

THE BOOK OF EZRA

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Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are placed at the close of the third division of the Jewish canon, which is called "Ketubim." In the Talmud, the Massorah, the Septuagint, and in the writings of Josephus, Ezra and Nehemiah are treated as one book. It is claimed that originally Chronicles with Ezra and Nehemiah formed one book. The last two verses with which Second Chronicles closes are repeated in the opening chapter of Ezra.

(The order of the books in the Hebrew Bible is as follows: I. Tora (the law) Genesis--2 Kings, except Ruth; II. Nevijin (the prophets) Isaiah--Malachi, except Lamentations and Daniel; III. Ketubim (the Writings) Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles.)

Ezra, the Author of the Book

No valid proof can be given that the Jewish and early Christian view, that Ezra is the author of the book which bears his name, is incorrect. He was a pious, deeply spiritual man. His genealogy is found in chapter 7:1-6. We learn that he was a lineal descendant of Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron; and therefore Ezra was a priest. (See chapter 7:11; 10:10, 16.) He was also a scribe--"a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given" (7:6); "a scribe of the words of the commandments and of the statutes of Israel" (7:11). We find him first mentioned in the seventh chapter. The record is given that he went up to Babylon ... "and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD God upon him." He received permission from King Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) in the seventh year of his reign (458 B.C.) to lead a number of the people back to Jerusalem. His beautiful, godly character may be seen in the three last chapters of the book, in which he is the principal actor. He was a great man of prayer and worship, with a childlike trust in the LORD, with great zeal for God and an intense interest in His people and their welfare. Much is said of Ezra in talmudical literature, where his greatness and worthiness is celebrated. According to these traditions he was in meekness and godliness like Moses. It is said that he first

introduced the Hebrew alphabet in square characters, and that he made the Massorah and punctuation of the Scriptures. He is also considered to be the author of the Jewish canon, and to have rewritten the whole of the Old Testament from memory. most likely he wrote Chronicles besides the record contained in this book. It is more than likely that he collected the Psalms in a book and arranged them under the guidance of the Spirit of God in the order in which we possess them now. His great reformation work we shall point out in the annotations.

The Story of the Book

The book of Ezra records chronologically the return of the remnant to Jerusalem and the events which took place after their return. The rebuilding of the temple and its dedication are fully described, while Nehemiah records the rebuilding of the wall and the city. The edict of Cyrus permitting the Jews to return and urging the rebuilding of the temple is followed by the list of names of those who returned under Zerubbabel, a son of David, to Jerusalem. The given number is 42,360. After their reestablishment they proceeded with the building and dedication of the altar, after which the foundation of the temple was laid. Then the mongrel race, the Samaritans, came offering their fellowship in the building of the temple; their cooperation was positively rejected. Then the adversaries troubled them, hired counsellors against them, and for a number of years the work stopped. A letter addressed to the king of Persia is inserted in chapter 4 and is written in Aramaic (Chaldean). (The Aramaic portions of Ezra are chapters 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26.) Then appeared in the midst of the discouraged remnant, when the work had ceased, the two great post-exilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. As a result of the fiery exhortations of Haggai and the glorious visions of Zechariah, a revival took place and under Zerubbabel with Joshua the high priest, the prophets helping, the building of the house began. Next the governor Tatnai appeared, attempting to stop their work; but he did not succeed. He appealed to the king in a letter which is also given in full in Aramaic; he was confident that he would succeed in ending the work of the remnant. Ezra had access to these documents and reports them in the Chaldean language in which they were written. But when Darius the king instituted a search there was found in Achmetha, in the palace of Media, a roll with the record of Cyrus, which Tatnai the governor had insinuated was a falsehood, used by the remnant to continue the work. Then Darius made a decree by which Tatnai and his companions were commanded not to interfere any more with the work of the house of God, but that the Jews should build the house. The decree also appointed a generous contribution day by day from the king's goods for the Jews. The hostile governor was forced to carry out the decree of the king. After that the temple was completed and dedicated. They kept the feast of Passover and unleavened bread. This concludes the first section of the book.

Many years after these events had taken place, Ezra comes upon the scene. Ezra's work is described, and how, authorized by the decree of Artaxerxes, he headed an expedition of exiles, who returned to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' letter is given in full in the language used by the Chaldeans (Aramaic). Ezra's outburst of praise follows the decree of the king. A list of all who joined Ezra in the return is found in the beginning of the eighth chapter. They gathered at the river Ahava, encamping there for three days. Ezra discovered that none of the sons of Levi were in the company. A number of these were soon added to the returning exiles. Before the journey

was started there was a fast and humiliation before God; they looked to Him for a straight way and for protection. They departed from Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month and reached Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, the LORD graciously protecting them from robbers. After that follows the great reformation work in which Ezra dealt with the deplorable moral conditions into which the people had fallen.

The Spiritual and Dispensational Application

This interesting historical account of a return of a remnant from Babylon contains a message for us. Divine principles are revealed in this book, which find their application to God's people at all times. These spiritual and dispensational lessons will be pointed out in the annotations.

The Division of the Book of Ezra

This book is divided into two sections. After the edict of Cyrus there is a return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, the rebuilding of the temple and its dedication. Then after sixty years the return under Ezra took place.

I. THE RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL AND THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE (1-6)

II. THE RETURN UNDER EZRA AND HIS REFORMATION (7-10)

Analysis and Annotations

I. THE RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL AND THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

CHAPTER 1

1. The proclamation of Cyrus (1:1-4)
2. The response of the chiefs of Judah and Benjamin (1:5-6)
3. The vessels of the house of the LORD restored (1:7-11)

Verses 1-4. Cyrus (meaning "the Sun") the King of Persia was, according to ancient historians, the son of Cambyses, Prince of Persia, and Mandam, daughter of Astyages, King of the Median Empire. The theory that he was the offspring of Ahasuerus and Esther, and was trained by Mordecai and Nehemiah, lacks all historical foundation. The heart of Cyrus in the beginning of his reign was stirred by the LORD, because the time had come that the Word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah might be fulfilled. And this was the Word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah: "For thus saith the LORD, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place" (Jer. 29:10). The seventy years were ended and God was about to act in behalf of His people Israel. Daniel was praying in Babylon after also having read the words of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:1-2). Cyrus was the chosen instrument of the LORD to bring about the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of the temple. Almost two hundred years before his birth the LORD had revealed his name and his work to the prophet Isaiah. Twice Isaiah mentions the name of this Persian King: "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasures, even saying to Jerusalem,

Thou shalt be built, and the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut" (Isa. 44:28, 45:1). "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build my city and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of Hosts" (Isa. 45:13). This was written by this prophet of God over a century before the temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Previously in Isaiah Jehovah had spoken his challenge to the idol-gods to show their power: "Let them bring forth, and show us what shall happen, let them show the former things, what they be ... or declare us things for to come; show the things that are to come afterward" (Isa. 41:22-23). In naming Cyrus the king, and the great work he would do for the exiles and for Jerusalem, the LORD demonstrates His power to declare things to come and to make the future known. And who would doubt that an omniscient God, who knows all things, the end from the beginning, could do this? Only infidels and destructive critics. The latter have invented a Deutero-Isaiah who, it is claimed, wrote the above prophecies concerning Cyrus after he had come into existence and done the work.

It will be seen that the Spirit of God through Isaiah spoke of Cyrus as the shepherd, the anointed, the man of my counsel (Isa. 46:11); whom the LORD loveth (48:14); whose right hand the Lord upholdeth (45:1); who will perform the LORD's pleasure (44:28); and yet he is also called "a ravenous bird from the East" (46:11). Cyrus is, as the chosen instrument, a type of the Messiah, Christ. A comparison of Cyrus with Christ, the work Cyrus did for Israel and the work Christ will do in His second coming, is interesting.

The proclamation which Cyrus issued and sent in writing throughout his kingdom speaks of God as "the LORD God of heaven," and in his edict Cyrus declares, "He hath charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." How did Cyrus receive this knowledge? Beyond question he knew Daniel, and may have heard from his lips the history of Nebuchadnezzar as well as the great prophecies. This prophet may also have acquainted Cyrus with the prophecies of Isaiah. According to Josephus, the great Jewish historian, Cyrus read the book of Isaiah himself. When he came to the place in which Isaiah mentioned him by name, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was written in these prophecies. From the record here we learn that it was the LORD who stirred him up to issue the proclamation. In it permission was granted to those Jewish exiles throughout his kingdom to return to Jerusalem to build the house of the LORD; and those who remained were to help with silver and gold, with goods and beasts, besides free-will offering for the house of God. Thus God's Word spoken over two hundred years before was fulfilled in this proclamation of Cyrus: "He shall let my captives go;" "Saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid"; these were the two great prophetic statements of the work he was to do. And so it came literally to pass. All predictions of a future restoration of Israel to their land, not through a Gentile king, but through the coming of Heaven's King, the Shepherd of His sheep, will soon find all their literal fulfillment likewise.

Verses 5-6. There was at once a response from the heads of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites. What joy must have filled their hearts when they read the proclamation of Cyrus. What they had longed and prayed for had come at last. God was acting in their behalf and

His promises were about to come to pass. It was the LORD who stirred them to action and to turn their faces towards Jerusalem. But not all were ready to go back; only a small remnant was willing. The great majority preferred to remain in Babylon. There was nothing to attract them to Jerusalem--the city of ruins, with the once magnificent temple in ruins. Those who returned, loved Jerusalem, the place the LORD had chosen, where alone the appointed offerings and sacrifices could be brought. They belonged to those who sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion and said, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Ps. 137:5-6). And the Jews who remained helped them generously in every way.

Verses 7-11. Then Cyrus restored the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem and put into the house of his gods (Daniel 1:2). His grandson, Belshazzar, defiled them at his licentious feast (Dan. 5:2). In that night Belshazzar was slain and Babylon fell. No doubt Cyrus had these vessels collected and carefully guarded. Mithredath the treasurer handed them to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This prince was Zerubbabel: Sheshbazzar was the name the Babylonians had given him. He was born in Babylon; his name Means "stranger in Babylon." He became the princely leader of the returning exiles. Besides being mentioned in Ezra we find his name also in the book of Zechariah. In all there were 5,400 vessels of gold and silver which were handed over to Zerubbabel to take back to Jerusalem. How it all shows that God had not forgotten His people, and when His appointed time came He manifested His power in their behalf. Nor has He forgotten His promise to bring a remnant back from the great dispersion among all the nations of the world. When that return comes, a greater than Zerubbabel the prince of Judah will be the leader. The Lord Jesus, the Son of David, will be their Deliverer.

CHAPTER 2

1. The leaders (2:1-2)
2. The names of the returning exiles (2:3-35)
3. The priests (2:36-39)
4. The Levites and singers (2:40)
5. The porters and Nethinim (2:42-54)
6. Solomon's servants (2:55-58)
7. Those of doubtful descent (2:59-63)
8. The number of the whole company (2:64-67)
9. The offering of the house of God (2:68-70)

Verses 1-2. This chapter contains the names of the returning remnant. It is a specimen page of the records which God keeps, and from which we may learn that He remembers His people, whom He knows by name and whose works are not forgotten by Him. In the book of Nehemiah this list is repeated (chapter 7) with an additional record of those who helped in building the wall. He has a book of remembrance (Mal. 3:16); and the apostle reminded the Hebrew believers of this fact when he wrote: "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have showed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints and do minister" (Heb. 6:10). There were twelve leaders. Only eleven are given by Ezra; in Nehemiah's record we find an additional name (Nahamani), making twelve in all. Zerubbabel was the leader of the returning captives. His name means "seed of Babylon." He is called the son of Shealtiel, the son or grandson

of Jeconiah, and was therefore a descendant of David. His name appears in the two genealogies of Matthew (1:12) and Luke (3:27). In 1 Chronicles 3:19 he is called the son of Pedaiah, who was Shealtiel's brother. This double ascription of parentage may probably be accounted for by Pedaiah having contracted a levirate marriage with Shealtiel's widow. The second leader was Jeshua, also called Joshua. He was a son of Jehozadak and grandson of the high priest Seraiah. Zerubbabel, the princely leader, son of David, and Joshua, the high priest, are types of Christ. (See Zech. 4 and 6.) Nehemiah is not the Nehemiah who led the other expedition years later, nor is Mordecai the uncle of Queen Esther, who was an old man and evidently remained in Shushan (Esther 10:3). The names Nehemiah and Mordecai were quite common among the Jews. The names of some of the others appear in a slightly changed form in Nehemiah; it was a Jewish custom to call a person by different names.

Verses 3-35. The descendants of the different persons are now given. In all we find 24,144 descendants. Their individual names are not recorded but the Lord knows them all, and cared for each member and sustained them in the journey homeward. Even so He knows all His sheep and keeps every member of His body, leading them home to glory. If some of the numbers do not agree with Nehemiah's record, there is no doubt a good reason for it. For instance, the descendants of Arah are here 775 and in Nehemiah we find only 652 recorded. Probably 775 had enrolled their names but only 652 went. All the names recorded may be traced in other portions of the Scriptures.

Verses 36-39. The different temple officials are recorded next. These are priests, Levites, singers, porters and Nethinim. The priests are first mentioned. In 1 Chronicles 24 there are mentioned twenty-four courses. Jedaiah, Immer and Harim are found in the record of the Chronicles. In all there were 4,289 priests who went back. And these constituted four courses only.

Verses 40-41. Only seventy-four Levites returned. This was a very small number. (Hodaviah should be read Judah; chapter 3:9.) There were more singers than Levites. The children of Asaph, that sweet and blessed singer in Israel, were one hundred and twenty-eight. No doubt they encouraged the returning exiles in song, by the spirit of praise and worship. The Babylon experience, so beautifully expressed in Psalm 137, was passed. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?" All was changed now. God was working. Deliverance had come and singing no doubt was heard again among the returning hosts. But why were so few Levites ready to go back? According to the divine instruction in the Law they were to have no inheritance save in the LORD. It was a test of faith to return under these circumstances, and for this reason many Levites must have tarried in Babylon, where things were abundant. Those who returned were tested (Neh. 13:10).

Verses 42-54. The names of the porters and Nethinim. There were in the company one hundred and thirty-nine porters. The Nethinim were temple servants. The word means "given" or "devoted," i.e., to God. We find this name in only one other passage (1 Chron. 9:2). According to Ezra 8:20 this order originated with King David. Jewish tradition identifies them with the Gibeonites, whom Joshua appointed as helpers to the Levites (Josh. 9:3-27).

Whatever their origin, they were devoted servants of God assigned to certain duties in the temple.

Verses 55-58. Then comes the record of the children of Solomon's servants. These with the Nethinim were three hundred and ninety-two. Nothing certain is known of these additional servants, whose duty seems to have been similar to that of the Nethinim. Some regard them as the descendants of the strangers whom Solomon had enlisted in the building of the temple (1 Kings 5:13).

Verses 59-63. These verses tell us of the great caution exercised by the people not to tolerate one in their midst whose origin was in any way doubtful. They were determined that Israel should be an unmingled Israel. Therefore they were most careful in examining the genealogies to exclude all who could not be clearly established as true Israelites, for none but such should engage in the work. The true family of God was now marked out and all who could not clearly prove their connection were set aside. There were six hundred and fifty-two who had joined the company from the Babylonish places Tel-melah, Tel-harsa, Cherub, Addan and Immer. They were the children of Delaiah, of Tobiah and Nekoda. These could not show their descent. They were allowed to return with the rest, but their names are not found in Ezra 10:25-43 or in Nehemiah 10:15-28. And also children of priests sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found; they were therefore counted as polluted and put from the priesthood. Tirshatha is the governor (a Persian title meaning "your severity"); his name was Sheshbazzar, the official title of Zerubbabel, the prince (chapter 1:8). Nehemiah also had that title (Neh. 8:9). Zerubbabel, the governor, ruled that those uncertified priests should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and Thummim. And how many are there today in the professing Church who are in the same uncertainty. While making an outward profession, they have no assurance, they have no clear title and do not know that they belong to the holy priesthood into which grace brings all who have been born again. The Church has become a great house (2 Tim. 2:20-21) in which we find the true children of God and those who are such only in profession. If there is to be a return from the Babylon which Christendom is today, the same principle of separation must be maintained. Only those who are born again, who can "show their father's house," constitute the members of the body of Christ.

Verses 64-67. The number of the whole congregation was 42,360. There were also 7,337 servants and maids, among them two hundred singers; the latter must be distinguished from those mentioned in verses 41 and 70. Singing was evidently a very prominent occupation on the journey towards the homeland! Their groans were ended. The captivity was behind and freedom before. How beautiful the chanting of their great psalms must have been as they journeyed on. But greater still will be the time when the wandering remnant, so long scattered among the nations, turns homeward; when through the coming of their King their groans will end forever, and when they sing the Hallelujah chorus in the kingdom of righteousness and peace.

There were likewise 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 asses.

Verses 68-70. These last verses tell us of what happened when they came to Jerusalem. They must have sought at once the ruins of the former temple, for that is the spot they loved. Significant it is that though it was razed to the ground, it still existed in the mind of God, and also in the thoughts of the people. It does not say "when they came to the ruins,"

but "when they came to the house of the LORD." And then the hearts of the fathers were touched, and they gave after their ability unto the treasurer of the work 61,000 drams of gold and 5,000 pounds of silver and one hundred priests' garments. They were faithful in their giving, not according to the Law, the tenth part, but after their ability. And in the New Testament the rule for the Church as to giving is stated in 1 Cor. 16:2, "Upon the first day of the week, let each one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him."

CHAPTER 3

1. The altar set up (3:1-3)
2. The feast of tabernacles celebrated (3:4)
3. The sacrifices brought (3:5-7)
4. The foundation of the temple laid (3:8-13)

Verses 1-3. How long the journey lasted is not stated. The previous chapter in its close states that all dwelt in their cities--"and all Israel in their cities." The significant seventh month (Tishri) with its holy convocation (feast of trumpets, day of atonement and feast of tabernacles) having come, the remnant gathered "as one man to Jerusalem." It was the time for such a general gathering, for the feast of trumpets is typical of the restoration of Israel, a restoration which was not fulfilled in the return of this remnant; only foreshadowing it. This gathering "as one man to Jerusalem" reminds us of that other gathering in Jerusalem centuries later "when they were all with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1) and the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and all were baptized into one body, the Church. There is only one body, and all true believers are put into that body by the same Spirit. This oneness was manifested in the beginning of the church on earth (Acts 2:41-47; 4:23, 32). While its outward expression is lost, yet still the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace can be kept. (Sectarianism is a denial of that unity.) Whenever the Spirit of God is permitted to manifest His power unhindered among God's people, the result is always in bringing them together. The Spirit of God never divides, but unites.

Then Jeshua the high priest with his brethren priests, also Zerubbabel and his brethren, built the altar of the God of Israel, to be enabled to bring the burnt offerings as commanded in the law. Obedience to the Word of God was their first concern. Fear was also upon them because of the people of those countries, therefore they felt the need of protection. They knew Jehovah is the Shield and the Refuge of His trusting people. First they were obedient to His Word by setting up the altar for worship and approach to God in the appointed way, and then they trusted Him that He would keep them in the midst of their enemies. The altar and the burnt offerings morning and evening are typical of Christ, who is the altar and the burnt offering. Whenever the Spirit of God sends a true recovery and revival He will make the Lord Jesus Christ and His blessed finished work the first thing. He leads His people together, and then in true worship around the Person of the Lord. This worship centers for the true Church in the Lord's Supper, that precious feast of remembrance.

Verse 4. Next they kept the feast of tabernacles--as it is written (Lev. 23:33-36). They manifested a holy zeal in rendering a complete obedience to the law of their fathers. The feast of tabernacles typifies the consummation when the kingdom has come and the full harvest. Another

remnant of Israel will return in the future, under different circumstances, and then when Messiah, the King, is in the midst of His people, the feast will find its fulfillment. We learn from this how exact the returned exiles were to be in obedience to the Word of God. Without having the house to worship in, destitute of almost everything, they earnestly tried to please God by leaving the ways of Babylon and submitting to the Word of God. This is another mark of the power and energy of the Spirit of God in His gracious work or recovery; He leads back to the Word of God and gives power to walk in obedience.

Verses 5-7. It was a complete return to the law of God. Continual burnt offerings were offered, new moons and the set feasts of Jehovah were kept. Then the spirit of sacrifice was also manifested--they offered a free-will offering unto the LORD. And though the foundation of the temple was not yet laid, they gave money to the masons and to the carpenters in anticipation of the laying of the foundation and building of the temple. Meat, drink and oil were given to them of Zidon and Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa. Permission had been given to do this by King Cyrus.

Verses 8-13. We doubt not that their faith also was tested in the beginning, for nine months passed by before the work began. It was in the second month of the second year after their arrival in Jerusalem, when the Levites from twenty years and upward were appointed by Zerubbabel and Jeshua "to set forward the work of the house of the LORD." The leaders were foremost in the work, and associated the people with themselves in the blessed enterprise. They were "laborers together" (1 Cor. 3:9). They took hold of the work in earnest. The order in this chapter is the building of the altar-worship; obedience to the Word of God, and then whole-souled and united service for the Lord. This is the order still for God's people. And in that work God's order was not ignored but conscientiously followed, for the Levites are mentioned first (Numbers 4; 1 Chron. 23:24). In all things they adhered strictly to the Word of God. And when the work was actually begun a holy enthusiasm took hold of them, and all the people praised the LORD with a great shout. It was a great celebration, led by the priests in their apparel, with trumpets. Next came the sons of Asaph with cymbals. Their praise was after the ordinance of David, King of Israel. They sang together by courses in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD "because He is good, for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel." Then all the people shouted with a great shout. The Spirit of praise took hold upon their hearts. They celebrated the goodness and mercy of Jehovah towards His people, which are endless. But there were also tears. The old men, Priests and Levites, and others who still remembered the Solomonic temple in its great beauty, wept with a loud voice; while others shouted aloud for joy. The voice of the shouting and of the weeping was so mingled together that it could not be discerned. The tears were occasioned by remembering the glories of the former days, which had passed away.

Joy was in His presence and acceptable. Tears confessed the truth and testified a just sense of what God had been for His people, and of the blessing they had once enjoyed under His hand. Tears recognized, alas! that which the people of God had been for God; and these tears were acceptable to Him. The weeping could not be discerned from the shout of joy; this was a truthful result, natural and sad, yet becoming in the presence of God. For He rejoices in the joy of His people, and He understands their tears. It was, indeed, a true expression of the state of things (Synopsis of the Bible).

And when we too remember the former things and present conditions in the ruin and confusion all around us in that which professes His Name, we also weep. And yet we shout and praise Him when we remember His mercy, which endureth forever.

CHAPTER 4

1. The offer of the Samaritans refused (4:1-6)
2. The letter to King Artaxerxes (4:7-16)
3. The king's reply (4:17-22)
4. The work is stopped (4:23-24)

Verses 1-6. The adversaries were the Samaritans. (There is an interesting correspondence with the book of Acts. After the Spirit of God had begun His blessed work, the enemy from without and then within started his hindering work.) They had watched silently the work of restoration and then appeared before Zerubbabel and the chief of the fathers and said unto them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God, as ye do, and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esar-haddon, King of Assur, who brought us up hither." These words revealed their true origin. They were a mongrel race settled by heathen kings in the conquered territory of the house of Israel, the ten tribes. We find the history relating to them in 2 Kings 17:24. The king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, Cuthah, Ara, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and colonized them in Samaria. They were a wicked lot, and the LORD punished them by sending lions in their midst. Then they appealed to the Assyrian king and expressed a desire to get acquainted with the "manner of the God in the land." Priests of Jeroboam, who were captives, were then sent to them. One of these priests taught them in Beth-el the corrupt worship which had been the downfall of the ten tribes. The result was "they feared the LORD, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places." They served their own idols at the same time. The record saith, "Unto this day they do after the former manners, they fear not the LORD, neither do they after their statutes, or after their ordinances, or after the law and commandment which the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel." These Assyrians married Israelitish women who had been left in the land. (In the British Museum is a cylinder containing the annals of Esar-haddon, giving the deportation of the Israelites and the settlement of colonists in their place.) These corrupt people with their well sounding words remind us of the Gibeonites in Joshua's day. They illustrate the wiles of the devil. The leaders of the remnant refused them participation in the building of the house of the LORD. They realized that they were a separated people and to permit these Samaritans to come in would have been disobedience to the Word of God, bringing His displeasure upon them. If they had been permitted to link themselves with the people of God, corruption and disaster would have been the result. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua endowed with divine wisdom knew that they were adversaries and had no call and no right to engage in the work of the LORD. It was a decisive reply they received. "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the King of Persia, hath commanded us." At once they were unmasked. They turned against them, molested them, and hired counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose. They also wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. The Hebrew word (used only in this passage) is "sitnah," cognate with the noun "Satan." Satan was the power behind these Samaritans and

their efforts to hinder the work. Their method was Satan's method. These Samaritans may well be compared with the large masses in Christendom who have a form of godliness and deny the power thereof. Like the Samaritans the unsaved multitudes in professing Christendom pretend to serve the Lord, but they are the enemies of the Cross, and their belly is their god, they mind earthly things. The New Testament demands separation from such (2 Cor. 6:14-18; 2 Tim. 3:5; 2 John 11). Fellowship with them is disastrous, for they are only natural men, not having the Spirit and are therefore unfit for Christian fellowship, for they are serving the world and its god.

Verses 7-16. Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel, Persians, and officials of the government, probably closely identified with the Samaritans and residents of Jerusalem, wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes. (Ahasuerus is a regal title, meaning "the venerable king"; Artaxerxes also is such a title, meaning "the great king.") With the eighth verse begins an Aramaic section of the book, which extends to chapter 6:18. The Syrian tongue was Aramaic. The letter is a very cunningly devised document, full of misrepresentation and falsehood, inspired by him who is "the liar, and the father of it." They accused the Jews of building Jerusalem and setting up the wall. This was a falsehood, for only the house was being built and not the wall or the city. What they said about the city, its former character of rebellion, was true, and the accuser made use of the past sins of the nation. But God had again been gracious to His people and turned their captivity. Reminding the king of the possible danger if the city were built again and fortified by a wall; and the loss of revenue, they inspired fear in the king's heart. The same accuser of the brethren, liar and falsifier, who stood behind these letter writers, is still at work and will continue till he is cast out (Rev. 12).

Verses 17-22. The king received the letter and instituted a search into the former history of Jerusalem, which verified what the letter claimed, and he commanded at once that the city should not be built. The falsehood that they were building the city and the wall was not discovered. The enemy was successful. Yet a faithful God watched over it all.

Verses 23-24. We can well imagine that when the letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai and their companions, with what a feverish haste they must have rushed up to Jerusalem, and made them cease from the work by force and power. "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius, King of Persia." The remnant was severely tested, and at that time there set in a decline. The former energy seems to have left them, as we find when we consider Haggai's message. Nor do we read anything at the close of this chapter about turning to the LORD in prayer.

CHAPTER 5

1. The prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah (5: 1)
2. The result of their ministry (5:2)
3. Tatnai's interference (5:3-5)
4. The letter to Darius (5:6-17)

Verse 1. At that critical time when the enemy seemed to have triumphed, and they were losing their interest, God graciously intervened by sending them His two messengers the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Their great prophetic messages will be more fully taken up in our annotations on

the books which contain their prophecies. The voice of prophecy is always heard when the people of God are in decline. The greatest prophets appeared at the darkest period of Israel--Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel. Two months before Zechariah began his prophetic ministry Haggai lifted up his voice and addressed Zerubbabel and Joshua (Jeshua). It was the Word of the LORD which he communicated to the princely and priestly leaders of the people. This first message gives an interesting light upon the situation of the remnant. (Read Haggai 1.) The people were saying "The time is not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built." This they must have said on account of their enemies; they were waiting for a more providential time, when they could pursue the building of the house. The next words of Haggai reveal the moral condition of the people: "is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in ceiled houses, and this house lie waste?" Then the exhortation, "Consider your ways." From these words we learn that they had settled down in comfort and were more occupied with building themselves houses than with finishing the house of the Lord. And God had dealt with them for this neglect; they had suffered on account of it (Hag. 1:6-11).

Verse 2. When the burning message of Haggai was delivered the LORD revived them again. They arose from their state of apathy and began to build the house of the LORD, the prophets of God helping them. The book of Haggai tells us that they all obeyed the voice of the LORD their God ... and the people did fear before the LORD. No sooner had they obeyed and feared the LORD than another message came through the prophet: "I am with you, saith the LORD." They no longer feared their enemies, nor the King's command, but they feared the LORD, and at once the work was vigorously resumed and the house finished (6:15). The Word of the LORD was used in their revival. Every true and genuine revival always started and always will start with the Word of God, hearing and believing what God has spoken.

Verses 3-5. This new start attracted at once the attention of their enemies. Tatnai, governor on this side of the river and Shethar-boznai with their companions appeared on the scene. (In cuneiform tablets of the first and third years of Darius Hystaspis, a governor Ustnai is mentioned. He is described in Assyrian as the governor of the province.) They asked the questions, "Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up the wall? What are the names of the men that make this building?" ("We" in verse 4 is "they," Tatnai and his companions, See verse 10.) Thus the enemy made another effort to hinder the work. He never fails to attack that which is done to the glory of God. But these enemies did not reckon with the Keeper of Israel who neither sleeps nor slumbers. Little did they know that what they were doing would lead to victory for God's people and would result in finishing the house of God. The eye of God was upon the elders of the Jews. He gave them strength, courage and assurance, so that they could persevere in the work. God was with them, and who then could be against them? God restrained Tatnai from giving order to suspend the work, so that they worked right on. Blessed are all the servants of the LORD who toil in the fear of the LORD, knowing that His eye is upon them and that He sustains all who put their trust in Him.

Verses 6-17. Then Tatnai and his associates sent a letter to King Darius, which gives the unreported details of their visit to Jerusalem. The letter tells us that the house was built with great stones and timber in the walls, and that all prospered in their hands. Zerubbabel and his companions had answered the inquiries to Tatnai as follows: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth." Thus they gave a witness of

themselves and then related what had taken place, and how Cyrus had made the decree to build the house of God. The letter stated that Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) had laid the foundation and that the house was still unfinished. Then follows the request: "Now, therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the King to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning the matter." The builders must have had perfect peace about this letter, knowing that the LORD was with them.

CHAPTER 6

1. The search of the king and the result (6:1-5)
2. The command of Darius (6:6-12)
3. The king's command obeyed (6:13)
4. The house finished (6:14-15)
5. The dedication of the house (6:16-18)
6. The feast of Passover and unleavened bread (6:19-22)

Verses 1-5. King Darius had a search made in the place where the records of the empire were kept, "in the house of the rolls." The word "rolls" is "books" and these consisted of clay tablets on which the cuneiform inscriptions were preserved. Neither the Aramaic nor the Hebrew language has a word for clay tablets. Whole libraries of such clay tablets were found at Nineveh and elsewhere, and can now be seen in different museums. The searchers found the desired record at Achmetha (the Ecbatana of Greek writers, the capital city of Media, which is the modern Hamadan). Divine providence had preserved this interesting command of Cyrus, and the same providence guided the searchers to the place where it was kept. From it we learn interesting details. Cyrus gave instructions concerning the foundations, the height and the breadth of the building, the expenses were to be met from the King's house, i.e., the royal treasure house. Persian Kings controlled the religious affairs of the nation; but Cyrus acted under divine guidance of the LORD (1:1).

Verses 6-12. Darius answered the communication of Tatnai and Shethar-boznai at once. He commands, "Be ye far from hence," do not hinder the work, let the work of this house of God alone. And furthermore he directed that the Jews were to be assisted in the building of the house by the paying of the expenses. Darius was anxious that the house should be built and speedily completed. The material mentioned was for the sacrifices and offerings. Young bullocks, rams and lambs for the burnt offerings. Wheat, oil and salt for the meal offering, and wine for the drink offering. All these things were to be given to the priests without fail day by day. "That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savour unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the King and of his sons." God was working again, and used Darius as His instrument for the accomplishment of His own purposes. All the enemy was doing to hinder the work turned out to its furtherance. How often this has been in the history of Israel and the Church. The decree of Darius demanded the death penalty for all who altered the command he had given. "And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and peoples that shall put their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed." These words warrant a belief that Darius had knowledge of the God of heaven. The events which transpired during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in the Babylonian Empire, when Daniel was there, as well as

the things which happened under the reign of the other Darius (Daniel 6) may have been fully known to Darius Hystaspis who gave this decree. And solemn were his words that God would destroy all kings and people who alter or destroy this house of God. How this came repeatedly to pass history tells us. (Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod and the Romans defiled and destroyed the house, and God's wrath came upon them for it.)

Verse 13. What Darius commanded was speedily done. All opposition ended and the enemies were completely defeated. God had undertaken in behalf of His trusting people, whose faith had been revived through the messages of Haggai and Zechariah.

Verses 14-15. With revived zeal the elders builded, and they prospered, through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo. Haggai's ministry stirred up the conscience of the people, exhorting them to consider their ways, which must have led them to seek His face. Zechariah is the prophet of glory. The vision of glory, the ultimate victory of God's people, the coming of the King and setting up of His kingdom, the future overthrow of all their enemies--this vision of the coming glory became an inspiration for them. God's people need this twofold ministry which is so abundantly supplied in the Word of God. They builded and finished the house according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of the great Kings Cyrus and Darius. ("And Artaxerxes, King of Persia," some claim should be omitted from the text.) The house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the King.

Verses 16-18. Then the dedication of the house took place. It was a feast of great joy. "The feast of dedication" which the Jews keep (Chanukah) does not commemorate the dedication of this house, but the cleansing of the temple from the defilement of Antiochus Epiphanes. Tradition claims that Psalms 138, 146, and 148 were composed by Haggai and Zechariah, and used in the dedication ceremony. But what a contrast with the magnificent dedication of the Solomonic temple! Here they offered a hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and for a sin offering twelve he-goats. At the dedication of the first temple Solomon offered 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (2 Chron. 7:7). And the greatest contrast with Solomon's temple, the glory cloud; the visible sign of Jehovah's presence which filled the house; was absent. No glory came to manifest the fact that Jehovah dwelt in the midst of His people. In the future another temple will stand again in Jerusalem, and into that temple the glory of the LORD will enter once more (Ezek. 43:1-3). It is the millennial temple which will be erected by converted Israel after the King has come back. Of this glorious event Zechariah bore witness: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. And many nations shall be joined unto the LORD in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee" (Zech. 2:10-11). These prophetic words were certainly not fulfilled in the dedication of the second temple, nor have they been fulfilled since. Perhaps this prophecy was the prophecy of hope and comfort for the godly then, as well as Haggai's prediction (Hag. 2:7-9). But note well the obedience to God's Word manifested in the dedication service--"as it is written in the book of Moses."

Verses 19-22. The feast of Passover and unleavened bread was kept also by the children of the captivity. Those who had separated themselves from

the filthiness of the heathen were not proselytes, Gentiles who turned to Israel; they were Jews who had married heathen women (10:11). They were true to the written Word. As to the meaning of this feast see our annotations on Exodus 12, Leviticus 23 and 1 Corinthians 5.

The connection is exceedingly beautiful. The house of their God finished, His people celebrated the memorial of their redemption from the land of Egypt, and thus remind themselves, to the praise of Jehovah, of the ground on which they stood, and of the fact that the foundation of all their blessing, of all God's actings in grace towards them was the blood of the slain Lamb. This, according to the word of Moses, was "a night to be much observed unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is that night of the LORD to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations" (Exodus 12:42). Nothing could show more distinctly that these children of the captivity were at this moment in possession of the mind of the LORD than their observance of the Passover. Passing by the glories of the kingdom, they travelled upward until they reached the charter of all they possessed, whether in title or in prospect, and there confessed God as the God of their salvation. They thus built on what God was for them on the ground of the blood of the Passover lamb, and they found in that, as individual souls ever find, a rock which is both immutable and immovable. Their hearts were in this feast; "for," as we read, "the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure." (See Numbers 9:10-14.) They discerned what was due to Him whose feast they kept (E. Dermett).

II. THE RETURN UNDER EZRA AND HIS REFORMATION

CHAPTER 7

1. The journey of Ezra to Jerusalem (7:1-10)
2. The decree of Artaxerxes (7:11-26)
3. Ezra's thanksgiving (7:27-28)

Verses 1-10. The record of the return under Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple ends with the previous chapter. Many years passed after the temple had been built before the godly Ezra and his companions returned to Jerusalem. No record whatever is in existence covering the years which intervened between Zerubbabel's expedition and work, and Ezra's expedition. The critics claim that "it was in these apparently barren years that the priestly code was elaborated by the priests who had not left Babylon, and that part at least of the second half of Isaiah (chapter 40, etc.) was composed and put together in Babylon." But what historical foundation for their theory can they offer? There is nothing in existence which in any way warrants such claims. The evidence that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and that Isaiah is the author of the entire book which bears his name is overwhelming. The theory of a priestly code, that the priestly laws of Leviticus were collected in Babylon and brought back by Ezra, is an invention.

What became of Zerubbabel is not known. But we know that a sad decline among the returned remnant set in. Their moral and religious condition had suffered a severe relapse. Perhaps these very conditions moved Ezra to leave Babylon and go to Jerusalem.

It was in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, that Ezra

went up. The genealogy of Ezra is given, showing that he was a direct descendant of Aaron, the chief priest. Ezra was "a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given." A blessed testimony that the Law of Moses was given by God, and not put together piece-meal, corrected, revised and added to by different hands. Ezra, occupied with the Law and the Word of God, desired to go up to Jerusalem. God put it into his heart, and the Gentile King granted him all his request. In all this the hand of the Lord is acknowledged. "According to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." This phrase we meet a number of times (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31); and it shows how this man of God trusted in the LORD for guidance. He saw His hand in having all his request granted by Artaxerxes. It was the good hand of God who brought him to Jerusalem (7:9). His hand strengthened him (7:28). The good hand of the LORD is again acknowledged in bringing them ministers (8:18) and in deliverance (8:31). The same hand which was for good upon Ezra, which guided, kept and shielded him, is still upon all His people who trust Him and are obedient to His Word. (The character of our work forbids an attempt to enlarge upon the identity of the different rulers mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah--which is a difficult matter, involving a careful examination of chronology. We suggest a good book on chronology *The Romance of Bible Chronology*, by M. Anstey.)

With Ezra a company of people went up to Jerusalem, 1,496 in all. They left on the first day of the first month, and arrived on the first day of the fifth month, corresponding to the end of July or beginning of August. The distance they travelled by way of Carchemish was over 800 miles.

In verse 10 we have the secret of Ezra's piety: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." Diligently and prayerfully he sought the truth and the will of God in the Word of God. The law of the LORD was his joy and delight. How he must have searched the Scriptures with deep exercise of soul. This is the foundation of godliness. The heart must enter into the things of God as revealed in His Word. And his aim was "to do it;" to live according to the truth God had given him. Finally, the third desire of Ezra was "to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." Heart preparation in the Word, obedience to the word, must be the marks of the true servant of the LORD.

Verses 11-26. The copy of the letter that Artaxerxes gave to Ezra is now recorded. This section is again in Aramaic. In the salutation of the letter Artaxerxes calls himself "king of kings" and addresses Ezra as the scribe of the law of the God of heaven. There can be no question that Artaxerxes was divinely moved in all he did. The decree states that all Israelites, priests and Levites in his realm who are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem, may go with Ezra. The name of God, the law of God, the house of God are constantly used in this document. Then the King and his seven counsellors freely gave silver and gold "unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem." In a future day, when all Israel is saved, when Christ comes again, the Gentiles and their kings will offer their silver and gold (Isaiah 60; Ps. 62:10-11). Besides the silver and gold Artaxerxes and his counsellors gave, there were other offerings of non-Jews and of the Jewish residents of Babylon. The king had perfect confidence in Ezra. After buying bullocks, rams, lambs, etc., the king wrote, "And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God."

Verses 27-28. Then Ezra broke out in a beautiful doxology. He blessed the LORD God of his fathers. He had put all this in the King's heart. And Ezra was strengthened as the hand of the LORD His God was upon him.

CHAPTER 8

1. Those who returned with Ezra (8:1-14)
2. The gathering at Ahava (8:15-20)
3. The fast proclaimed (8:21-23)
4. The appointment of guardians (8:24-30)
5. The departure and arrival in Jerusalem (8:31-36)

Verses 1-14. The names of those who gathered around Ezra and went up with him are here recorded. In view of the magnificent decree and liberality of Artaxerxes, the company was very small. The majority preferred Babylon, and remained there. The faithful ones are known to God, and their names are here forever written in His Word. Though the Gentile monarch had given the decree, and the people were abundantly supplied with all necessary means, the undertaking was one of faith. They came out of Babylon trusting the LORD; they marched on in faith. It must be especially noticed that only males are mentioned. The mixed marriages of which we read in the next chapter most likely were the result of the fact that no women had joined Ezra's expedition.

Verses 15-20. Ezra gathered them together at the river that runneth to Ahava, which probably was a branch of the Euphrates, near Babylon. There they dwelt in their tents for three days. They were pilgrims and strangers, and had gone forth like Abraham, the father of the nation. Ezra viewed the people and discovered the absence of the Levites. While a small number of Levites had gone up with Zerubbabel, none had joined Ezra. Only two priests were present, Gershon, son of Phinehas, and Daniel, son of Ithamar. What indifference this reveals! They had settled down in the enemy's land and were satisfied to remain there. They were minding earthly things, and the things of God were forgotten by them. Still they were Levites in their holy calling. It is so today with many who are no doubt saved, but they are worldly-minded, and have but little desire to live in the separation demanded by Him from His people. Ezra was not willing to leave the Levites behind, knowing how absolutely necessary they were for the house of God. How Ezra must have looked to God! Then he acted, and through the good hand of God, which he once more acknowledged, a number of Levites and Nethinim joined the party.

Verses 21-23. He proclaimed a fast. The man of God felt the need of seeking God's face and His gracious protection. The fasting was the outward sign of deep humiliation and an expression of their dependence, "to seek of Him a straight way, for us and for our little ones, and for all our substance." The need of guidance as well as protection was fully recognized by the gathered company, and they trusted the LORD for both. This is still the blessed way of faith for God's servant, and for the children of God. How great would be the success and the blessing if at all times and in all service God's people would first seek His face, humble themselves in His presence and trust Him fully. Ezra had told the king that he trusted the LORD, that His hand is upon all them for good that seek Him, and so he was ashamed to ask a military escort to protect them against robbers, who might waylay them and rob them of their possessions. He knew His God was the best shield, and His angels, the ministers used in guarding His people and

keeping evil away from them, would be the unseen companions of the caravan. "So we fasted and besought our God for this, and He was entreated of us." Their prayers were answered. And He still answers faith.

Verses 24-30. Faith in God did not make Ezra careless. He felt his great responsibility and made the most careful preparations. He set apart twelve of the chief priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them. Levites were also selected by him (8:30). To their custody he committed the holy vessels, as well as the silver and the gold which had been so freely given. Then he gave them the charge, "Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also and the silver and gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers. Watch ye and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD." He had weighed into their hand 650 talents of silver (about \$1,250,000) and of gold 100 talents (about \$3,000,000) besides the costly vessels of silver and gold. This careful weighing of everything when they received the costly treasures, and the weighing when they delivered the same in Jerusalem, does not mean that Ezra entertained any doubt as to the honesty of the priests and Levites. It was done to avoid all suspicion. The same principle is laid down in the New Testament for the Church: "Provide for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. 8:21).

Verses 31-36. Then the departure was made on the twelfth day of the first month. In faith and complete dependence on God they set out towards the land of their fathers. And the LORD honored their faith. "And the hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days." They must have had many narrow escapes, but as they constantly trusted in the LORD, in His good hand of mercy and power, He delivered them from all dangers. The LORD who answered their faith and kept them is the same today, and never disappoints faith. His hand is the same as then, and we too can experience His gracious deliverance. The journey occupied not quite four months. The three days at the end of the journey correspond to the three days before the journey began at the river Ahava. (8:15). What praise they must have rendered to God during these three days in Jerusalem, when their eyes beheld once more the beloved city and the house of the LORD!

on the fourth day the treasures were turned over and were weighed in the house of God. This was done by Meremoth, the son of Uriah, the priest. He is mentioned by Nehemiah as one of the builders of the wall (Neh. 3:4, 21). With him was Eleazar, the son of Phinehas. Associated with them were Jozabad, the son of Jeshua (mentioned also in 10:23 and Neh. 7:7) and Noadiah, the son of Binnui. Thus in the house of God account was rendered, as all His people will have to give an account before the judgment seat of Christ.

Burnt offerings were then offered, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs and twelve he-goats for a sin offering. It is especially to be noticed that the small remnant which had returned embraced in their faith all Israel. "All Israel" will some day be saved and be brought back to the land, through Him who is the true burnt and sin offering. And as their faith included all their brethren, the whole house of Israel, though they were not with them, so our faith must include all the saints of God.

After having discharged their solemn obligation, giving God the first place, they "delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side of the river; and they furthered the people and the house of God."

CHAPTER 9

1. Ezra's astonishment and grief (9:1-4)
2. Ezra's confession and prayer (9:5-15)

Verses 1-4. When all these things had been done (that are related in chapter 8:33-36) Ezra was confronted by a very sad condition of the people, and even the priests and the Levites. The princes (civil leaders) came to Ezra and told him that the demanded separation according to the law, between God's people and the Canaanitish inhabitants of the land, had not been obeyed. The people had taken of their daughters for themselves and of their sons "so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of the lands; yea the hand of the princes and rulers hath been first in this trespass." Not alone had they intermarried, but they were also doing according to their abominations. Not alone had they fallen into the evil things of the former inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, but they were also contaminated with the wicked things of the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. In doing this they had wilfully broken the command of the Lord as given in Exodus 34:12-16. God's people were to be holy, a separated people. Israel was married unto Jehovah; their marriage to the heathen was disobedience to the law and unfaithfulness to Jehovah. It was an alliance with the world. God demanded separation of Israel; He demands the same of His people in the New Testament. "But as He who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). Like Israel, believers in the New Testament are said to be married unto Christ (Romans 7:4; 2 Cor. 11:2). And therefore God's Spirit warns against alliance with the world. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15). "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore would be a friend of the world, maketh himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). That the returned remnant, after a few years of the completion of the temple and after the gracious and remarkable deliverance from Babylon, could plunge into such depths of degradation, shows what the heart of man is. As it has been said, when saints fall into sin, it is sometimes into worse and grosser forms of sin than those committed by the people of the world. It equally manifests the infinite patience and long-suffering of God, in bearing with His people and not dealing with them at once in judgment.

Let us listen to the words of pious Ezra, what he said and did after receiving this sad report. "And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice." He was seized with horror. The rending of his garments was the outward expression of his indignation and grief (Gen. 37:29; Lev. 10:6; Judges 11:35; Esther 4:1). The plucking of the hair is also a sign of sorrow (Job 1:20; Ezek. 7:18). But how his heart must have felt the dishonor done to

Jehovah's holy Name! How he was deeply affected by the sins of the people. Would to God such a spirit of deep grief and humiliation were more manifested today over the sad and worldly conditions of those who profess that worthy Name! His grief and sorrow brought others, who were also trembling at the words of God, to his side, and he sat in their presence astonished till the evening sacrifice.

Verses 5-15. When the evening sacrifice came he arose from his deep affliction and sorrow, with his garments rent. It is the sacrifice, the burnt offering, which leads him to approach God; he trusted in the efficacy of the sacrifice as the ground on which he could appear before God. He knew by sacrifice he could come near to God and receive the answer. All this blessedly foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ and our approach to God through His finished work on the cross. The prayer which follows is like Daniel's great prayer (Daniel 9:4-19). Daniel also received his answer at the time of the evening sacrifice. Ezra fell upon his knees and spread out his hands unto the LORD. What a confession of sins and deepest humiliation breathe in the opening sentences of this remarkable prayer! He is ashamed and blushes to lift his face up to God. Iniquities are owned as covering the head of the people and "the guiltiness is grown unto the heavens." Not alone is the present guilt acknowledged, but he owns the guilt of the nation from its very start. Furthermore he declares God's righteousness and justice in dealing with them in judgment. "For our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hands of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to spoiling, and to confusion of face, as it is today." He confessed the sins of the people and owned it all in His presence. Such humiliation and confession is always pleasing to God, for "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (James 4:6).

Then, after having confessed and owned the sins of his brethren and justified God in His judgment upon them, he mentions the grace which had been manifested towards the people in bringing back the remnant from the captivity. The remnant through His mercy had escaped, and God had given them "a nail in His holy place" (Isaiah 22:23). Like a nail in the wall fixed and immovable, so God had established them in Jerusalem. And after the recital of all these mercies, he brings into the light of God's presence their sin, their disobedience and ingratitude once more (9:10-12).

It should also be observed that Ezra does not once pray for forgiveness. Nay, with any intelligence of the mind of God, it was impossible that he should do so. When there is known evil in our hearts or in the assembly, our first responsibility is to judge it, not to pray for forgiveness. Thus, when Joshua lay on his face before the LORD, after the defeat of Israel by the men of Ai, the LORD said, "Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?" Israel hath sinned," etc. And yet how often does Satan beguile the LORD's people, in a time of manifested evil, by suggesting through one or another, Let us pray about it. Confess our sins we surely should, but even then only as seeking grace and strength to deal with the evil, and to separate ourselves from it; for if Ezra lay before the LORD in this chapter owning his people's guilt, we shall see him in the next energetic in dealing with the sin he had confessed, and resting not until it had been put away. (E. Dennett, Exposition of Ezra.)

1. The effect of Ezra's prayer on the people (10:1-4)
2. Ezra summons an assembly (10:5-8)
3. The gathering, confession and the evil judged (10:9-17)
4. The register of those who had married strange women (10:18-44)

Verses 1-4. Ezra's prayer, confession and humiliation were before the house of the LORD." The people saw his great sorrow and his tears, they heard his words confessing the nation's sins. It produced a wonderful effect among the people. "There assembled unto him out of Israel a great congregation of men and women and children, for the people wept very sore." Was this great weeping real contrition over their disobedience? or did they weep in anticipation of the separation from the wives they had taken? No doubt they thought of what the demanded separation would mean for them; yet it was an aroused conscience which produced the tears of repentance.

Schechaniah's voice is heard in behalf of the people. He was a son of Jehiel. His own father is mentioned among those who had taken strange wives (10:26). His words then must have condemned his own father. He said, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land." He acknowledged the sin of the people violating the direct commandment of the LORD. But he also had confidence in the mercy of God, that not all was lost on account of their disobedience, "yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing." Yet this hope and mercy could only be realized by self-judgment and by putting away all the wives and such as were born of them. He therefore said, "Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law." The law demanded the dismissal of these wives and children, for they were unclean, and admission into the congregation of Israel had to be denied to them. How different it is under grace! In 1 Cor. 7:10, etc., we read what grace has done even for an unbelieving husband who is sanctified by the believing wife, and the unbelieving wife who is sanctified by the believing husband, and that their children are not unclean, but holy.

Then Schechaniah addressed weeping Ezra: "Arise! for this matter belongeth unto thee; we also will be with thee; be of good courage and do it." These words must have dried Ezra's tears, for they evidence the answer to his humiliation and prayer. Confession, humiliation, self-judgment and putting away the evil are always the condition of the restoration of God's people.

Verses 5-8. Ezra took hold at once. The priests, Levites and all Israel had to swear that they would act upon this word. But Ezra's grief was not ended. He arose and went into the chambers of Johanan, the son of Eliashib. He did not eat bread, nor did he drink water. He still mourned because of the transgression of the people. God's presence was sought by this deeply spiritual man of God, and in His holy presence he felt anew the sin of the people. What deep soul exercise Ezra passed through! This is what is so sadly lacking in our own days. So many make light of the sin and worldliness of those who profess the Name of Christ, there is but little heart searching, true humiliation and self-judgment to be seen. Such is the spirit of Laodicea.

A proclamation was then made. The time to act had come. All the returned captives were to gather themselves together in Jerusalem. It had to be within three days. Neglect of this commandment meant the confiscation

of their substance and separation from the congregation of Israel.

Verses 9-17. The great gathering takes place. They all obeyed the Word. We see them sitting in the wide space before the house of the LORD. They were a trembling, Lightened company, on account of this matter and also the great rain, for the cold and rainy season had started in. Ezra addresses the multitude in simple but firm words. Once more he mentions their sin and the guilt which rests upon them on account of it. He demands confession, and separation from the peoples of the land and from the strange women. There was an immediate response: "As thou hast said concerning us, so must we do." Then a plan is inaugurated to bring the separation about in as speedy a manner as possible. What self denial and heartaches this must have meant! In verse 15 we read of those "who were employed about this matter." But the translation of this sentence is more than doubtful. It has been rendered "they stood up against this." If there was opposition it was not opposition to the separation decree. They probably opposed the method which had been suggested; they may have demanded an immediate action.

Verses 18-44. The examination of the whole matter as agreed upon began on the first day of the first month (Nisan-March-April), the time of the New Year, the new beginning according to Exodus 12:1. Then follows the list of the men who had married the strange women. God's record is again before us in these names. The names of the priests come first. Theirs was the greater responsibility and guilt. The sons of Joshua head the list. What an illustration of what man is, that the sons of the high priest, who, with Zerubbabel, had been such great instruments of the Lord to lead the first captives back, should corrupt themselves with these women! They gave their hand that they would put away their wives, and confessing themselves guilty, they brought a ram for an offering. In all, seventeen priests were guilty, and six Levites. The guilty singers and porters are given by name in verse 24. Then follow eighty-six more names who had all defiled themselves by strange women.

Ezra's great work was finished. In Nehemiah we read how he was still active, ministering to the people in spiritual things, in reading and expounding the Word of God (Neh. 8:8).

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