
- He was a scribe
- He was a man of courageous faith
- He was a model reformer

Steven Cole: **The Life that God Blesses**

Over thirty years ago, I read a sermon that has impacted my life as much or more than any of the thousands of sermons that I have read. It is titled, "Expecting the Lord's Blessing," by the late Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee (in *Twelve Baskets Full* [Hong Kong Church Book Room], 2:48-64). That sermon, based on the Lord's feeding of the 5,000, has affected the entire direction and motivation of my personal life and my ministry.

Nee hammers home a simple but profound truth: "Everything in our service for the Lord is dependent on His blessing" (p. 48).

To have God's hand of blessing on us, we must study and obey His Word, with a view to teaching others and glorifying God for everything.

1. All of us should seek God's blessing on our lives above all else.

A. GOD'S BLESSING IS THE ONLY BLESSING THAT COUNTS BOTH FOR TIME AND FOR ETERNITY.

B. GOD'S BLESSING FLOWS THROUGH FAMILY LINES.

C. GOD'S BLESSING REFERS TO GOD'S DOING ABOVE AND BEYOND WHAT HUMAN EFFORT CAN PRODUCE OR EXPECT.

2. God's blessings come to those who study and obey His Word.

3. The study and obedience of God's Word are the foundation for teaching it to others.

4. The final end of God's blessing should be our glorifying God for His abundant mercy.

Conclusion

It is remarkable that God is pleased to be known in the Bible as the God of Jacob (**Ps. 46:7, 10**). Jacob was a man with many shortcomings and faults. He connived his brother out of the birthright. He bargained with God at Bethel, promising to follow Him if He would take care of him and bring him back safely to the land (**Gen. 28:20-21**).

After his many years of trying to out-maneuver Laban, he returned to the land full of fear about what Esau might do to him. The night before he was to meet Esau, the Lord met him and wrestled with him, dislocating his hip so that Jacob always walked with a limp after the encounter.

But before dawn, the angel of God said to Jacob, "*Let me go, for the dawn is breaking*." Jacob gave this great reply, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me*" (**Gen. 32:26**). The Lord did bless Jacob, the conniver, by changing his name to Israel, one who has wrestled with God and prevailed. The greatness of Jacob was not related to the strengths and abilities of Jacob. It was due to God's hand of blessing resting on Jacob.

I hope that you will join Jacob and me in praying, "God, I won't let You go until You bless me." His blessing comes to those who study and obey His Word with a view to imparting what they have learned to others, all to the glory of God. May the hand of the Lord our God be upon you for His name's sake!

Gary Smith: One cannot overemphasize the importance of the "*law of God*" or the "*Law of Moses*" to Ezra's life and mission. Ezra's worldview was shaped by this revelation that had come from God as a gift to his covenant people. It identified what it meant to be a Jewish person, what was involved in following a holy God, and what should be avoided in order to be separate from sin. The law was not something new that Ezra devised and introduced (Throntveit 1992:43); it was those stories and regulations Moses received long ago. Thus, Ezra was not trying to create a new paradigm that was more practical or culturally relevant for returnees after the Babylonian exile. He was calling people back to the foundational truths that God had revealed centuries earlier. This is the law "*which is in your hand*" (**7:14**), not some unknown or mysterious secret; it is the will of God (**7:18**) that regulated life in the Temple, in the family, and in the courts (**7:25**). The revelation of God in this law served as the standard for Ezra's investigation of life in Yehud (**7:14**), and the teaching of the laws of God would be the cure to reordering life in Jerusalem (**7:25**). Those who refused to obey God's law were dealt with severely (**7:26**) but appropriately and justly. Although this emphasis may appear excessively focused on obedience and devoid of freedom of expression, there never was a better way than God's way of doing things. As long as Ezra avoided a legalistic formula of doing works to earn God's approval and blessing, there was nothing wrong with instructing people in God's words of revelation. They provided the covenant people with instructions on how to live holy and just lives so that they could maintain their covenant relationship with God and enjoy worshiping him in the Temple. God's word is a light to the traveler's path (**Ps 119:105**), a guide to keep people from sin (**Ps 119:9–11**), and a source of revival (**Ps 119:40**). It was a privilege to have copies of the words of God to read. This precious, life-giving resource should be something a believer loves and meditates on every day (**Ps 119:97**).

TEXT: Ezra 8:1-36

TITLE: THE SECOND WAVE OF EXILES RETURNS UNDER EZRA'S LEADERSHIP

BIG IDEA:
SUCCESSFUL PIONEERING MISSIONS COUPLE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP WITH DEPENDENCE UPON THE BLESSING OF GOD –

SIX STEPS IN LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL REBUILDING MISSION FOR GOD

INTRODUCTION:

Here we have additional details regarding the return of the exiles to Jerusalem for the rebuilding project and restoration of Jewish worship (a summary had been provided earlier in **chapter 7**). The model presented here would make a good study for a church planting team or for other types of pioneering ministries where the blessing of God must be secured in conjunction with careful planning, teamwork, stewardship of resources and diligent execution. The key is always dependence upon God for His favor and blessing. Spiritual preparation via fasting and prayer must be our primary tactic. The successful outcome must lead to thankful worship as we continue to trust the Lord for ongoing support.

Williamson: There are three main elements in the narrative of this section, and by reference to God's good hand upon Ezra and his companions, each is marked out as having been carried through under the blessing of divine providence (**vv 18, 22 and 31**). These three elements are the gathering of Levites, the care for the treasures to be presented at the temple, and the journey itself, with all its attendant dangers. Small wonder that sacrifices of thanksgiving were offered at its conclusion!

I. (:1-14) BUILDING A FUNCTIONAL TEAM

A. (:1) Heads of Households

> "*Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes:*"

Constable: The descendants of the priestly and royal families in Israel appear first in this list (**vv. 2-3**). Then the names of the rest of the Jews follow (cf. 1 Esdras 8:28-40). A comparison of **verses 3-14** with **2:3-15** shows that Ezra's companions were mainly the relatives of those Jews who had returned 80 years earlier under Sheshbazzar. The one exception was Joab's family (**v. 9**).

Breneman: The emphasis on the "family heads" reminds us of the great responsibility of being head of a family. The family is the basis of society, and the father is the head of the family. As such he has a tremendous responsibility under God to direct and teach

his family. Ezra's carefulness about registering each family should be a challenge for Christians today to take seriously each family in the church community.

B. (:2-14) Key Players

"2 *of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom;*
of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel;
of the sons of David, Hattush;
3 of the sons of Shecaniah who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males who were in the genealogical list;
4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah and 200 males with him;
5 of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him;
6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him;
7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him;
8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him;
9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him;
10 and of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him;
11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him;
12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan and 110 males with him;
13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah and 60 males with them;
14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud and 70 males with them."

Guzik: *Shecaniah* -- There were three of this name; the second is mentioned in **Ezra 8:5**, and the third **Ezra 10:2**. They were all different persons, as may be seen from their fathers' houses" (Clarke). . .

Adding the counts of the male members of the group together, there was a total count of at least 1,496 men in the group. Adding an estimated number of women and children (**Ezra 8:21**), we can surmise that the total number of the party coming with Ezra in the days of King Artaxerxes was something like between 6,000 to 7,000 people.

Derek Thomas: This is a second wave of returnees. The first returnees came back from Babylon in 537, in response to the decree of King Cyrus. We are now 445 B.C., eighty years and perhaps then some into the future, and this is a second wave of returnees led by this godly man, Ezra. There'll be another wave of returnees when we come to the book of Nehemiah. That's about twenty years down the line.

Gary Smith: Although the list of names in **8:1–14** may seem rather pedantic and boring, it was theologically essential to know who was going to return to Jerusalem and what their genealogical background was. An emphasis was placed on being the people of Israel and especially on having legitimate priests and Levites serving in the Temple.

II. (:15-20) RECRUITING MISSING WORKERS (LEVITES FOR TEMPLE SERVICE)

A. (:15-17) Addressing the Problem of Missing Workers

1. (:15) Observing the Deficiency

a. Encampment to Assess Readiness

"*Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days;*"

b. Evaluation of Assembled Skill Set – No Levites Found

"*and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.*"

Andrew Swango: Technically, priests are Levites because they are the sons of Aaron, who is a son of Levi. Obviously, the implication is that Ezra is looking for Levites who can perform the other duties, such as **Merarites** (who were in charge of the building pieces of the tabernacle) or **Kohathites** (who were in charge of the furniture inside the tabernacle).

Guzik: Perhaps the Levites were generally too comfortable with their lives in Babylon to go back to Jerusalem. Perhaps they were not willing to come back to their ancestral temple duties that put them under the authority of the priests. Whatever the reason was, Ezra had the money and the authority he needed, but not the men.

Derek Thomas: Now the Levites did all sorts of things. They did all sorts of menial work. They were essentially servants to the priests. The priests had access to various parts of the innermost temple to which the Levites generally had no access. The Levites were the ones who kept the outer gates of the temple. Now there are no gates as such at this second temple as yet. We believe that there was a stone wall that surrounded this temple, and in that wall there were various rooms, accommodations for priests and perhaps some of the Levites who were on duty there for upwards of a week at a time. There will be storerooms for utensils and food and other bits and pieces, pots and pans and so on, within that wall. The Levites were the ones who would keep the temple and the surroundings of the temple clean. They would make sure that the utensils were cleansed. They were the ones who would keep watch over the temple. They would police the temple. They would guard the entrance ways into the temple to ensure that only those could enter that were allowed to enter. But on the whole the Levites did menial work.

2. (:16) Organizing a Team of Recruiters

a. Leading Men

"*So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men,*"

Andrew Swango: We learn that many of these priests who were traveling with Ezra back to Jerusalem had married foreign wives (**Ezra 10:18, 10:29, 10:31, 10:39, 10:26**).

Derek Thomas: If you look at the list of names in **verse 16,** only two of those names appear in **verses 1-14**. In other words, of the leading men, only two of them were heads of families. That's a problem to some. It's not a problem to me, but it's a problem to some. My response to that is yes, yes, there were only two leading men who were heads of families. That says something about the relative importance or unimportance after the exile of heads of families within Jewish society, that there were leading men who could be singled out and named who actually weren't heads of families.

b. Teachers

"*and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers.*"

3. (:17) Ordering the Desired Outcome = Bring Back Levites

a. Strategic Appeal

"*And I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia;*"

b. Specific Agenda

"*and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers,*
the temple servants at the place Casiphia,
that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God."

Derek Kidner: The absence of Levites and other Temple servants is a revealing contretemps; it was only natural for these men to shrink from a prospect which was doubly daunting: not only the uprooting which all the pilgrims faced, but the drastic change from ordinary pursuits to the strict routines of the Temple. So it is no surprise to read of Ezra's careful choice of emissaries to rectify this (nine of them for the weight they carried in the community, and an extra two for their diplomatic skill, **verse 16**), and to notice his explicit briefing of them (*'telling them what to say' and whom to approach*, **17**).

The outcome (**v.18**) was highly satisfying, not only numerically but in the provision of a gifted leader; and Ezra, as ever, recognized in this *the good hand of our God upon us*.

B. (:18-20) Appreciating God's Provision of Essential Workers

1. (:18) Testimony of God's Provision of Capable Levites

"*And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us*
a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel,
namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men;"

Derek Thomas: Ezra's giving a testimony as to what happened, and he's telling us that what happened is that 38 Levites came forward, along with 220 temple servants. The mission to Iddo had been somewhat of a success. You might have credited that to Ezra. Ezra is a phenomenal leader. But he credits it all to the Lord. The kind of leadership that Ezra wants us to emulate, you see, is a leadership in which God is given all the glory. Ezra didn't sit back and say, 'Well, if God wants Levites to come, He'll bring them.' No, he marshaled arguments, he sent his best men, he gave it his best shot! But

the outcome was of the Lord. Man may plan, and man may marshal arguments, and man may scheme, and man may plot, but **the outcome is of the Lord**.

2. (:19) Testimony of God's Provision of Merarites

"*and Hashabiah and Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari,*
with his brothers and their sons, 20 men;"

Andrew Swango: These were the men Ezra found to be Levites (non-priestly temple servants). But, with a static temple that would not need Merarites to carry the temple pieces and furniture anymore, what would these men do? In Nehemiah's day, they either became a leader of a district in the province of Judah (**Neh 3:17**), they publicly read the Law to the people (**Neh 8:7**), lead the people in praises (**Neh 9:4- 5ff**), or signed Nehemiah's confession document (**Neh 10:11-12**).

3. (:20) Testimony of God's Provision of Additional Temple Servants

"*and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given*
for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name."

III. (:21-23) SEEKING GOD'S PROTECTION AND BLESSING (BY PRAYING AND FASTING) FOR ALL THE LOGISTICS (HERE = SAFE JOURNEY)

A. (:21) Fasting and Praying as the Primary Tactic

1. Proclamation of Fasting

"*Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava,*"

Derek Thomas: First of all, I want us to see the setting in which faith is expressed. This is a journey of faith. Ezra, five thousand men, women, children…they're saying their farewells. They've got a thousand-mile journey at a walking pace in the heat of a Near Eastern summer. It's going to take them four months. They're carrying enormous amounts of wealth in terms of goods, gold and silver. It's a situation of great nervousness. I wonder what's going through their minds as they camp by the river Ahava on the outskirts of Babylon. They're facing a life-changing scenario.

2. Posture of Fasting = Humility

"*that we might humble ourselves before our God*"

3. Purpose of Fasting = Prayer for a Safe Journey

"*to seek from Him a safe journey for us,*
our little ones, and all our possessions."

B. (:22) Boasting in God's Power and Protection as the Public Testimony

1. Rejecting Dependence on the Flesh

"*For I was ashamed to request from the king*
troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way,"

Derek Thomas: I want to reflect a little on that: that two men of God, Ezra and Nehemiah, can come to opposite conclusions about whether it was right to ask the king for a secular military escort back to Jerusalem. It says something to us, I think, that men of God who love God and who love His word, and who are deeply saturated in the Scriptures as both Ezra and Nehemiah were…they were men of prayer, they were men of consecration. You wouldn't begin to doubt the godliness or the consecration of Ezra or Nehemiah. But in this matter, both of them seek the will of God and they come down in opposite places. Ezra concludes it would be wrong to ask for the king's help. Nehemiah sees no problem and asks for a military escort. I think it says something to us about certain decisions that godly men can sometimes make.

Fensham: But we can explain this difference of approach as follows. Ezra the priest went to Jerusalem on a religious mission. In such a case a military escort would have seemed strange, because the religious group would then have shown no faith in their God. Nehemiah went as a political official, a governor, to Jerusalem. In such a case, the king would protect his official with a military escort.

2. Relying Only on Faith in God

"*because we had said to the king, 'The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him,*
but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.'"

C. (:23) Seeking God Successfully as the <u>Providential Triumph</u>

1. Activity of Fasting and Praying

"*So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter,*"

2. Answer to Prayer

"*and He listened to our entreaty.*"

Derek Thomas: God answered Ezra's prayer. You know, in **verse 23** when he says, "*We fasted and implored our God for this, and He listened to our entreaty,*" you understand he's writing after the fact. At the time he may well have been nervous. He may well have been second-guessing what he had said to the king. But after the fact, when he writes his memoirs (and a lot of Ezra is full of his memoirs, you understand), he's saying 'God heard our prayer! God delivered us! There were dangerous moments along this journey, there were ambushes along this journey–bandits, marauders, thieves.' And it looks as though everyone got there. No one was killed. No one was injured. What a blessing that is!

Rata: The expression "*And [God] listened to our entreaty*" is one of the Christian's greatest encouragements and comforts. Our God is not a deaf, granite-carved God who does not care about His children. Rather, our God is the only true God, and the One who hears our prayer (**Gen. 30:17, 22; Exod. 2:24; Judg. 13:9; 1 Sam. 1:19; 1 Chron. 4:10; 2 Chron. 1:11**). When Ezra and his compatriots prayed and fasted, they experienced the power of fasting and praying manifested in God answering their prayers.

IV. (:24-30) STEWARDING THE PRECIOUS RESOURCES DEDICATED TO GOD'S SERVICE

A. (:24) Key Leaders Assigned the Accountability of Stewardship

"*Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers;*"

B. (:25-27) Precious Resources Require Faithful Stewarding

1. (:25) Summary of the Accountability

"*and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel present there, had offered.*"

Guzik: Ezra divided the valuables among the leaders of the priests, making each of them responsible for their portion. They were responsible then to watch and keep them until they arrived in Jerusalem and delivered them to the leaders of the priests and Levites there.

Breneman: Following Ezra's example, Christian leaders should delegate responsibility. Ezra carefully chose the people to whom he gave responsibility. It may seem exaggerated to have taken such precautions with the money, to weigh it out carefully, to record every detail. However, to do things carefully, with decisions and transactions documented in writing, is a sign of wisdom rather than a lack of confidence. It protects everyone involved. Many present-day scandals could be avoided if Christian leaders would learn from Ezra.

2. (:26-27) Specific Value of the Precious Resources

a. Gold

"*Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents,*"

b. Silver

"*and 100 gold talents, and 20 gold bowls, worth 1,000 darics;*

c. Bronze

"*and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold.*"

Loken: The amount of treasure recorded here is staggering. A Babylonian talent weighed approximately 75 pounds. Therefore, the 650 silver and 100 gold talents together weighed almost 30 tons! Equally impressive are the various gold, silver, and bronze utensils. The silver articles alone weighed 7,000 pounds. The gold bowls probably weighed about a pound each. Also mentioned are 1,000 darics. A Persian daric was a thick gold coin that weighed about 128 grains troy. The coin was named after the Persian king Darius. The obverse of the coin had a picture of the king with his crown while holding a bow and arrow (or javelin or dagger). Many scholars have questioned

the amount of treasure detailed here. Blenkinsopp (169), for one, believes the amounts are greatly exaggerated. However, the Persians were well known for their extraordinary wealth.

C. (:28-29) Resources Are Valuable Only to the Extent They are Dedicated to the Lord's Service

1. (:28) Emphasis on the Need for the Dedication of Valuable Resources

"*Then I said to them,*"

a. The People

"*You are holy to the LORD,*"

b. The Temple Utensils

"*and the utensils are holy;*"

c. The Freewill Offerings of Silver and Gold

"*and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.*""

Rata: The expression "*holy to the Lord*" originates in the Pentateuch and it first appears in conjunction with God setting apart the priesthood for service at the tabernacle (**Exod. 28:36**). The expression appears only one other time in Ezra-Nehemiah, and it refers to the sacred day when Ezra read the Law of the Lord to the people (**Neh. 8:9**). It could be that the Israelites needed to be reminded of their special status before the Lord since they had sojourned a long time among a profane people who worshipped other gods. The absence of the temple and subsequently the absence of atonement provision were conducive to the people falling into complacency. Through Ezra, God reminded the people that they were set apart for Him and for His purposes. Just like in the Pentateuch, not only are people holy but offerings and temple vessels are also set apart to be used for sacred purposes. It seems that some temporary quarters have been assigned to hold these sacred vessels and offerings. Williamson states that "the chambers of the temple were rooms around the edges of parts of the temple area used both for administration and storage and for the priest's personal convenience."

2. (:29) Emphasis on the Need for Watchful Stewardship and Faithful Accounting

"*Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites, and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.*"

D. (:30) Responsibility of Stewardship Must Be Accepted and Carried Out

"*So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.*"

Gary Smith: *So the priests and the Levites accepted the task* -- Ezra was not a dictator but a man who led and challenged his followers with rational decisions based on

traditional roles in the books of Moses. His followers willingly accepted this responsibility, making adherence to the law of Moses their own purpose. It was not just a burdensome job they had to do, but a means of serving God so that his name would be glorified through their efforts.

Constable: Ezra took special precautions to make sure the expensive temple utensils arrived safely and to guarantee that everyone would perceive that his handling of the precious cargo was completely honest (cf. **2 Cor. 8:20-21**). The Babylonian "*talent*" (**v. 26**) weighed about 66 pounds. The "*daric*" (**v. 27**) was a thick gold Persian coin that weighed 130 grams or about 4 1/2 ounces. The total weight of the precious cargo the exiles took with them seems to have been about 28 tons. There are records that indicate that there were some very wealthy Jews living in Babylon at this time.

V. (:31-34) EXECUTING THE MISSION SUCCESSFULLY

A. (:31-32) Completing the Dangerous Journey Safely

1. (:31a) Description of the Journey

"*Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem;*"

2. (:31b) Divine Deliverance Credited for the Safe Travels

a. Success Attributed to God's Hand of Favor and Blessing

"*and the hand of our God was over us,*"

b. Success Amplified by the Dangers Overcome and Avoided

"*and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.*"

3. (:32) Destination Reached with a Well-Deserved Rest

"*Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.*"

Gary Smith: we rested for three days . After the long journey was over, they rested three days, similar to Nehemiah's rest upon arrival (**Neh 2:11**). Some hypothesize that this was due to an arrival on a Friday; thus they waited until after the Sabbath to deliver the silver and gold to the Temple (Fensham 1982:120, who follows A. Jaubert). Of course, some of the three days would have involved greeting old friends and relatives as well as finding places for the 5,000 new immigrants to live. In addition, it would take some time for the priests at the Temple to empty and prepare secure rooms to store all the silver and gold they were receiving from the Persian king.

B. (:33-34) Completing the Stewardship Responsibility Faithfully

1. (:33) Key Leaders Authenticate the Process of Accountability

a. Role of Meremoth

"*And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest,*"

b. Role of Eleazar and Other Key Levites

"*and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui.*"

2. (:34) All the Valuable Resources Accounted For

"*Everything was numbered and weighed,*
and all the weight was recorded at that time."

Constable: The exiles had begun their journey on the first day of the first month (**7:9**), but they had camped by the Ahava waterway for 12 days (**8:31**). They arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (**7:9**). Thus the trip took four months, and it covered about 900 miles. God kept them safe on their dangerous trip, and all their 28 tons of valuable cargo arrived safely. Burnt offerings represented the consecration of the worshippers' persons to God (**Lev. 1; 6:8-13**). Sin offerings provided atonement (covering) for the worshippers' sinful natures (**Lev. 4:1—5:13; 6:24-30**). A satrap (**v. 36**; lit. "protector of the Kingdom") ruled over governors in the Persian governmental structure.

VI. (:35-36) WORSHIPING GOD AND SEEKING ONGOING SUPPORT

A. (:35) Worshiping God

"*The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the LORD.*"

Derek Thomas: They offered sacrifices. The number twelve is deeply significant in the numbers of bulls and so on that are being offered. They are a representative of Israel. They have come back in a sense as part of the true Israel of God, and they're offering burnt offerings. Burnt offerings had many things, but one of the things about a burnt offering was total consecration. The Hebrew for *burnt offering* is *olah* which means *to go up*. And the sense of a burnt offering was not only for atonement, and not only for acceptance by God, but also for consecration. These men and women and houses and families were giving themselves to the Lord. They had come back for one purpose, and for one purpose only: to serve the Lord with all of their hearts…with all of their hearts.

Breneman: Again there is emphasis on the number **twelve**, which stands for the twelve tribes. The author emphasized that this exilic community represented all Israel. All the numbers here are multiples of twelve except "*seventy-seven*," but in 1 Esdr 8:66 it is seventy-two (thus a multiple of twelve). However, there is no textual evidence for the change. Since seventy-seven is often used to denote a large number, most scholars think the original text must have had "*seventy-seven*."

B. (:36) Seeking Ongoing Support

"*Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps,*

and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River,
and they supported the people and the house of God."

Andrew Swango: this area included what is today Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and the northeast part of Libya. And this may have been around 15 provinces. This would have included Tatenai's province that we read about in **chapter 5**. Jewish servants were sent to these places with the letter that Ezra received from King Artaxerxes. I wonder what their response would have been to know that they were being forced to give more wealth to the Jewish province of Judah.

Guzik: This reminds us of the great purpose of Ezra's expedition. In the final two chapters we will see Ezra administering strict correction as a reformer; but he did not come primarily as a disciplinarian. He came to give support to the people and the house of God, and only dealt with the problems of sin and compromise as necessary in the course of this greater goal.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) Why is male leadership so important to God? Why are family connections so important?

2) What is the connection between fasting and prayer?

3) What is the connection between using human means and trusting God for a specific objective?

4) What types of financial accountability must be maintained in any ministry context in order to insure integrity?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Steven Cole: **The Work that God Blesses**
Last week we looked at **the life that God blesses**. This week we are looking at **the work that God blesses**. This chapter gives the account of the journey of about 5,000 exiles (including women and children) from Babylon to Jerusalem. The phrase, "*the hand of our God*," which we saw in **7:6, 9, & 28**, occurs three more times: **8:18, 22, & 31**. We learn three ingredients in the work that God blesses:

> **God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by humble faith, scrupulous integrity, and Christ-centered worship.**

Honoring God is the major thrust of the chapter. Ezra refused to accept an armed escort from the king because he had told the king how God would protect His people (**8:22**). So these people put their faith on the line by venturing out into a robber-infested desert with no human protection. Also, Ezra wanted to honor God by a strict accounting of the silver, gold, and other resources that they were transporting to Jerusalem. And, the reason that these people were making this difficult and dangerous journey was to honor God by worshiping at His house.

1. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by humble faith.

Ezra's humble faith in the Lord shines through in two ways: in the roster of people who were willing to commit themselves to this difficult enterprise; and, in making the journey without armed protection. We learn:

A. WE HONOR GOD BY TRUSTING HIM TO RAISE UP GODLY, QUALIFIED LEADERS AND PEOPLE FOR THE WORK.

B. WE HONOR GOD BY TRUSTING HIM TO PROTECT OUR WORK AND OUR FAMILIES FROM THE ENEMY.

Our text shows that as God's people seeking to do God's work, we need to recognize that there are enemies and ambushes along the way (**8:31**), and thus we desperately need "*God's hand over us*" to protect us. The enemy is seeking to destroy us and our little ones (**8:21**) by tearing apart families and by bringing down church leaders. I know of many men, formerly in the ministry, who have brought dishonor to God and His church through divorce or moral failure. Satan is especially targeting leaders. Knowing that there are enemies and ambushes along the way, we must humble ourselves and seek God's protection through prayer, and in special times of need, through fasting. God will bless His work through us when we seek to honor Him by humble faith.

2. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by scrupulous integrity.

3. God blesses the work that seeks to honor Him by Christ-centered worship.

Rata: **Chapter 8** teaches two important leadership principles that need to be practiced by today's Christian leaders: humility (**vv. 21–23**) and integrity (**vv. 24–30**). In Ezra's case, this humility was seen in his dependence on the sovereign God who alone can provide safety for His people. Ezra's integrity can be seen in his delegating the care of the offering for the house of God, realizing that both the offering and those who handle it must be holy to the Lord. History has proven that when unholy people handle that which is holy to the Lord, corruption is bred, and oppression reigns.

Gary Smith: Ezra emphasized that all the details of the trip worked out for the returnees because the sovereign hand of a gracious God was blessing their efforts (**8:18**). This central theological idea was not just pious jargon to Ezra; it was the guiding force that motivated his willingness to travel to Yehud without a military guard. Ezra knew that their safety through several provinces would involve traveling through desolate areas

where they would be at the mercy of the local inhabitants. Robbers might attack and kill people, officials might refuse to give permission to continue through their territory, farmers might not have grain to sell them, the weather could be unusually difficult, and crossing rivers and mountains could be dangerous. The wagons could break down, people could get seriously sick, some might get discouraged and want to settle down on some attractive piece of land along the way, or others might rebel against Ezra's leadership. With about 5,000 people traveling together for over 800 miles, there would be plenty of opportunities for external problems as well as internal disunity. Ezra encouraged the travelers to fast and humble themselves before God. This would motivate them to depend on God for safety and protection from evil, to humbly put the good of the group above their own wishes, and to daily look to God for his blessing. Ezra was teaching his followers that this move back to Jerusalem was going to be an act of faith, not a Caribbean cruise with the finest accommodations, slick entertainment, and the best in safety precautions.

Ezra and his friends had already talked to the king and bragged about God's power and care for his people (lit., "*the hand of our God brings good upon those who seek him*"; **8:22**). So he would have looked rather foolish and two-faced if he had asked the king for military protection on their trip to Jerusalem. They believed and claimed that God would protect them on the journey. Now they had to put this theoretical belief into practice. Ezra's fast challenged the people to have a consistency between their faith claims and their action. Failure was pictured in terms of God's anger, not the attacks of some enemy along the way. Failure would come if God's people abandoned their walk of faith and forsook God—"*It is impossible to please God without faith*" (**Heb 11:6**). . .

The long journey to Jerusalem was important, but the text does not give much attention to any trials during the journey, and only a few verses deal with the people's worship of God at the journey's end in Jerusalem. Instead, a great deal of space is spent describing the enormous gift of gold and silver for God from the Persian king and his seven councillors. It is amazing how God was able to provide for the needs of his people and for worship at the Temple in unexpected ways.

Within this narrative, the text emphasizes Ezra and the priests' responsibility to deal honestly with financial matters. It is obvious that Ezra had proven his honesty to the king before this trip; therefore, the king had no trouble trusting him with this huge amount of gold. Part of the reason why the king trusted Ezra was that both Ezra and the king saw this money as a gift to God, to glorify the God of Israel. Since Ezra was intent on treating the gold and silver as sacred, there was no danger of losing any of this vast treasure. He required that it be handled and carried by sacred people and checked at the Temple to make sure not one ounce was missing (**8:24–34; cf. Num 4**).

Ezra was very wise. He wanted to do everything openly so that everyone would know that meticulous care was being given to doing the will of the king. Ezra, the family leaders, the priests, and the Levites were not involved in order to get rich off the king's generosity, and they did not want people falsely accusing them of skimming gold for themselves. This careful accounting also would have discouraged anyone who went on

the trip with them from trying to steal any of the gold. Everyone knew there would be a counting at the end of the trip to see if all the gold and silver were accounted for. Indeed, great care was taken in weighing and counting everything. The results of this final inventory showed that everything was in order down to the very pound; so a final document recording these facts was prepared. These results show the faithfulness of Ezra and the priests who were given responsibility for the silver and gold. Riches or a handsome reward did not motivate them; they were serving God. They were strongly committed to being responsible servants of the king and deeply committed to bringing glory to God through these generous gifts.

The principles that Ezra lived by could apply broadly to many areas of life. If people believe life is sacred, they will treat people as God's sacred trust, requiring care and honest treatment. When something loses its sacred character, people kill, steal, and abuse what is common and not valued. The key is to understand how God values things and people so that we will value what is important in his eyes. This narrative indicates that money is one of the things that matters to God; so it should be treated as God's sacred money. There is no place for waste or carelessness, for the glorification of God is tied up with the way people use his money. Ezra's open handling of money and his belief that all this gold belonged to God are two perspectives that are needed by the leaders of every organization that desires to glorify God.

Randall Smith: **Second Chances – Meet Me at the River**

> **Key Principle: Though God does not hold us responsible for what we cannot do, He delights when we do what He has called us to do.**

Here is the truth: We must resist the temptation to spend our energies doing what God has not called us to do. . .

This will help us focus first on what they did and what we can do as we serve together for God's purposes:

First, Ezra understood the need for a people-centered view of the work (8:1-14)

As obvious as it sounds, there are many today who forget that teamwork is people work. God's vision was set forth, and now people needed to get there and get going. The vision didn't OPPOSE the people – it was FOR the people. Let me say it this way: There are many in ministry who see the goals of the ministry as greater than the people that work in that ministry. The fact is, ministry is about relationship for people by people empowered by Jesus. I love that Ezra took the time to share the names of so many households. I love that he took the time to tell us that they were from genealogical records that could be verified. I do not want to spiritualize the passage, but look at what he says in verse one. Ezra reminds us that he checked out the people before he involve them in the work. . .

Second, Ezra got the right people together for the work (8:15-20)

Having a people centered work is only going to be truly effective if you have the right people. Ezra knew who he WANTED – but that isn't always who volunteers. I think it is clear in the text that he was disappointed that the "right guys" didn't seem quick to step up and volunteer?

Ezra thought the problem through, and delayed moving forward to get the right people in the right positions. What a smart move.

Because I've been a long-time in leadership I can testify to the reality that delay can be one of the hardest disappointments for a leader. Once we ascertain exactly what God wants us to do in some area, we want to reach out and do it right away. Yet, there are many instances in Scripture, where we find God called upon His people to wait on Him — not to rush ahead and accomplish the task even when He has made it clear that is the task He wants completed.

I am struck by the record that shows how Ezra sent for leadership among the priestly class, but he also sent specifically for teachers. He needed people who could work, but he knew that in order to expand the work he needed people that could teach the work. Shortsighted ministry enables workers. Long-term ministry intentionally raises up teachers to build more workers. I came to this conclusion over the years of study of the text — many a church has failed to raise up leaders behind them, and their great work collapsed as a weight upon aging leaders. Jesus told us to make disciples. Some of those disciples must also be teachers. Others, fall into the last category of the text, those who are simply called ministers for the house of God – but are vital to the work!

Third, Ezra called them to get their hearts ready for the work ahead (8:21a)

In order to move people from their busy lives into the work of God, Ezra took the time to separate them from their daily life. Fasting was an outward show of the "time of consecration" to the new work to which they were called.

Fourth, Ezra placed his trust in God's providential power for the success of the whole endeavor (8:21b-23).

He called upon the Lord for the specific needs.

I think it is also significant that he recognized the weaknesses of their flesh.

I love the integrity of Ezra that is revealed in his words of shame. Ezra did not think more of himself than he should, but he was rethinking words that he spoke to the king. He wanted God's name to be elevated, and he wanted to explain the testimony of Who God is and how powerful He is. As a result, he spoke of God's power before the king. What is striking to me about verse 22, is the candor with which Ezra admits what he had done. To admit shame is to admit human weakness. Many men do not show emotions easily. Still others, because of ego, refuse to admit that they are as weak as all others.

I think it is also telling that Ezra and the others were not presumptuous with God. Just because they had a call to do something, didn't mean they didn't need to be very careful about HOW they completed the vision God gave them.

Note that Ezra spotted the blessing and empowering of God when it came. He wrote: Ezra 8:23b…and He listened to our entreaty.

Isn't the confidence inspiring! Ezra prayed, God answered, Ezra celebrated. I'm not suggesting that Ezra knew that moment but God answered, because the passage is reflective – it recalls the story in a truncated way. I simply make note that nothing escaped the leader when it came to being able to point back to God's blessings

Ezra divided tasks for the work (**8:24-30**) and that is one of the most important and yet difficult tasks for any work. How should it be done? The text offers the steps:

First, he identified the key leaders (**8:24**)
Second, Ezra distributed the work (**8:25-27**)
Third, Ezra charged the workers with the tasks (**8:28-29**)
Fourth, the Leaders accepted the challenge (**8:30**).
Fifth, Ezra saw God's protection in the work (**8:31-34**)
Sixth, the people had opportunity to testify about God's help in the work (**8:35-36**)!

Look at the part of the work they were called to do and could do:

- Plan: call people to the work,
- Wait: Hold when the work was not ready to advance,
- Organize: Collect and choose responsibilities,
- Pray: Recognizing they couldn't do God's work in their power.
- Be Accountable: Check one another at intervals.
- Celebrate: Mark what God did every step of the way for them!

Now look at the part of the work they could NOT do:

- Selection: Get the best people in the community to respond (they got who chose to come).
- Guarantee: They could not ensure complete safety nor victory – only that God would be pleased.

Don't forget the prize here… it was an active and vibrant Temple to meet Him daily. It was more time with God! It was intimate, personal relationship with the Creator.
God was delighted. He loves it when we put ourselves in His shadow, and bow to listen to His voice.
https://randalldsmith.com/second-chances-meet-me-at-the-river-ezra-8/

TEXT: Ezra 9:1-15

TITLE: HEARTBROKEN REPENTANCE

BIG IDEA:
EXPOSURE OF FLAGRANT SIN SHOULD LEAD TO HEARTBROKEN REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION:
Expression of remorse over conviction of sin is not a popular theme in our day. We tend to take sin lightly and to minimize any emotional reaction of deep distress and anguish and contrition. Ezra was a godly leader and a man of the Word. He understood God's commands and was very familiar with Israel's repeated pattern of apostasy in the face of God's mercy and faithfulness. Here we see him begin to address the needed reforms in the land – beginning with the problem of marriages to foreigners and the consequential religious idolatry. His humble prayer of heartbroken repentance should still serve as a model for us today.

Gary Smith: Ezra's strong negative reaction to this sin suggests that he thought God would deal very seriously with the people and might destroy the nation for this sin. Ezra's lamenting response also got the attention of those around him and demonstrated to them that he was very upset by this news. **Ezra 9:4** says that "*all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat*" with Ezra. It was important that Ezra not be alone in his opposition to this sin. There is no indication of the size of this group of like-minded individuals who strictly interpreted and followed the law of Moses (**10:3**). Their reporting this problem to Ezra shows they opposed this trend of intermarriage, but they did not have the political or religious stature to change the way some Jewish leaders were acting. Ezra solidified this group's opposition to this unfaithfulness, and his boldness empowered them to take a stand against the broad-minded acceptance of the intermarriage practices of other Jews. Their united public opposition did not directly address the offending parties, but the sincerity of their sorrow and the compassion of their prayers touched the hearts of those who listened. They took the problem to God first, instead of gossiping to their friends about the sins of others.

Derek Kidner: Something of the devotion and insight of the man praying can be sensed in this confession. His involvement with those for whom he spoke comes through at once, in the swift transition from 'I', in the first sentence, to 'our' and 'we' for the rest of the prayer. Ezra could have protested his innocence, but like the servant in **Isaiah 53:12** he was impelled to reckon himself '*numbered with the transgressors*', more deeply ashamed of the national guilt than any of them, and thus more fit to be their spokesman in confession. Secondly, he could not forget the havoc they had suffered—and deserved (**7**)—especially in their loss of freedom (note the words *captivity* (**7**), *bondage* (**8, 9**), *bondmen* (**9**), and the decimation of their numbers, stressed in the recurrence of the word **remnant**: **8, 13, 14, 15**). In other words, he had a high sense of the glory they had betrayed, and he could not be reconciled to what they had become.

But thirdly, he was acutely conscious of God's mercy. The very fact that any remnant had survived was proof of it (**8**), for even their punishment had been mercifully light (**13**), and verses **8** and **9** use vivid terms—characteristically concrete -- for God's many-sided loving-kindness. At the same time, it was a mere shadow of what God could do and give—a little reviving (**8**), some reviving (**9**)—and it was in jeopardy already, after this brief moment (**8**) of grace; for even the eighty years since Cyrus were no more than that in God's perspective.

Breneman: Ezra and Nehemiah constantly turned to God in prayers of worship, confession, praise, petition, and thanksgiving. They show us the importance of an implicit trust in a personal God and that God's work depends on the prayer of his people. Prayer founded on biblical theology assumes that God is omniscient and hears each prayer. It also assumes that God acts in historical events in response to the prayers of his people.

I. (:1-4) EXPOSURE OF FLAGRANT SIN

A. (:1-2) Shocking Apostasy Reported -- Involving Flagrant Sin of Foreign Marriages

1. (:1) Summary Report of Flagrant Sin = Union with Foreign Abominations

> "*Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, 'The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.*'"

Fensham: "*when these things*" -- Ezra needed some time to deliver the orders of Artaxerxes to the satraps and governors. . . Between Ezra's arrival on the first of the fifth month (**8:33**) and the twentieth of the ninth month we have more than four-and-a-half months. This long period between the arrival and discovery of the marriages to foreigners poses a problem. Was he not aware of this fact? If he stayed for more than four months in Jerusalem, one would expect that he would have become acquainted with this phenomenon. . . Ezra had travelled extensively after his arrival to bring his credentials from the Persian king to the attention of the high officials of the Persian empire who lived close to Judah. Then the above-mentioned phrase of **9:1a** can be interpreted as referring to **8:36**. This is a more acceptable solution, but at the same time we must confess that the situation is not at all clear. . .

The reason for this attitude [prohibition of marriage to foreigners] had nothing to do with racism, but with a concern for the purity of the religion of the Lord. Marriages with foreigners, especially when those foreigners were in an important position as in the time of Ezra**,** were fraught with problems for the Jews. The influence of a foreign mother, with her connection to another religion, on her children would ruin the pure religion of the Lord and would create a syncretistic religion running contrary to

everything in the Jewish faith. In the end it was a question of the preservation of their identity, their religious identity.

Loken: Since the meeting of elders described in **10:9** takes place more than four months after Ezra's return, the question of the scribe's ignorance of this situation must be addressed. Surely he would have become aware of the problem if he had spent any amount of time among the people. The solution lies in the fact that Ezra evidently did not remain very long in the city of Jerusalem after his arrival. The final verse of **chap. 8** reveals that Ezra delivered the king's edicts to the satraps who were on the southwestern side of the Euphrates River ("*beyond the River*"). The plurality of the word "*satraps*" indicates that Ezra delivered these documents to satraps in several different provinces. This obligation would naturally have taken several months, especially if the provinces in northern Africa are included. It was only upon his return from this mission that he learns of the apostasy of the Jews.

MacArthur: The reason for this exclusiveness was to keep the people pure. In the first settlement, Israel was warned not to make covenants with the nations, which would result in intermarriages and inevitably the worship of foreign gods (**Ex 34:10-17; Dt 7:1-5**). To a great extent, the continual violation of this precipitated the 70-year exile from which they had just returned. Ezra found out it had happened again and called for immediate repentance. Nehemiah (**Ne 13:23-27**) and Malachi (**Mal 2:14-16**) later encountered the same sin. It is unthinkable that the Jews would so quickly go down the same disastrous path of idolatry. Neither wrath from God in the exile to Babylon, nor grace from God in the return was enough to keep them from defecting again.

Andrew Swango: Canaanites… Amorites. The Canaanites (Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites) and others were conquered by the Israelites when they first settled in the Promised Land under Joshua. We know that the nations were not wiped out by the Jews, but were more thoroughly wiped out by the Assyrians and especially the Babylonians. It is amazing that remnants of these people, at least, remnants of their religions are still around in Ezra's day. It appears that some of their cultures still linger. There is absolutely no mention of these cultures after the time of the Greeks, the empire after Persia. The Greek conquered with their culture as well as their weapons, all these nations were probably assimilated into the culture of the Greeks.

2. (:2) Specific Disturbing Aspects of Such Flagrant Sin

a. Nature and Repercussions of the Sin

1) Nature of the Sin = Mixed Marriages

"*For they have taken some of their daughters*
as wives for themselves and for their sons,"

2) Repercussions = Mingling the Holy with the Profane

"*so that the holy race*
has intermingled with the peoples of the lands;"

b. Nobility Leading the Way in This Apostasy
"*indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.*"

Rata: It was especially distressing that even the priests and the Levites compromised themselves by disobeying the very Law they were supposed to uphold and teach. Not only were these leaders compromised, but the text suggests that some took the lead role in this grave disobedience. The end of **verse 2** clearly states that "*in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost*" (**Ezra 9:2**).

Derek Thomas: It looks as though there is more going on than even what we read here in the ninth chapter of Ezra. Malachi, who is a contemporary prophet to Ezra, records in his second chapter (the final book of the Old Testament) what looks like a sermon in which he is castigating the people not only because they have married outside of the faith, but some of them have divorced their wives in order to do so. These are probably not so much those who have returned with Ezra, but those who had returned on the first wave, under Zerubbabel. These now would be their sons and possibly even their grandsons that are being spoken of here. And perhaps for economic advancement, perhaps for political gain, perhaps for strategic influence within certain communities, it appears as though they have divorced their wives in order to marry outside of the faith.

It's distressing news, by any standard. It's distressing news. They have flouted the express commandment of God. They have married Yahweh – Jehovah, the God of covenant – to Baal…to a false god. There's an inevitable consequence that will emerge from these marriages.

Now imagine the scenario here. These are folk who have come back from Babylon. They've made a home for themselves in Jerusalem, the city of God. They have witnessed — or at least, their parents or grandparents have witnessed — the rebuilding of the temple. They have seen the hand, the favor of God upon them, and still they have flouted the express commandment of God. They were to separate themselves from unbelief. They were to separate themselves from false gods. And what Ezra has discovered as he's preached the word and expounded the word is that the Old Testament church in Jerusalem was no different than the world. There was no holiness about the church. There was no separated-ness about the Old Testament church. They were not living as the holy people of God. It's distressing news. It's distressing news because priests are involved, and Levites — temple workers — are involved; men who should have known better; men who could not argue that they didn't know about this. It's distressing news that in the very heart of the city of God with all of its favors, with all of its revealed religion, there was sin — and flagrant sin.

Loken: The Jews who were involved in this sin were probably those who had returned to the land prior to Ezra's arrival. Welch is of the opinion that only those who returned with Ezra participated in this sin. However, there does not seem to have been enough time for this type of wholesale corruption to have taken place.

B. (:3-4) Shameful Humiliation = Reaction over Conviction of Flagrant Sin

1. (:3) Personal Humiliation over Conviction of Flagrant Sin

"*And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.*"

MacArthur: An outward expression of a grieving, disturbed spirit over sin (cf. **2 Ch 34:27**) characterized Ezra as he saw the people returning to their old ways which would bring judgment again.

Gary Smith: Ezra was outraged at this irresponsible act of sin and its potential repercussions. . . The repetition of words of "*trembling*," "*shocked*," "*appalled,*" and "*outrage*" demonstrate that Ezra and his followers were totally baffled and amazed beyond belief at this callous, sinful behavior by the leaders and priests. The emotional response was strong, and it resulted in a trembling desire to seek God's help. How could these acts of unfaithfulness have happened?

2. (:4) Corporate Humiliation over Conviction of Flagrant Sin

"*Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.*"

Andrew Swango: What would all this look like? Here is Ezra, the new governor of the Persian province of Judah. A few leaders come up to him and tell him that many of the leaders have taken the lead among the people in marrying foreign wives and are tolerating, accepting, or participating in the detestable practices of the nations who lived there before the Israelites even settled in the Promised Land. Ezra, who expected nothing like this, tears his clothes, the usual response when in great remorse and repentance, and is so devastated that he also pulls out his own hair like a mad man. He falls to the ground and just sits there. Many godly men also join Ezra, probably in tearing their clothes also, and sit with him until evening. They could be exposing their underwear, but they sit there in silence until evening.

II. (:5-15) CONFESSION OF HEARTBROKEN REPENTANCE

A. (:5) Transition to Prayer of Confession

1. Rising Up in Shameful Humiliation

"*But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation,*
even with my garment and my robe torn,"

2. Falling Down in Contrite Humiliation

"*and I fell on my knees*
and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;"

B. (:6-7) Testimony of Historic Pattern of Corporate Apostasy

1. (:6) Expression of Solidarity

a. Personal Contrition

"*and I said, 'O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God,*"

b. Corporate Confession – 2 Metaphors of Drowning in Sin and Guilt

1) Drowning in Sin

"*for our iniquities have risen above our heads,*"

2) Drowning in Guilt

"*and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.*'"

MacArthur: Ezra's priestly prayer of intercession and confession is like Daniel's (**Da 9:1-20**) and Nehemiah's (**Ne 1:4-11**), in that he used plural pronouns that identified himself with the people's sin, even though he did not participate in it. The use of "*we*," "*our*" and "*us*" demonstrates Ezra's understanding that the sin of the few is sufficient to contaminate the many.

McConville: Ezra's prayer contains four primary characteristics:

- solidarity,
- confession,
- readiness to change,
- and faith in God's mercy.

Fensham: The structure of this prayer is as follows: It starts with a confession of sin (**vv. 6–7a**); proceeds to the punishment on the sins (**7b**); to the favor of the Lord and his influence on the Persian kings on behalf of the exiles (**8–9**); to another confession of sin and a reference to the marriage with foreigners (**10–14**); and it concludes with a doxology to God (**15**). **Confession of sin** stands in the center of the whole prayer.

In these verses we have Ezra's striking confession of sin, pictured with strong metaphors. The two metaphors concern the iniquities which increased until they were higher than their heads and the guilt that had risen as high as the heavens.

2. (:7) Enormity of Israel's Historic Pattern of Apostasy

a. Timeline of Historic Pattern of Apostasy – Great in Time

"*Since the days of our fathers to this day*"

b. Tremendous Guilt – Great in Guilt

"*we have been in great guilt,*"

c. Sin Lies at the Heart of Shame and Humiliation – Great in Sin

"*and on account of our iniquities*"

d. Tragic Consequences of Sin and Guilt = Painful Oppression – Great in Effect

1) National Defeat

"*we, our kings and our priests*
have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands,"

2) Nihilistic Destruction

"*to the sword,*
to captivity,
and to plunder
and to open shame,"

e. Today's Crisis – Great in Impact

"*as it is this day.*"

C. (:8-9) Testimony of God's Grace and Covenant Lovingkindness

1. (:8) Testimony of God's Grace

"*But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.*"

MacArthur: "*a peg in His holy place*" – A figure of speech that indicated permanence and prominence.

Guzik: In those days, houses didn't really have cupboards or storage closets as we think of them. Things were stored on pegs set up all around the room. If something was on its peg, it was safe and secure, stored properly and ready for use at the appropriate time.

Constable: The temple and the returned exiles were the first small beginnings of a larger establishment in the land that would hopefully follow, as the pounding in of a tent peg is the first step in erecting a tent. It was "a foothold."

Loken: The result of this **foothold** was twofold. First, the return to the land served to "*enlighten*" the "*eyes*" of the nation. This phrase literally refers to the immediate sense of physical revival that nourishment can bring following a period of hunger and thirst (Williamson, 136). This idea is vividly demonstrated in the account of Jonathan in **1 Sam 14**, where this same phrase occurs two times. In this passage, Jonathan unwittingly broke his father's command against eating food when he ate some honey after a long day of battle. Immediately after eating the honey, Jonathan had his "*eyes brightened*" (**v. 27**). He later adds, "*See now, how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey*" (**v. 29**). In the same way, the initial returns gave the nation of Israel an immediate sense of physical revival. Second, the return to the land served to demonstrate a "little revival" in the midst of the nation's bondage. The author evidently considered the nation dead during the exile and in need of reviving (cf. **Ezek 37:1–14**).

Although the nation was still subservient to a foreign power, the various returns were the initial signs of the resurrection of Israel.

2. (:9) Testimony of God's Covenant Lovingkindness

"*For we are slaves; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.*"

Andrew Swango: Ezra knows that God was right and just in doing all those terrible things by the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians to the Jews because of their sins. He recognizes that God did not have to preserve a remnant of the people to live on. It was by God's merciful grace that He has allowed a remnant of Jews to survive and has re-given them the land of Judah and even had them rebuild the temple. Ezra recognizes that everything the Jews have now is not by their own works but it is all because of God's mercy and grace.

Guzik: quoting Trapp -- They had the fence of the king of Persia's favour. They had also God's providence, as a hedge or wall of fire round about them.

Williamson: A **metaphorical interpretation** is by no means impossible in the present context, where several of the phrases have already been seen to fall into this pattern, and indeed two considerations make it more probable. First, the qualifying phrase "*in Judah and Jerusalem*" would be very odd if the reference were merely to the city wall. Second, the word used here is not at all the normal word for a city wall. It usually refers to a wall or fence around a vineyard or along a road. Only in one other passage could it even possibly mean "*city wall*" (**Mic. 7:11**), and even there it is not completely certain that this is what is meant. In any event, the writer was more concerned in a prophecy of restoration, to use a term that refers to the enclosure of a vineyard, a traditional metaphor for Israel in their enjoyment of a healthy relationship with Yahweh.

D. (:10-12) Transparency of Divine Communication – No Confusion or Misunderstanding

1. (:10) Clear Apostasy

"*And now, our God, what shall we say after this?*
For we have forsaken Thy commandments,"

2. (:11) Clear Danger

"*which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.'*"

3. (:12) Clear Warning with Promise of Potential Rewards

a. Warning

1) Avoid Foreign Marriages

"*So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons,*"

2) Avoid Political Alliances

"*and never seek their peace or their prosperity,*"

b. Potential Rewards

1) Strength

"*that you may be strong*"

2) Prosperity

"*and eat the good things of the land*"

3) Legacy

"*and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.*"

E. (:13-15) Total Abandonment of Any Defense or Right to Continue to Exist

1. (:13) No Justification for Our Continued Existence

"*And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God hast requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this,*"

Fensham: **(:13-15**) -- The Jews were punished to a certain extent for their sins. They were exiled and nearly wiped out. In the times of the Persian kings, however, the Lord saved a remnant, who returned to the Holy Land. They were there as a token of his love and grace. And now, if these exiles committed evil deeds and heaped guilt on themselves, the remnant came into danger of being destroyed—and then nothing would be left. It is this kind of reasoning which we have in these verses. But there is still hope. If the exiles confess their sins, the Lord will grant forgiveness through his love.

2. (:14) No Defense for Our Continued Apostasy

a. Our Apostasy Makes No Sense

"*shall we again break Thy commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations?*"

b. Your Mercy Makes No Sense

"*Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?*"

Gary Smith: Notice that Ezra had not yet asked for forgiveness; his focus was on getting the people to see the seriousness of their sin. He had to get them to see their sins as a terrible affront to the holiness of God and as a threat to their continued existence as a people. True confession must come first. People can come to God to receive mercy and forgiveness only after they realize that God hates sin and will punish them for their sins. Some may try to seek his mercy without confessing their sins first, but their

petition will not be heard or answered while sin blocks their relationship to God (**Isa 59:1–2**).

Breneman: The Old Testament passages mentioned earlier warn that God's anger will be kindled if his people disobey him. God is not capricious like human beings; his anger is his just reaction to disobedience and evil. Ezra recognized the seriousness of their condition. They had been punished for disobedience and had experienced God's mercy in reestablishing them. Therefore, to commit the same sins like intermarriage with pagans would demand renewed punishment. Grace ought to result in obedience (**Ps 130:4; Rom 12:1; 1 Cor 6:11**). Believers must learn how serious it is to go back to the evils from which God has delivered and cleansed them.

3. (:15) No Recourse Apart from God

a. No Fault of God

"*O LORD God of Israel, Thou art righteous,*"

Williamson: This little phrase ["*Thou art righteous*," **v. 15**] thus constitutes the highest form of worship: an acknowledgment of God, even though at the same time it accepts that the worshiper has forfeited his or her right to live before God. God is thus praised solely for who he is, and not merely for what the worshiper hopes to gain from him.

b. No Other Hope

"*for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day;*"

c. No Excuses

"*behold, we are before Thee in our guilt,*
for no one can stand before Thee because of this."

MacArthur: All were reckoned guilty and had no right to stand in God's presence, yet they came penitently seeking the grace of forgiveness.

Derek Kidner: The prayer ends with clear recognition that God has every reason to wash his hands of this community, as he had once threatened to do with an earlier generation (**Exod. 32:10**). This was no exaggerated fancy. There were other Israelites scattered abroad, through whom the promises could be fulfilled. Ezra had not even the heart to plead, as Moses had, that God's name would suffer in such a case. His prayer was naked confession, without excuses, without the pressure of so much as a request.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How can you tell whether you have become numb to sin?

2) Does Ezra's response seem over-the-top to you? Why or why not?

3) Do you see Christian leaders expressing corporate solidarity with the past sins of the Christian church?

4) How often do your prayers not make a list of requests from God?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Steven Cole: **The Godly Reaction to Sin**
I fear that in our decadent society, even we in the church have grown so used to sin that it doesn't **shock** us anymore. C. H. Spurgeon (*Autobiography of C. H. Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth], 1:160) warned his fellow pastors of the danger of dealing with sin and sinners professionally, so that we lose our dread of evil. What at first shocked us becomes commonplace and routine. As Alexander Pope perceptively observed (*Essay on Man*, line 217, in *Familiar Quotations,* John Bartlett [Little, Brown, & Co.], 13th ed., p. 317):

> *Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,*
> *As to be hated needs but to be seen;*
> *Yet, seen too oft, familiar with her face,*
> *We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

Because we are so desensitized toward sin, we fail to have the proper response toward it, whether it is our own sin, or sin in others. We minimize it, justify it, or ignore it and go on our way unaffected by it.

If we see someone reacting in a godly way toward sin, we think that he is a bit carried away or extreme. He is judgmental or intolerant. How dare he cast stones at others! Does he think that he is without sin? And so, by casting our stones at him, we justify our sins and go back to business as usual, wondering why God doesn't bless our lives more than He does.

Our text relates Ezra's reaction to the sin of the exiles who had returned to Israel after the Babylonian captivity. About four and a half months (**7:9, cf. 10:9**) after he led a remnant back to the land, it was reported to him that many people in Israel, including many priests, Levites, princes, and rulers, had sinned by taking pagan wives. . .

> **The godly reaction to sin is to recognize it from Scripture, to mourn over it, and to confess it without excuse to the God of mercy.**

1. The godly reaction to sin is to recognize it from Scripture.

A. SCRIPTURE REVEALS TO US WHAT SIN IS.

B. SCRIPTURE REVEALS TO US WHAT SIN DOES TO PEOPLE

2. The godly reaction to sin is to mourn over it.

When Ezra heard of this sin of God's people, he tore his garment and robe, pulled some hair from his head and beard, and sat down appalled for hours. His reaction probably seems extreme to us, and in part it may be culturally determined. But, as Edwin Yamauchi observes, "Rare is the soul who is so shocked at disobedience that he is appalled (*Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 4:664). R. W. Dale said, "It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God" (cited by R. C. Sproul, *The Cross of Christ Study Guide*, p. 35).

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*" (**Matt. 5:4**). In his sermon on that text, Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "I cannot help feeling that the final explanation of the state of the Church today is a defective sense of sin and a defective doctrine of sin" (*The Sermon on the Mount* [Eerdmans], p. 55). He goes on to say that the reason so many professing Christians lack joy is that they have never experienced a real, deep conviction of sin, which is the essence of the gospel. He says (*ibid.*, pp. 55-56),

They have failed to see that they must be convicted of sin before they can ever experience joy. They do not like the doctrine of sin. They dislike it intensely and they object to its being preached. They want joy apart from the conviction of sin. But that is impossible; it can never be obtained. … Conviction is an essential preliminary to true conversion. . .

3. The godly reaction to sin is to confess it without excuse to the God of mercy.

Ezra's prayer is a model of confession.
<u>It has four elements:</u>

A. CONFESSION ACKNOWLEDGES THE ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN ALL HIS DEALINGS WITH US.

B. CONFESSION SUBMITS TO GOD'S RIGHTEOUS DEALINGS WITHOUT COMPLAINT OR EXCUSE.

C. CONFESSION AGREES WITH GOD CONCERNING HIS VIEW OF OUR SIN.

D. CONFESSION CASTS THE SINNER ON GOD'S UNDESERVED MERCY, BASED ON THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST.

Ezra's prayer makes no petition, but rather, he implicitly casts himself and the nation on God's undeserved mercy. He acknowledges that the current return from exile and the

building of the temple are a gracious "little reviving" from God (9:8-9), which those who have sinned have ungratefully disregarded.

Conclusion

J. C. Ryle said, "Christ is never fully valued, until sin is clearly seen" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], on Luke 20:9-19, p. 326). Thus our first reaction to sin must be to see it clearly from the Scriptures. Then, realizing that it put our Savior on the cross, we should mourn over it. Finally, we should confess it without excuse to the God of mercy, appropriating His cleansing for our consciences, that we might be renewed to serve Him in purity.

C. S. Lewis observed, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less" (cited by Nathan Hatch, *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], p. 14). As we grow in godliness, with Ezra we will react more strongly to our own sins and to the sins of God's people. We will dwell more consistently at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, where God's mercy flows to repentant sinners.

Rata: **Verse 14** contains two rhetorical questions. The first one "*Shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations?*" requires a "No" answer. The second question, "*Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us*?" requires a positive answer. In prayer, Ezra exalts God and affirms God's justice and righteousness. Only by confessing their sin and invoking God's grace can the people hope to escape the penalty they have brought upon themselves by disobeying God's Word.

Even though things are improving, the text is clear that the reader should expect more. The people have not gotten their entire land back, the temple is less glorious than Solomon's, and there is still no Davidic king on the throne. These great expectations will only be fulfilled through Christ's first and second comings.

Ezra's prayer is a monument to the importance of prayer for today's Christian leader. Programs, no matter how elaborate or extravagant, can never substitute for a deep prayer life. Like Ezra, we need to learn how to confess personal and corporate sin. Like Ezra, we need to learn to identify ourselves with the people to whom we minister. The leader with a "holier-than-thou" attitude will not get far, while the leader who humbles himself in order to identify with the one who has wronged, will succeed in being like our Lord Jesus "*who made himself nothing*," took the form of a servant, and humbled himself for our sake (**Phil 2:7–8**).

Loken: The first group mentioned is the Canaanites. The Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham. They are identified in Deuteronomy as one of the seven nations in the promised land "*greater and stronger*" than Israel (**Deut 7:1**). The Canaanites lived along the eastern Mediterranean coastal regions from Egypt to the area of Lebanon (**Num 13:29**). The Canaanites, caught between the cumbersome writings of Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, were the inventors of

a simplified method of writing, the alphabet. Biblical Hebrew is derived from the Canaanite language. The Canaanites were also known as artisans, bronze metallurgists, potters, and merchants. However, their most significant impact on Israel came in the area of religion. The Canaanite fertility cult was perhaps the most immoral and vile religion known to man. The chief god of the Canaanites was Baal, god of thunder and lightning. Other gods included El, the patriarchal deity who was the father of Baal; Yam, the god of the sea; Asherah, the wife of El; Mot, the god of the underworld; and Anat, the sister of Baal. The Canaanites worshipped their gods by engaging in sexual immorality involving male and female prostitutes and sacrificing their children. The Canaanite religion proved to be too attractive for the Hebrews to resist. Israel's worship of Baal seems to have been the most significant sin among those that led to the nation's deportation (cf. **Jer 11:17; Hos 2:1–13; 11:2; Zeph 1:4**).

The second group mentioned is the Hittites. The Hittites were the descendants of Heth, the son of Canaan (**Gen 10:15**). They are identified in Deuteronomy as one of the seven nations in the promised land "*greater and stronger*" than Israel (**Deut 7:1**). Many scholars consider the Hittites as the third most influential people group of the Ancient Near East, rivaling the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians. The Hittites dominated Asia Minor, their capital located on the Halys River at a place called Boghaz-keui in central Anatolia. Groups of Hittites migrated south, eventually settling in the hill country of Canaan near the city of Hebron (**Gen 23:19; Num 13:29**). Notable Hittites include Ephron, from whom Abraham purchased a burial site (**Gen 23**), and Uriah, one of the mighty men of David (**2 Sam 23:39**). Esau married two Hittites (**Gen 26:34**), and Solomon had Hittite women in his harem (**1 Kgs 11:1**).

The third group mentioned is the Perizzites. The origin of the Perizzites is unknown. They first appear in **Gen 13:7**, where they are simply identified as dwelling in the land of Canaan with the Canaanites at the time of Abraham (cf. **Gen 34:10**). They are identified in Deuteronomy as one of the seven nations in the promised land "*greater and stronger*" than Israel (**Deut 7:1**). During the period of the judges they lived in the heavily forested region near Mount Ephraim in the territory allotted to the tribes of Ephraim and West Manasseh (**Josh 17:15**). The Perizzites may have lived in unwalled villages, probably located in the heavy forests mentioned above or in the low ground between hills (cf. the lxx rendering of **Deut 3:5; 1 Sam 6:18**).

The fourth group mentioned is the Jebusites. The Jebusites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (**Gen 10:16**). They lived in the hill country (**Num 13:29**) and were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jebusite Jerusalem was taken by King David in about 1004 b.c. (cf. **2 Sam 5:5–8**). The Jebusites are identified in Deuteronomy as one of the seven nations in the promised land "*greater and stronger*" than Israel (**Deut 7:1**). During the period of the judges they lived in the general region of Jerusalem in the territory allotted to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (cf. **Josh 15:63; Judg 1:21**). It should be remembered that Jerusalem was among the cities allotted to the tribe of Benjamin (**Josh 18:28**). Notable Jebusites include Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem who formed the alliance against Gibeon (**Josh 10:1–4**), and Araunah (also known as Ornan), from whom David bought the threshing floor that would become the site of

Solomon's temple (**2 Sam 24:16–24; 1 Chr 21:14–27**). If Salem is identified as Jerusalem, then Melchizedek may have been a Jebusite (cf. **Gen 14:18**).

The fifth group mentioned is the Ammonites. The Ammonites were the descendants of Ben-ammi, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his younger daughter. The Ammonites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The nation's territory was essentially surrounded by the Jabbok River and its tributaries. As a result, the border of Ammonite territory was referred to simply as the Jabbok River (**Deut 3:16; Josh 12:2**). The sources of the Jabbok River are near modern Amman, Jordan. This territory had previously belonged to the Rephaim, an ancient people who were displaced by the Ammonites (**Deut 2:20–21**). The earliest documentation of hostilities between the Ammonites and the Israelites is the record of **Judg 3:12–14**, where the Ammonites join the coalition formed by Eglon, king of Moab. Jephthah later defeats an unnamed king of Ammon (**Judg 11**). Notable Ammonites include Naamah, the wife of Solomon and mother of Rehoboam (**1 Kgs 14:21, 31; 2 Chr 12:13**), and Tobiah, one of the major antagonists of Nehemiah (**Neh 2:19; 4:3**). Solomon built a sanctuary for Molech, the "*detestable*" chief god of the Ammonites, on the Mount of Olives (**1 Kgs 11:7**). Child sacrifice was a significant part of the Ammonite Molech cult (**Lev 18:21; 20:2–5; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 32:35**).

The sixth group mentioned is the Moabites. The Moabites were the descendants of Moab, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. The Moabites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, just to the south of the Ammonites. The land of Moab was famous for its pasturage. **2 Kgs 3:4** testifies to the agricultural wealth of the area: "*Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep breeder, and used to pay the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams*." The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh (**1 Kgs 11:7, 33**). The worship of Chemosh included a priesthood (**Jer 48:7**) and a sacrificial system (**Num 22:40; 25:2**). The climate of Moab also allowed for the growing of wheat, barley, vineyards, and fruit trees. Solomon married Moabite women and built a sanctuary for Chemosh on the Mount of Olives (**1 Kgs 11:1, 7**). Notable Moabites include the following: Balak, the king who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (**Num 22–24**); Eglon, the king who was assassinated by Ehud (**Judg 3:15–30**); Ruth, the widow of Mahlon and wife of Boaz (**Ruth 4:10, 13**); and Mesha, the king who rebelled against King Jehoram of Israel **(2 Kgs 3**). Mesha is of special significance thanks to the archaeological discovery of the thirty-four-line Mesha Inscription, also known as the Moabite Stone. The Mesha Inscription dates to approximately 830 b.c. and commemorates Mesha's achievements, especially his overthrow of Omride oppression after the death of Omri. The text specifically names Omri king of Israel. It also specifically names Yahweh in the statement that Mesha, having captured an Israelite town, "took from there the vessels of Yahweh and dragged them before Chemosh" (lines 17–18).

The seventh group mentioned is the Egyptians. The land of Egypt is strategically located at the northeastern tip of Africa, forming a land bridge to the continent of Asia. The most significant feature of the land of Egypt is the Nile River. In fact, Egypt is often called "*the gift of the Nile*." Because the Nile River flows from south to north,

southern Egypt is known as Upper Egypt while northern Egypt is known as Lower Egypt. The Egyptians may be the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. The land of Egypt is sometimes identified as the land of Ham in the OT **(Pss 78:51; 105:23, 27; 106:22**). Like Israel, Egypt was a land of religion. Herodotus notes, "They [the Egyptians] are beyond measure religious, more than any other nation.… Their religious observances are, one might say, innumerable" (Hist. 2.37). The chief god of the Egyptians was Ra, the sun god. However, many other gods were routinely worshipped including Osiris, god of the Nile, and Isis, goddess of children. These gods were shown to be inferior to Yahweh through the ten plagues sent upon Egypt. . .

The eighth and final group mentioned is the Amorites. The name Amorites is derived from the Akkadian Amurru, meaning "west." They were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (**Gen 10:16**). The Amorites lived to the west of Mesopotamia and thus were called "westerners." The Amorites had their origins in Syria and migrated south into the land of Canaan. They were so numerous that the land of Canaan is called Amurri in the Amarna letters. The Amorites are identified in Deuteronomy as one of the seven nations in the promised land "*greater and stronger*" than Israel (**Deut 7:1**). The Amorites lived in the hill country on both sides of the Jordan River (**Num 13:29; Josh 5:1**). The so-called King's Highway traversed their territory (**Num 21:21–22**). They were largely nomadic shepherds, supplying sheep and goats to the Canaanite cities. Notable Amorites include Sihon and Og, two kings who were defeated by the Israelites on their way to the promised land (**Num 21**).

Gary Smith: In summary, this chapter describes how one man dealt with a sin that was discovered within the community of believers. Once he knew it was there, he did not rationalize it away, ignore it, make excuses for it, try to redefine it as something that was not that bad, sweep it under the rug, or claim that it was someone else's problem. Ezra knew sin must not be ignored, but squarely and honestly faced. The consequences of sin for the individual and the community must be fully understood and owned. Only a fool would ignore a cancer that would soon bring death. Tolerating sin, especially among leadership, only condemns the community to destruction and permits people to redefine sin for themselves. People need to know what God has said about sin, and they need to understand why God calls certain acts sin. Sin is rebellion against God's words, impurity that defiles the holy people of God, and unfaithfulness or wickedness that is characterized by despicable moral and ritual behavior.

Sometimes sin is not intentional, but other times people make decisions that are a rejection of the warnings of Scripture or the admonitions of a fellow believer (**9:11**). Of course, some sins are more dangerous because they lead down a slippery slope into more and more unfaithfulness to God. Marriage to an unbeliever is one such example, because if a believer marries an unbeliever, there will be a continual negative influence on the believer. Over time the temptation to accept what is wrong will be very strong. The holy state of marriage is defiled and complete unity is impossible when one partner is not committed to God.

When sin is encountered, it should drive people to their knees in prayer and lamentation. If the sinner does not acknowledge something as sin, then spiritual people who tremble at the words of God (**9:4**) need to confess the offender's sins and intercede for God's grace. The intercessor needs to see these sins as "our sins," not "his sins," because God will deal with the community as a whole—both the praying and the offending brother. How can God bless the praying brother if he allows his offending brother to continue in his sin unchallenged? Once the sin is known, the first step is to confess it to God, not to attack the errant brother. Our hatred of sin should embarrass us and shock us so much that we are ashamed and appalled that it exists in our midst. This astonishment will partly arise because it is so unreasonable and treasonous to reject God after he has been so gracious to us (**9:8–9**). It makes no sense to be enjoying God's blessings, enlightenment, love, protection, and deliverance and then ignore all that God has asked us to do. When such unfaithfulness to God becomes apparent, it must be openly admitted, and its dire consequences must be recognized (**9:5–7**).

Although we may deserve the wrath of God's justice because of our guilt (**9:8, 15**), sometimes God deals with us graciously, not as we deserve (**9:13**). After a brief period of past punishment, God may allow us to prosper and protect us. When such things happen, a return to our old sinful ways is inexcusable. When a nation has all of God's glorious promises open before it, how could these same people turn their backs on God again?

Finally, this chapter suggests that our prayers may do as much, if not more, to reach and transform another believer as our nagging and accusing. We must be broken by sin and not proudly condemn the other person. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore or condone sin; it must be called sin and confessed. Once the house of God is pure, it will be a shining light to the grace of God. God's unfailing love and grace bring hope, but sin brings death and hopelessness.

TEXT: Ezra 10:1-44

TITLE: ACTIVE REPENTANCE

BIG IDEA:
ACTIVE REPENTANCE EXPRESSES SORROW TO GOD WHILE COMMITING TO CORRECTIVE ACTION

INTRODUCTION:
This is a classic passage demonstrating the difference between mere remorse for sin and genuine repentance. Sorrow for sin lies at the heart of any spiritual response to conviction. But the active nature of repentance is featured here in the covenant commitment to change behavior and to put away the foreign wives with their children. There certainly are some surprising and disturbing aspects of this community divorce pact. But the emphasis must be on the need of God's people for holiness to maintain their testimony as the distinct witness to God's glory. Embracing the aberrant practices of false religions is an abomination to God and a disgrace to His name. Effective leadership enlists community buy-in to take the radical steps needed to stamp out apostasy and recover from such unfaithful relationships. Sadly, this revival did not last for long.

Loken: Ezra's leadership technique in this book largely involved leadership by spiritual example. In this passage, you can see how effective this style of leadership can be. Not all leaders have to be aggressive with the people placed under their care. Allow the Holy Spirit's conviction to work in your favor. Model the life of Christ, and your followers will be encouraged to do the same.

McConville: It was the godliness and commitment of Ezra, testifying more powerfully than any harangue to the reality of God, of right and wrong and of judgment, that brought others to repentance.

Andrew Swango: Ever since **7:27**, Ezra has been writing in first person. This marks a return to third person. It is very probable that **Ezra 10** was written by someone else. It could have been a later historian. Or, I believe it is more likely that these are the official historical documents of the province.

William Nicoll: Ezra's narrative, written in the first person, ceases with his prayer, the conclusion of which brings us to the end of the ninth chapter of our Book of Ezra; at the tenth chapter the chronicler resumes his story, describing, however, the events which immediately follow. His writing is here as graphic as Ezra's, and if it is not taken from notes left by the scribe, at all events it would seem to be drawn from the report of another eye-witness, for it describes most remarkable scenes with a vividness that brings them before the mind's eye, so that the reader cannot study them even at this late day without a pang of sympathy. . .

Whatever opinion we may form of the particular action of Ezra, we should do well to ponder gravely over the grand principle on which it was based. God must have the first place in the hearts and lives of His people, even though in some cases this may involve the shipwreck of the dearest earthly affections.

I. (:1-5) ACTIVE REPENTANCE EXPRESSES SORROW FOR SIN VIA CONFESSION AND COVENANT COMMITMENT

A. (:1) Corporate Penitence – Weeping / Praying / Confessing

"*Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.*"

Williamson: It has already been noted in **chap. 9** that Ezra's prayer was both a genuine confession of sin to God and at the same time aimed at giving a lead to the people so that they might respond out of conviction rather than coercion. In this latter purpose Ezra clearly succeeded. Drawn by the wailing of those who had already gathered, and no doubt sensing that a long-standing problem was nearing its climactic solution, a large crowd gathered expectantly. The qualification "men, women, and children" draws attention to the unusual size and comprehensive composition of the crowd. It also introduces a note of tragic gravity as it reminds the reader of the possible social consequences of the proceedings about to be initiated, a point recapitulated in the last verse of the chapter.

B. (:2-4) Covenant Proposal – Put Away the Foreign Wives and Children

1. (:2) Unfaithful Yet Still Hopeful

"*And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, 'We have been unfaithful to our God, and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.'*"

Williamson: Shecaniah belonged to a family (Elam) that had returned to Judah from Babylon at the first opportunity (cf. **2:7**). Since it was this group that was primarily involved in the mixed marriages, he was well qualified to act as spokesman. He is not, however, included in the list of offenders in **vv 18–44**. Unless this is the result of editorial abbreviation (which would seem improbable in this case), we will have to understand his following confession as representative, just as Ezra's was.

2. (:3) Ultimatum

"*So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children,*"

a. Based on the Counsel of Ezra and the Penitents

"*according to the counsel of my lord*
and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God;"

b. Based on the Law

"*and let it be done according to the law.*"

Williamson: a pledge or binding agreement with one another to a specific plan of action related to acceptable marriages.

Fensham: Even the children born from the illegal marriages must be sent away. This proposal is harsh in the light of modern Christian conceptions. Why should innocent children be punished? We must remember that the religious influence of the mothers on their children was regarded as the stumbling block. To keep the religion of the Lord pure was the one and only aim of Ezra and the returned exiles. As a small minority group, the repatriates lived in the Holy Land among a large population of influential people who were followers of various polytheistic religions. Against such larger numbers they had to defend themselves and their religious identity. Thus the drastic measures are understandable.

3. (:4) Urging Ezra to Take the Lead

"*Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.*"

Gary Smith: The people recognized Ezra as an authority on God's law and knew that he would know best what to do.

C. (:5) Commitment Promise – Taking the Oath

"*Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.*"

Loken: Upon hearing the words of Shecaniah, Ezra immediately rose from his knees. He made the elders of the Jews take an oath that they would follow the advice of Shecaniah. Once again, the Jews are divided into three groups, i.e., the priests, the Levites, and the laity (cf. e.g., **9:1**). The taking of oaths was customary in the Ancient Near East (cf. **Josh 6:26; Judg 21:5; Neh 6:18**).

II. (:6-8) ACTIVE REPENTANCE EMBRACES BOTH PRIVATE ANGUISH AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

A. (:6) Private Anguish

1. Seeking Solitude

"*Then Ezra rose from before the house of God*
and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib."

2. Mourning Unfaithfulness

"*Although he went there, he did not eat bread, nor drink water,*
for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles."

B. (:7-8) Public Accountability

1. (:7) Proclamation to Assemble

"*And they made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem,*"

2. (:8) Penalty for Failing to Appear

"*and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.*"

III. (:9-16a) ACTIVE REPENTANCE URGENTLY RESPONDS WITH CORRECTIVE ACTION

A. (:9) Public Assembly – Trembling Multitude

1. Urgent Assembly

"*So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month,*"

2. Unmasked Guilt

"*and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain.*"

Loken: The text notes that the exiles sitting in the open square of the temple were trembling. Two reasons for this phenomenon are provided. First, the exiles were trembling because of the sheer magnitude of this matter. Clearly, they understood the significance of the occasion. Many of their lives were about to be forever changed. Many were going to lose wives and children. Perhaps even many feared for their lives, knowing that Ezra had the authority to put them to death (cf. **7:26**). Second, the remnant was trembling because of the heavy rains. These rains would have been not only extremely heavy but also bitterly cold. The crowd was thus experiencing both an internal emotional anxiety and an external physical distress. Hays remarks, "Even the weather seems to cast judgment on the people: as the people wait outside the temple, they are trembling, not just because of the gravity of the matter, but '*because of the heavy rain*' (**10:9**). If this is not intended as a direct sign of God's displeasure, it is at least intended to intensify the pathos of the situation: the Bible does not tend to report weather conditions idly."

B. (:10-11) Prophetic Appeal – Commanding Confession and Corrective Action

1. (:10) Idolatrous Indictment

"*Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, 'You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel.'*"

2. (:11) Required Response

"*Now, therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers,*

and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

Gary Smith: The moment of truth and real leadership had arrived for Ezra. It was time to take a difficult but courageous step of obedience that might be controversial and divisive. Ezra had probably never encountered a similar situation while living in Persia, but now the expert on interpreting the law of God had to decide how the community should proceed in implementing God's will in this practical matter. The problem was that there is no explicit information in the law about how to proceed in such a situation. So Ezra needed to firmly but sensitively construct a process that would be true to God's ideals and acceptable to his audience. Ezra had to act while the people were under conviction and willing to cooperate with him.

Rata: Confession of sin must be followed by doing God's will and not one's own. "*Separate yourselves*" points to the heart of God's holiness. To be holy means to be set apart from the world and for the purposes of God. Ezra's exhortations "*do His will*," and "*separate yourselves*," point to the dual aspect of holiness. To be holy means to be set apart from the world, but it also means to be set apart to God—to do His will and work. One cannot do one without the other. One must separate from whatever causes one to be profane rather than holy. In the case of the returnees, this meant separation from their foreign wives and the local population who were worshipping foreign, dead gods. Holiness then, is not just more important than the closest human relationship, but it is the most important since it focuses on one's relationship with a holy God.

Loken: As the masses huddled under the driving rain, Ezra rose to speak to the assembly. His speech was short but powerful. It is composed of four key elements.

- First, the scribe accused the exiles of being unfaithful to the Lord by marrying foreign women.
- Second, Ezra explained that their personal sin had communal implications; it added to the guilt of the nation. The entire nation could be exiled as a result of the sins of a few.
- Third, the scribe called on the people to "give praise" to the Lord. This phrase was probably a popular idiom for expressing heartfelt repentance. Before a person can truly praise the Lord, he must first repent and make confession. Therefore, the idiom used here refers to the entire process.
- Fourth, Ezra commanded the remnant to do the will of God, namely, to separate from foreigners, especially the foreign wives.

Andrew Swango: Confess and do. This is what repentance is all about. It is recognizing that sin has occurred and being remorseful over it. But that is just the first half of repentance. For repentance to be complete, a person must also do the will of God. In this case, Ezra explains what they are to do: separate themselves from their foreign wives and surrounding people. The same thing happened at Pentecost when Peter preached his first sermon. The people were cut to the heart, recognizing that they had sinned and were remorseful. Then the people asked, "*Brothers, what must we do*?" We see that as another great example of repentance becoming complete.

C. (:12-14) Prudent Arguments Regarding Deliberate Process

1. (:12) Approving the End Goal

"*Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, 'That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do.'*"

2. (:13) Adjusting the Timeline to Complete the Process

a. Considerations

"*But there are many people, it is the rainy season, and we are not able to stand in the open.*"

b. Caution

"*Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter.*"

Fensham: The role of the leaders is fully recognized in Ezra, and here on behalf of their people they produced three arguments why on that very day the investigation into the marriages with foreign women should not proceed. First, the people gathered there were a large crowd, and it would take a long time to organize the crowd. Second, it was raining and they were standing in the open without any protection. The situation was not favorable for a calm investigation; tempers could flare up easily. It would not be easy to decide on such a personal matter and nothing should stand in the way of a calm investigation in favorable circumstances. Third, a great number of cases had to be decided. Some of them might be problematical. It was thus unwise to draw hasty conclusions and to commit an injustice to people. In the situation there in the open, with a large crowd assembled, the reasonableness of these arguments was beyond cavil. But they also had a solution for the problem. This shows that their arguments were not an escape from the problem of intermarriage. They proposed that the chiefs must substitute for the congregation. They must organize the whole investigation. On appointed times those that had married foreign wives had to come to Jerusalem for the investigation. But they should not come on their own. Their local leaders and judges who knew their circumstances were to accompany them. This last proposal is very important. The people wanted a fair investigation in which every case would be carefully scrutinized with the aid of leaders who had an intimate knowledge of the circumstances.

The proposals were concluded with a religiously motivated clause, namely, the important aspect that the anger of God must be averted. The prayer of Ezra had made a lasting impression on them. Because of the marriages to foreign women the whole congregation was contaminated. Now they must purify themselves. Judges refers probably to the local judges in towns and not to state judges.

3. (:14) Advising Regarding the Next Steps to Take

a. Representative Approach

"*Let our leaders represent the whole assembly*"

b. Righteous Adjudication

"*and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times,*
together with the elders and judges of each city,"

c. Redressing Divine Anger

"*until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us.*"

D. (:15-16a) Popular Assent

1. (:15) Minimal Opposition

"*Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.*"

2. (:16a) Maximum Compliance

"*But the exiles did so.*"

Breneman: Since the Hebrew literally says "*stood against*" (or alongside of), it has been suggested that it does not mean they were opposed. However, the normal reading of the verse is that these men did oppose the decision. The text does not say why they opposed it; they may have objected to taking the time the assembly requested. However, the sense of the verse is that they opposed the whole decision to put away the foreign women. The emphasis here is on the unity of the community with little opposition.

Derek Thomas: Meshullam, in **verse 15**…if you glance down at **verse 29,** you'll see that he is named, implying perhaps if it's the same Meshullam, that he had married an unbelieving wife. Understandable, then, that he didn't like the plan.

IV. (:16b-44) ACTIVE REPENTANCE COMPLIES WITH OPEN INVESTIGATION AND VERIFIED FINDINGS

A. (:16b-17) Open Investigation

1. (:16b) Selecting the Investigators = Heads of Households

"*And Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of fathers' households for each of their father's households, all of them by name.*"

2. (:16c) Conducting the Investigation

"*So they convened on the first day of the tenth month*
to investigate the matter."

3. (:17) Finishing the Investigation

"*And they finished investigating all the men*
who had married foreign wives by the first of the first month."

Loken: The proceedings took almost three months, thus revealing how deeply this sin permeated the community. The investigations began on the first day of the tenth month and were completed by the first day of the first month.

B. (:18-44) Verified Findings

1. (:18-19) Sons of the Priests

a. (:18) Relatives of Jeshua Identified

"*And among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah.*"

b. (:19) Response of Compliance and Sacrifice

"*And they pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense.*"

Rata: The list has no title and includes seventeen priests, six Levites, three gatekeepers, one singer, and eighty-four laity. Just as in the days of Eli (**1 Sam 1–3**), even some sons of the priests have committed the sin of intermarriage. The fact that the list starts with the priests highlights the fact that religious leaders and their families are not exempt from sin. However, they obey Ezra's command and "*pledge themselves to put away their wives*."

2. (:20-22) Sons of Leading Men

a. (:20) Sons of Immer

"*And of the sons of Immer there were Hanani and Zebadiah;*"

b. (:21) Sons of Harim

"*and of the sons of Harim:*
Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uzziah;"

c. (:22) Sons of Pashhur

"*and of the sons of Pashhur:*
Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah."

3. (:23) Levites

"*And of Levites there were Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.*"

4. (:24) Singer

"*And of the singers there was Eliashib;*"

5. (:24b) Gatekeepers

"*and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.*"

6. (:25-43) Sons of Israel = Laity

"*And of Israel,*"

a. (:25) Sons of Parosh
"*of the sons of Parosh there were Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benaiah;*"

b. (:26) Sons of Elam
"*and of the sons of Elam:*
Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah;"

c. (:27) Sons of Zattu
"*and of the sons of Zattu:*
Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza;"

d. (:28) Sons of Bebai
"*and of the sons of Bebai:*
Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai;"

e. (:29) Sons of Bani
"*and of the sons of Bani:*
Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth;"

f. (:30) Sons of Pahath-moab
"*and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh;*"

g. (:31-32) Sons of Harim
"*and of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah;*"

h. (:33) Sons of Hashum
"*of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei;*"

i. (:34-42) Sons of Bani
"*of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu, 38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph.*"

j. (:43) Sons of Nebo
"*Of the sons of Nebo there were Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah.*"

7. (:44) Summary

"*All these had married foreign wives,*
and some of them had wives by whom they had children."

Derek Kidner: As the margin indicates, the last half of this verse is obscure, and most modern versions rely on the parallel in 1 Esdras 9:36, which not only makes sense but is informative, showing that the policy advocated in **verse 3** was adopted.

On this painful note the story of Ezra's ministry breaks off. It is appropriate enough. His mission was to apply the law to his people (**7:14**), and the law brings the knowledge of sin. But a postscript will follow, when Ezra will present the positive and festive aspects of the law: its gift of light to the mind (**Neh. 8:8**), and its witness to God as liberator and provider (**Neh. 8:9–18**).

Until that moment, some thirteen years beyond the events of this chapter, Ezra will disappear from the record. Meanwhile further trials will overtake the Jewish settlers, until Nehemiah arrives to transform the scene.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

1) How can you tell the difference between mere remorse and genuine repentance?

2) Do you think Ezra was right or wrong to insist on divorce in this situation?

3) Should this passage be used as support that the Bible allows for divorce today in certain situations?

4) How does this passage impact your views on the necessity of church discipline?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Gary Smith: Ezra wisely worked with the community of repentant sinners to discover a method or procedure that would protect the holiness of the nation and deal fairly with those involved in mixed marriages, in which a Hebrew was married to an unbeliever. Ezra set a good example for all who are dealing with sin in the community of believers:

1. He took the matter to God, identified with the troubles of his audience, and squarely faced the failures of the community (**9:1–15**).
2. He waited until some repented and confessed their unfaithfulness to God (**10:2**), saw their need for renewing their covenant with God, decided to obey God's word, and were willing to submit themselves to the spiritual leaders in the

community (**10:3–4**). Ezra could not force revival, but he could show the way and invite others to follow.
3. He made sure that the leaders were repentant before he began to address the problem throughout the community (**10:5**).
4. He invited the whole community to consider the problem and develop a workable, practical solution that was fair and took the evidence into consideration (**10:7–8**).
5. He unambiguously communicated the fundamental problem without muddying the waters with other complicating factors ("*you have committed a terrible sin*"), identified the first step toward resolution with God ("*confess your sin*"), and outlined the basic changes needed if a resolution to the problem was desired ("*separate yourselves from the people of the land*") in **10:10–11**. All the other factors could be worked out later, if everyone could agree on these few basics.
6. He listened to suggestions about creating proper procedures that were fair and orderly so that the people could avoid God's wrath (**10:13–14**).
7. He was aware of opposition (**10:15**) but did not let a minority prevent the community from moving forward with the plan that most people accepted.
8. He shared authority with other leaders in deciding what to do with mixed marriages (**10:16**).
9. He completed the task in relatively short order and helped the unfaithful ones to right their relationship with God (**10:17–19**).

Breneman: This episode shows the danger of moral and spiritual apathy and the importance of maintaining the identity of the believing community in a pagan world. The commission of Artaxerxes to Ezra was to develop Judaism as a religious community. According to Malachi, some men already had divorced their Jewish wives to take foreign women, and the process of assimilation had already begun (**Mal 2:10–17; 3:13–15**). So the threat to the community was real. It also shows the seriousness with which the Bible treats marriage between believers and unbelievers (**2 Cor 6:14–18**). Furthermore, this episode also shows the wisdom of Ezra's leadership. As vital as his leadership was, he did not force his decision on the people. Rather, he influenced the leaders and people, relying on the power of God's Word and Spirit; and the decision was made by the community of believers. We can learn from his teaching, his patience, and his example. This shows how strong convictions, held deeply by one leader or a minority, can influence the future of the whole community's life and thought. Just as in Ezra's time, the believing community today often faces crises that demand strong leadership and decisive, united community action.

Andrew Swango: First, let's look at some interesting facts in this whole situation. The fact that the Jews married foreign wives is not in itself the problem. It was their detestable practices that they continued to do. What evidence is there for this? Take a look at how many men divorced their wives because of their solution. Scholars have noted that the number of men listed in **Ezra 10:18-43** is surprisingly few. When you add all the numbers of all the exiles who came under Zerubbabel (**Ezra 2:64-65**) and Ezra (**Ezra 8:3-20** plus women and children) (not including Sheshbazzar, Nehemiah, or

the number of children that were born in the province of Judah), the total is 55,000 but it can easily be more. When you add up all the men who divorced their wives in **Ezra 10:18-43**, you get 110. Therefore, out of 55,000 or more people in the province of Judah, 110 men had married foreign wives. That is about 0.2%!

Go back and read the report given to Ezra in **9:1-2** and the call for all of Israel to come to Jerusalem to discuss this matter. Up to this point, this problem has been portrayed as huge and nation-wide. How could only 110 men be guilty!? One explanation given is that there were many, many hundreds of men who had married foreign wives. But those wives had converted to Judaism. As men would come to Jerusalem with their foreign wives, it was judged whether their wives were guilty of detestable practices. If not, then the women were allowed to remain married. Their situation would become the same as Salmon, Boaz, and David. But if a woman would not give up her detestable practices, then the men were guilty of marrying a foreign wife who worshiped pagan gods and they divorced them. In this view, there were 110 men who had married wives who would not convert to Judaism. They are the ones who allowed detestable things to be done in their home, so they divorced their wives to keep their households pure. So in this view, there was not a mass divorce, but only 110 men whose wives had not converted to Judaism and committed detestable practices.

Moses' law about not marrying foreign wives was given through God and cannot be ignored. Although Paul seems to have instructed completely different things, is there a way that these two instructions under two covenants agree? I submit the following. Firstly, Moses told the Jews to not marry foreign wives; Paul told certain Christians to marry in the Lord (**1Cor 7:39**) which is a good principle for all Christians. When it comes to Jews and Christians marrying, Moses and Paul agree that they should marry in the Lord. But what about those who become Christians after they have married someone? . . .

Why didn't Ezra have the foreign wives killed like Phinehas had done? Because Ezra knew that it wasn't foreign wives that were the problem but their **detestable practices**. In divorcing the foreign wives, they were the wives that would not give up their detestable practices. So Ezra and all the people are doing exactly what Moses said in **Deut 7**. **Verse 5** says, "*Instead, this is what you are to do to them: tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, cut down their Asherah poles, and burn up their carved images.*" There was no misinterpretation of **Deut 7:1-6**. Everything can be explained by showing that their solution was not based on the wives being foreign; it was based on their foreign wives' detestable practices.

In the end, it wasn't marrying foreign wives that was sinful but being married to a wife who committed detestable practices. And there was never a mass divorce; only 110 men were affected this way. Look at the strengths of this view.... Their solution did not have to follow Phinehas' example because God told them in **Deut 7:5** told them to do something else. They followed God's command not to intermarry with them because their detestable practices would pull them away from God. Why there were so few men who were found guilty of a nation-wide problem. They followed the example of

Salmon, Boaz, and David by allowing the men to remain married to foreign wives who converted. They treated the foreigner well, just like the Law of Moses often commanded. They destroyed the people of the land who had not given up their pagan gods. And their application of their solution has strikingly similar parallels to Paul's instructions in the New Testament. Therefore, this third view, which is based on their solution focusing on the detestable practices and not only the foreign wives and that many foreign wives who had converted were accepted so that only few were found guilty... this third view can explain everything.

Steven Cole: **Genuine Repentance**
The Bible is clear that there is both genuine and false repentance. Twice Pharaoh told Moses, "*I have sinned*" (**Exod. 9:27; 10:16**), but he did not truly repent. Esau felt bad and wept over giving away his birthright, but he did not truly repent (**Heb. 12:17**). Judas felt remorse over betraying Jesus and even said that he had sinned (**Matt. 27:4**), but he did not repent.

If we want to be right before God, we must make sure that our repentance is genuine, not glib. Our text is not comprehensive, but it does give some marks of genuine repentance:

Genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins and prompt action to correct them.

1. Genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins.

A. GENUINE REPENTANCE MUST BE PRIMARILY TOWARD GOD.

B. GENUINE REPENTANCE FEELS DEEPLY THE WRONG OF OUR SINS.

C. GENUINE REPENTANCE ACCEPTS THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR WHAT WE HAVE DONE.

D. GENUINE REPENTANCE SEES HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR.

2. Genuine repentance takes prompt action to correct our sins.

A. GENUINE REPENTANCE TAKES THE NECESSARY ACTION TO CORRECT OUR SINS, EVEN WHEN IT IS PERSONALLY DIFFICULT TO DO SO.

B. GENUINE REPENTANCE TAKES THE NECESSARY ACTION TO CORRECT OUR SINS, EVEN WHEN IT IS POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE TO DO SO.

Conclusion
Thus genuine repentance involves heartfelt sorrow before God for our sins and prompt action to correct them, even when it is difficult and potentially divisive.

There are many today who teach that all that a sinner has to do is to believe in Jesus, and that repentance has nothing to do with salvation. It should come later, they would say, but to call sinners to repentance is to confuse faith and works. But Jesus said that He came to call sinners to repentance (**Luke 5:32**). In the Great Commission Jesus said "*that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations*" (**Luke 24:47**). Paul summed up his gospel as "*solemnly testifying … of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**Acts 20:21**). We must begin the Christian life by repentance and faith.

But repentance is not just something that we must do at the beginning of salvation. It is something that should characterize believers all of their lives. As the Holy Spirit convicts us through God's Word of our sins, we should go on repenting. In Eastern Europe, those who are nominal Christians in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have a word for those who are true Christians: "Repenters." I think that we need to adopt that term in America. True Christians should be genuine, lifelong "Repenters." May it be so of each of us!

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