

Ezra Devotionals

EZRA DEVOTIONALS

[Our Daily Bread](#) , [F B Meyer](#), [C H Spurgeon](#)
[Today in the Word & G Campbell Morgan](#)
[Christ in Ezra - A M Hodgkin](#)

Our Daily Bread

Ezra 1:1-4 The Cyrus Cylinder

July 4, 2015

Read: Ezra 1:1-4 | Bible in a Year: Job 28–29; Acts 13:1-25

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. —Ezra 1:1

In 1879, archaeologists discovered a remarkable little item in an area now known as Iraq (biblical Babylon). Just 9 inches long, the Cyrus Cylinder records something that King Cyrus of Persia did 2,500 years ago. It says that Cyrus allowed a group of people to return to their homeland and rebuild their “holy cities.” (See [Cyrus Cylinder](#))

It's the same story told in Ezra 1. There we read that “the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” to make a proclamation (Ezra 1:1). And in that proclamation, Cyrus said he was releasing the captives in Babylon to go home to Jerusalem, re-establish their homes, and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:2-5).

But there's more to the story. Daniel confessed his sins and his people's sins and pleaded with God to end the Babylonian captivity (Da 9:1-27). In response to Daniel's prayer, God sent an angel to speak to Daniel (Da 9:21). Later He moved Cyrus to release the Hebrews. (See also Jer. 25:11-12; 39:10.)

Together, the Cyrus Cylinder and God's Word combine to show us that the king's heart was changed and he allowed the exiled Hebrews to go home and worship.

This story has great implications for us today. In a world that seems out of control, we can rest assured that God can move the hearts of leaders. We read in Proverbs 21:1 that “the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.” And Romans 13:1 says that “there is no authority except from God.”

The Lord, who is able to change our own hearts as well as the hearts of our leaders, can be trusted for He is in control. Let's ask Him to work.

Dear Father, the world so often seems out of control. We know You are sovereign over everything. We pray that Your will be done in our homeland and in the hearts of our leaders.

Rather than complain, pray.

INSIGHT: Ezra is one of the Old Testament books that deals with the Israelites' return to the land of promise after their exile in Babylon. Along with the books of Nehemiah and Haggai, it focuses on rebuilding Jerusalem, the once proud capital of the southern kingdom. Ezra's role as a scribe was to rebuild the religious life of the Israelites through the law of Moses. In Nehemiah, the focus is on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem to once again make it a safe haven for the people. Haggai's focus some years later was on the importance of rebuilding the temple, the center of the Israelites' national life.

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Ezra 3:1-6 As It Is Written

November 19, 2015

Read: Ezra 3:1-6 | Bible in a Year: Ezekiel 11–13; James 1

[They] built the altar ... to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written. —nkjv Ezra 3:2

When it comes to putting things together—electronics, furniture, and the like—my son and I have differing approaches. Steve is more mechanically inclined, so he tends to toss the instructions aside and just start in. Meanwhile, I'm poring over the "Read This Before Starting" warning while he has already put the thing halfway together.

Sometimes we can get by without the instructions. But when it comes to putting together a life that reflects the goodness and wisdom of God, we can't afford to ignore the directions He's given to us in the Bible.

**Jesus shows us the way to live.
(See also How to Live Like Jesus Lived!)**

The Israelites who had returned to their land after the Babylonian captivity are a good example of this. As they began to reestablish worship in their homeland, they prepared to do so "in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 3:2). By building a proper altar and in celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles as prescribed by God in Leviticus 23:33-43, they did exactly what God's directions told them to do.

Christ gave His followers some directions too. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." And "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37,39). When we believe in Him and come to Him, He shows us the way to live. The One who made us knows far better than we do how life is supposed to work.

Remind us, Lord, as we start each day that You have already shown us by Your example how to live. Help us to read Your Word and follow the directions You so graciously provide for us.

Share this prayer from our Facebook page with your friends. [facebook.com/ourdailybread](https://www.facebook.com/ourdailybread)

**If we want God to lead us,
we must be willing to follow Him.**

INSIGHT: Twice in today's passage Ezra records that the people returning from exile did things "in accordance with what is written" (Ezra 3:2,4). However, what makes these statements impressive is what is found in the middle of the paragraph. They did all these things "despite their fear of the peoples around them"—the residents of Judah who were not part of the returning exiles (Ezra 3:3).

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Ezra 3:8, 4:1-5

Now the temple was finished ... in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius (Ezra 6:15).

Many people fail to reach a worthy goal because they become weary and discouraged. They give up, not realizing that success is within reach.

Zerubbabel and his work crew encountered constant delays and discouragements while they rebuilt the temple. How easy it would have been to give up. Yet they knew God had ordered the work they were doing, and this gave them confidence.

This verse cleverly illustrates the reward of perseverance.

Two frogs fell into a deep cream bowl;
The one was wise, and a cheery soul;
The other one took a gloomy view,
And bade his friend a sad adieu.
Said the other frog with a merry grin,
"I can't get out, but I won't give in;
I'll swim around till my strength is spent,
Then I'll die the more content."
And as he swam, though ever it seemed,
His struggling began to chum the cream,
Until on top of pure butter he stopped,
And out of the bowl he quickly hopped.

The moral, you ask? Oh, it's easily found.

If you can't get out, keep swimming around!

Doing God's will is not always easy. But when the going gets tough, "keep on swimming." —R. W. De Haan ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

We conquer by continuing

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Ezra 3:8-13 All Generations

June 12, 2002

Read: Ezra 3:8-13 | Bible in a Year: Ezra 3-5; John 20

Old men who had seen the first temple wept with a loud voice. —Ezra 3:12

I'm trying. I really am. I'm trying to enjoy my teenage son's musical tastes. Steve's preferred style of worship music is different from what I would choose, but our goal is the same. Even though our two generations have different musical preferences at home and in church, we both share the goal of using music to praise the Lord.

This reminds me of something that happened in the 6th century BC when Zerubbabel began rebuilding the temple after the Israelites returned from captivity (Ezra 3:8-13). As soon as the foundation for the new temple was laid, "all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord" (Ezra 3:11). But then, while the younger generation rejoiced (Ezra 3:10-11), the older generation cried (Ezra 3:12).

Why the two reactions? The young crowd had never seen the glorious temple of Solomon, so they were happy with what they saw being built. The older people realized this temple wouldn't be anything like the one they remembered, so their praise was mixed with sorrow.

One heart for God. Two ways to react. Generations do that sometimes. Let's thank God with a heart of praise—even though we may express it differently. —J Dave Branon

Both young and old can join in praise,
Although expressed in different ways;
One heart they lift to God above
In gratitude for His great love. —D. De Haan

There are many ways to express God's praise.

Ezra 3:10-13

Joy In The Midst Of Grief - Ezra 3:10-13

After only a few art lessons, 10-year-old Joel decided to try his hand at painting a flower. By looking at a color photograph of a Rose of Sharon, Joel was able to paint a beautiful mixture of blue, purple, red, green, and white. This made the flower, which had been photographed on the day Joel's aunt died, seem to come to life. To the family, his painting symbolized a bittersweet mixture of feelings. While it provided a lasting reminder of the loss they had suffered, it also carried a celebration of Joel's newly discovered artistic gift. The painting gave joy in the midst of grief.

When the people of Judah returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon, they too had a bittersweet experience. As they began rebuilding Solomon's temple, many in the crowd sang songs of praise. At the same time, some older people, who had seen the beauty of the original temple that had been destroyed by war, wept aloud. We are told that "the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping" (Ezra 3:13).

Grieving can be like that. While there is sadness in looking back, it also includes a promise of joy in trusting God for the future. Even in a devastating loss, we have this hope: The Lord provides joy in the midst of grief.

We sorrow not as others do,
Whose hopes fade like the flowers;
There is a hope that's born of God,
And such a hope is ours. —McNeil

**Even in the bleakest times,
Christians have the brightest hope.**

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Ezra 3:12

All Generations - Ezra 3:8-13

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Ezra 4:1, 4-5

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple... They troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose (Ezra 4:1, 4-5).

In August, 1857, Cyrus Field and his company, Atlantic Telegraph, attempted to lay a telegraph cable from England to North America, but the cable broke at twelve thousand feet under the ocean surface and could not be recovered. During the next nine years, Field and his men made three more unsuccessful attempts. Finally, in July, 1866, they succeeded in laying hundreds of miles of cable across the Atlantic.

Field's task took nine years, but Israel spent almost twenty-one years rebuilding the temple. The work began in 537 B.c. and was finally completed in 516 B.C. Israel's enemies continually stopped the work; one period lasted as long as seventeen years. People of less perseverance might have given up, but Israel had a deep desire to worship God.

Paul wrote about Christ's patience, or, more exactly, His perseverance, in his second letter to the Thessalonians (3:5). We may not understand why an all-powerful God demonstrated patient determination in His humanity, but we are to follow His pattern of perseverance.

We may not give up family and home as He did, but dare we cling too tightly? We may not hunger, but should we be fat and spoiled? We may not suffer and die, but why are we unwilling? Disciples persevere; they are willing to lose life to gain it. ([Our Daily Bread](#), Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved)

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Ezra 4:1-5 Him Only

January 11, 2004

Read: Ezra 4:1-5 | Bible in a Year: Genesis 27-28; Matthew 8:18-34

We alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us. —Ezra 4:3

A Christian youth organization in Singapore learned that the local horse-racing club wanted to donate a significant sum of money to its work. The gift would be helpful, but the organization had taken a position against gambling. Now it had to decide whether accepting money from a racing club that derived its revenue from gambling would compromise its commitment to Christ.

Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families of Israel faced a similar dilemma. They were being offered help to rebuild the temple by Assyrian settlers in the land who had intermarried with remnants of the tribes of Israel. Later known as Samaritans, these people were adversaries of Israel (Ezra 4:1). Zerubbabel's response was decisive: "We alone will build to the Lord God." Why such exclusivity? In 2 Kings 17:33, we learn that those who offered help "feared the Lord, yet served their own gods."

We need to be reminded often of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Although the Lord can use even unbelievers to accomplish His purposes, we are never to compromise our loyalty to Him. By our words and our actions we must show that we worship Him and Him only.

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee. —Cowper

**There are many ways to worship God,
but only one God to worship.**

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Ezra 5:7-17 Keep Calm And Carry On

June 12, 2014

Read: Ezra 5:7-17 | Bible in a Year: Ezra 3-5; John 20

We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth. —Ezra 5:11

"Keep calm and call mom." "Keep calm and eat bacon." "Keep calm and put the kettle on." These sayings originate from the phrase: "Keep Calm and Carry On." This message first appeared in Great Britain as World War II began in 1939. British officials printed it on posters designed to offset panic and discouragement during the war.

Having returned to the land of Israel after a time of captivity, the Israelites had to overcome their own fear and enemy interference as they began to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3:3). Once they finished the foundation, their opponents "hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose" (Ezra 4:5). Israel's enemies also wrote accusing letters to government officials and successfully delayed the project (Ezra 4:6,24). Despite this, King Darius eventually issued a decree that allowed them to complete the temple (Ezra 6:12-14).

When we are engaged in God's work and we encounter setbacks, we can calmly carry on because, like the Israelites, "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth" (Ezra 5:11). Obstacles and delays may discourage us, but we can rest in Jesus' promise: "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Mt. 16:18NLT). It is God's power that enables His work, not our own.

Thou art our life, by which alone we live,
And all our substance and our strength receive.
Sustain us by Thy faith and by Thy power,
And give us strength in every trying hour. —Psalter

God's Spirit gives the power to our witness.

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Ezra 7:10 No Appetite

January 2, 2014

Read: Nehemiah 8:1-12 | Bible in a Year: Genesis 4-6; Matthew 2

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. —1 Peter 2:2-**commentary**

When I was battling a bad cold recently, I lost my appetite. I could go through an entire day without eating much food. Water would suffice. But I knew I couldn't survive long on water alone. I needed to regain my appetite because my body needed nourishment.

When the people of Israel came back from exile in Babylon, their spiritual appetite was weak. They had departed from God and His ways. To get the people back to spiritual health, Nehemiah organized a Bible seminar, and Ezra was the teacher.

Ezra read from the book of the law of Moses from morning until midday, feeding the people with the truth of God (Neh. 8:3). And the people listened attentively. In fact, their appetite for God's Word was so stirred that the family leaders and the priests and Levites met with Ezra the following day to study the law in greater detail because they wanted to understand it (Neh 8:13, cp Ezra 7:10-**commentary**).

When we feel estranged from God or spiritually weak, we can find spiritual nourishment from God's Word. "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). Ask God to give you a renewed desire for relationship with Him, and begin feeding your heart, soul, and mind with His Word.

Break Thou the Bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord,
My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word. —Lathbury

**Feeding on God's Word
keeps us strong and healthy in the Lord.**

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Mom's Translation

Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. — Ezra 7:10

Today's Scripture: Ezra 9:5-15

Four pastors were discussing the merits of the various translations of the Bible. One liked a particular version best because of its simple, beautiful English. Another preferred a more scholarly edition because it was closer to the original Hebrew and Greek. Still another liked a contemporary version because of its up-to-date vocabulary.

The fourth minister was silent for a moment, then said, "I like my mother's translation best." Surprised, the other three men said they didn't know his mother had translated the Bible. "Yes," he replied. "She translated it into life, and it was the most convincing translation I ever saw."

Instead of discussing translation preferences, this pastor reminded them that the most important focus should be learning God's Word and doing it. That was the top priority of Ezra's life. As a scribe, he studied the Law, obeyed it, and taught it to the Israelites (Ezra 7:10). For example, God commanded His people not to intermarry with neighboring nations who served pagan gods (9:1-2). Ezra confessed the nation's sin to God (9:10-12) and corrected the people, who then repented (10:10-12).

Let's follow Ezra's example by seeking the Word of God and translating it into life. By: Anne Cetas

When we take time to read God's Word,
Our heart is filled with pleasure;
So let's relate the truth we've heard-
With others share the treasure. -Hess

The best commentary on the Bible is a person who puts it into practice.

Seeing God's Hand

He came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. —Ezra 7:9

Today's Scripture: Ezra 7:1-10,27-28

On Jack Borden's 101st birthday, he awoke at 5 a.m., ate a hearty breakfast, and was at his law office by 6:30 ready to begin his day. When asked the secret of his long life, the practicing attorney smiled and quipped, "Not dying."

But there's more to it than that. Mr. Borden, who was baptized at age 11 in the Clear Fork of the Trinity River, told Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram reporter David Casstevens, "I'm a firm believer that God has His hand in everything that happens. He is letting me live for some reason. I try to do the things that I believe He wants me to."

Ezra the priest experienced the “good hand of his God upon him” when he led a delegation to Jerusalem to provide spiritual leadership for the former captives who were rebuilding the temple and the city (Ezra 7:9-10). Ezra found strength and courage in knowing that the Lord was with them each step of the way. “So I was encouraged, as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me; and I gathered leading men of Israel to go up with me” (v.28).

When we see the Lord’s hand in our lives, it brings forth a deep “Thank You” and a growing desire to do what He wants us to do.

By: David C. McCasland

Sign in to track your progress!

SIGN IN

Reflect & Pray

If we would view through eyes of faith
The course of each new day,
We’d quickly see God’s gracious hand
In all that comes our way.
—D. De Haan

If you know that God’s hand is in everything, you can leave everything in God’s hands.

Ezra 7:1-10,27-28 Seeing God’s Hand

September 6, 2010

Seeing God’s Hand

Read: Ezra 7:1-10,27-28 | Bible in a Year: Psalms 148-150; 1 Corinthians 15:29-58

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We’d quickly see God’s gracious hand
In all that comes our way. —D. De Haan

**If you know that God’s hand is in everything,
you can leave everything in God’s hands.**

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Ezra 8:21-35 PRAYER, WORK, AND PRAISE

“We fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.” - Ezra 8:23

A 12-year-old Haitian girl’s feet were so deformed that she was actually walking on her ankles. She asked some missionaries if they could help her, but the girl’s father, who looked to a voodoo priest for advice, refused to let the doctors operate.

So the missionaries began to pray fervently that God would intervene. After 2 days, the father returned with his daughter and gave them permission for the surgery. Just before the operation, the youngster pointed to her heart and said, “I’m not afraid, because I put Jesus right here.” The operation was successful, and all who knew about this situation are praising the Lord for His answer to prayer.

We see a similar order of events in Ezra 8. The Israelites had to transport a large quantity of gold and silver to Jerusalem. This made them vulnerable to raids by outlaw gangs along the way. So the people fasted and prayed until they received assurance of God's protection. Then, after taking every precaution, they set out on their journey. Arriving safely in Jerusalem, they offered sacrifices of thanksgiving to the Lord.

Prayer, work, and praise -- it's a God-honoring combination. -- H V Lugt ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Don't surrender faith and courage,
Neither quit the place of prayer;
For the God of earth and heaven
Always meets His children there. -- Anon.

**Pray as if everything depends on God;
Work as if everything depends on you.**

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EZRA 9:1-10:1

Many sorrows shall be to the wicked (Psalm 32:10).

When Ezra learned that many of the Israelites had married heathen women (a practice strictly forbidden by God), he tore his garments, pulled hair from his head and beard, and sat down appalled. Then he fell to his knees and wept as he prayed. Many people were so moved by this that they wept with him. And well they should. Sin is a terrible thing. It offends the Lord. It grieves spiritually sensitive people. And it brings untold misery to the transgressor. In this instance, the men of Israel had to send their foreign wives and their children back to their homeland, which must have caused great pain. But this drastic step was necessary to keep the nation from spiritual disaster.

One day I responded to eighteen letters written by husbands, wives, parents, and grandparents who were deeply hurt because someone close to them had fallen into a sin that was breaking up a family circle. Answering these people reminded me how much pain disobedience causes, and it impressed on me that sin is the ultimate cause of all the anguish and sorrow in our world. Although suffering is unavoidable because of sin's effect on the human family, many people intensify their miseries by recklessly plunging into immorality.

We need a deeper sense of grief over sin and a greater burden for people caught in its snares. The heartbreak of sin is too devastating to underestimate. —H. V. Lugt ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

One of the greatest of all evils is indifference toward all evil.

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Ezra 9:1-9 Pride at the Core

October 21, 2015

Read: Ezra 9:1-9 | Bible in a Year: Isaiah 62–64; 1 Timothy 1

Ezra ... was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses. Ezra 7:6

"He thinks he's really something!" That was my friend's assessment of a fellow Christian we knew. We thought we saw in him a spirit of pride. We were saddened when we learned that he soon was caught in some serious misdeeds. By elevating himself, he had found nothing but trouble. We realized that could happen to us as well.

It can be easy to minimize the terrible sin of pride in our own hearts. The more we learn and the more success we enjoy, the more likely we are to think we're "really something." Pride is at the core of our nature.

#Humility lets us trust in the goodness of our forgiving God.

In Scripture, Ezra is described as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6). King Artaxerxes appointed him to lead an expedition of Hebrew exiles back to Jerusalem. Ezra could have been a prime candidate to succumb to the sin of pride. Yet he didn't. Ezra didn't only know God's law; he lived it.

After his arrival in Jerusalem, Ezra learned that Jewish men had married women who served other gods, defying God's express directions (Ezra 9:1-2). He tore his clothes in grief and prayed in heartfelt repentance (Ezra 9:5-15). A higher purpose guided Ezra's knowledge and position: his love for God and for His people. He prayed, "Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence" (Ezra 9:15).

Ezra understood the scope of their sins. But in humility he repented and trusted in the goodness of our forgiving God.

Lord, fill us with such a love for You that we think first of what will please You, not ourselves. Free us from the subtle captivity of our own pride.

Pride leads to every other vice: It is the complete anti-God state of mind. C. S. Lewis

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Ezra 9:5-9 Tree Of Rest

May 2, 2014

Read: Ezra 9:5-9 | Bible in a Year: 1 Kings 12-13; Luke 22:1-20

There is a remnant according to the election of grace. —Romans 11:5

The lone tree in the field across from my office remained a mystery. Acres of trees had been cut down so the farmer could grow corn. But one tree remained standing, its branches reaching up and spreading out. The mystery was solved when I learned the tree was spared for a purpose. Farmers long ago traditionally left one tree standing so that they and their animals would have a cool place to rest when the hot summer sun was beating down.

At times we find that we alone have survived something, and we don't know why. Soldiers coming home from combat and patients who've survived a life-threatening illness struggle to know why they survived when others did not.

The Old Testament speaks of a remnant of Israelites whom God spared when the nation was sent into exile. The remnant preserved God's law and later rebuilt the temple (Ezra 9:9). The apostle Paul referred to himself as part of the remnant of God (Rom. 11:1,5). He was spared to become God's messenger to Gentiles (Ro 11:13).

If we stand where others have fallen, it's to raise our hands to heaven in praise and to spread our arms as shade for the weary. The Lord enables us to be a tree of rest for others.

Thank You, Father, that You are my place of rest.
And that all You have brought me through
can be used by You to encourage others.
Bring praise to Yourself through me.

Hope can be ignited by a spark of encouragement.

INSIGHT: In the midst of the joy of God's grace in allowing a remnant to return to their homeland, Ezra mourned. He mourned because the people of Israel were not only physically distant from God, but spiritually distant as well. Yet God in His grace did more than enable the physical return of the remnant; He also preserved a spiritual remnant. Upon hearing the law of God, the people recommitted themselves to Him (Ezra 10:1-4).

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Ezra 9:5-15 Mom's Translation

January 6, 2006

Read: Ezra 9:5-15 | Bible in a Year: Genesis 16-17; Matthew 5:27-48

Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. —Ezra 7:10

Four pastors were discussing the merits of the various translations of the Bible. One liked a particular version best because of its simple, beautiful English. Another preferred a more scholarly edition because it was closer to the original Hebrew and Greek. Still another liked a contemporary version because of its up-to-date vocabulary.

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-Hess

**The best commentary on the Bible
is a person who puts it into practice.**

Devotionals

F B Meyer

Our Daily Homily

Ezra 1:1

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.

There were many rays focused on this spot. In the first place, it had been definitely foretold by Jeremiah that the captivity would only last for seventy years. In the next place, Daniel, having learned from comparison of dates that the allotted time had nearly expired, had set himself to pray. Also, if Josephus be credited, the aged prophet had shown the young king the predictions of Isaiah in which his own name was clearly mentioned: "Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden: ... he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 45:1, 13).

God is the fountain-head and source of all spiritual blessing, and of all those great movements for the uplifting and enlightenment of mankind which have swept from time to time over the world. Go to Him when you want to reach the heart of kings, prophets, and people. Oh for the faith of Samuel, Elijah, Daniel, and other stalwart men of God, that through Him we may stir up the spirits of those who will not listen to our appeals! For the fervent prayer of a righteous man still availeth much. In prayer you can touch the spring of all the stirrings that the world needs.

But it is not enough for God to stir men, they must obey. It appears that only a comparatively small number of captive Jews obeyed the Divine stirring and came out of Babylon with the chief of the fathers. The call resounds for volunteers, but only a few respond; the inspiration breathes over us, but only some are susceptible to it. God works to will and to do, but only certain of the children of men work out what He works in. Whenever there is a Divine stirring abroad, let us rise up and go.

Ezra 2:63

Till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.

It must have been a great disappointment to these people who found themselves excluded from sharing as priests. Their names were not on the register, and so they had to wait until a properly qualified authority could adjudicate their case. The mere inference of reason was not enough; they needed the direct corroboration of the anointed priest with Urim and with Thummim.

So in our life it is not enough to rely on the inference of reason, or to allow our Christian standing to be determined by the evidence of a document. We must seek the direct witness and testimony of the Holy Spirit. How many Christians there are who have no experimental knowledge of what the Apostle meant when he said that the Spirit witnesseth with our spirit that we are born again. They are always referring to inference, and the testimony of others; and therefore their consciousness varies, and they cannot eat of the holy bread of God. But when the Spirit of God speaks through the Urim and Thummin, and certifies that we are the children of God, giving us the white stone with its new name, and revealing Christ as dwelling within us, we have, immediately, boldness to enter into the holiest of all, and eat of the holy things.

Assurance is needful before we dare to appropriate the things which are freely given to us of God. Who of us is not able to verify this from his personal experience? We could not enjoy the Father's table, so long as there was a doubt about our sonship. But the assurance of faith may be ours as we wait in the presence of our great High Priest, speaking to us by the Holy Spirit, who

witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God.

Ezra 3:3

And they set the altar upon its bases.

This is the first thing that must be done before our temple-building or other undertakings can be crowned with success. It was well that the returned remnant made this their care; it augured well for their future. The new start that God Himself was giving would have been invalidated without that altar, which meant forgiveness for the past, and renewed consecration for the future.

Where is the altar in your life? Where the burned sacrifice which betokens entire surrender of consecration? It cannot be too often insisted on, that since Christ died for all, all died in Him. We were not only saved by His death, we were included in it, but we must appropriate and identify ourselves with it. We must look up to God and say, "I desire that this death should be mine, to the world, to sin, to the flesh; make it so by the power of the Holy Ghost, that in Jesus I may be truly dead unto sin, but alive unto Thee."

Perhaps that last clause will help some souls most. Do not perpetually dwell on the dying side, but think much of the living side. Yield yourselves to receive God's life, which is the life of the Son of God in the surrendered nature. Be very sensitive, and "quick of scent," to every movement and prompting of the Holy Spirit. Seek the things which are above, where Christ, your life, is seated. So you will find your energy drained away from self to Christ. Because He lives you will live also. A maple tree planted on a barren soil sent out one of its rootlets to a richer patch not far away, and ultimately all its roothold was there, till finally it was bodily moved and transferred from its first position to this more salubrious one.

Ezra 4:2

Let us build with you.

At first the world does its best to intimidate the Church; then it asks to be permitted to join with it. A most subtle temptation this. The child of God is greatly inclined to yield; the proposal seems so harmless, and so likely to be a means of blessing to the poor, hungry, weary world. But there is only one condition on which the world may be admitted; it must yield a true and humble submission to the cross, and be willing to give up all for Jesus— conditions which the world will not consider for a moment; and so its heart is filled with bitterness and gall, and it sets itself to hinder where it had professed willingness to help.

There are five things of which we are expressly bidden to beware— they are five phases of an unequal yoke: fellowship with unrighteousness; communion with darkness; concord with Belial; part with an unbeliever; agreement with idols. Let us beware of these things, and cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit. There may seem to be great loss and needless sacrifice in dispensing with the help of Rehum and Shimshai; but if once we accepted their help, we should discover to our cost that they were adversaries still, and that their only desire was to retard our efforts.

We sometimes shrink from some great undertaking for God, and are inclined to accept the proffered aid of wealthy but ungodly men. But their help may be purchased by the cost of all that makes our work worth doing. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship bath righteousness with unrighteousness?"

"Yea, with one mouth, O world, though thou deniest, Stand thou on that side, for on this am I."

Ezra 5:5

The eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews.

It was a delightful thought amid obloquy and opposition, like that which the Jews were at this moment encountering, to know that God was watching them with jealous care. We are reminded of the words of the Psalmist, quoted and authenticated by the Apostle Peter, "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears open to their cry; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." And he goes on to argue, "Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" The Jews certainly found it so; for the efforts of their enemies to induce them to desist from their work of temple-building were rendered nugatory and ineffectual by the special care exercised over them by their Almighty Friend.

It may be that you will have to encounter hatred and opposition in doing God's work; but be sure not to look at these things, but steadfastly to Jesus. Must you not watch the foe? No; you could not make a greater mistake. You must look away to the face of Jesus, and you will find that He, like a good shepherd, is looking carefully and lovingly down on you, and watching the stealthy movements of your foe. Even when we are not directly conscious of that watchful eye, it still follows us. He knoweth the way that you take; and He is acquainted with the varied circumstances of your life. He has pledged Himself to be with you forever; as Wordsworth once said of his beloved daughter Dora:—

"Dear child, fair child, that walkest with me here, Though thou appear untouched by solemn thought, Thy nature is not therefore less

divine; Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year, Thou worshippest at the temple's inner shrine, God being with thee when thou knowest not."

Ezra 6:22

The Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the King unto them.

Yes, the hearts of men are in the hands of God, and He can turn them whither He will. There are many instances of this in Scripture. God gave Joseph favor with Pharaoh; Moses with the Princess; and Daniel with the King of Babylon. If certain matters can only be settled by reference to great men, kings or men of affairs, make the application; and then betake yourself to prayer, believing that as He inclined the heart of Darius, in the instance before us, so He can do as He will among the armies of heaven, and the inhabitants of earth.

That unkind overseer, that vexatious member of your home-circle, that great man whose help you so greatly need— these are accessible to God's Spirit, if only you are intent on seeking His glory, and doing His will. But you must be able to show, as these Jews could, that your cause is identical with the cause of God, before you can claim, with unwavering faith, His interference on your behalf.

Then when the answer comes, let us thank Him, separating ourselves still further from the filthiness around us, so as to keep the feast with joy. Do not be afraid of joy; when God makes you joyful, do not think it necessary to restrain your songs or smiles, for fear that an equivalent of sorrow will presently be meted out as a make weight. Our blessed Lord was desirous that His joy might be in His disciples; it was for the joy that was set before Him that He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God; it is with exceeding joy that He will present us faultless before the presence of His glory. "Thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the Lord thy God giveth thee."

Ezra 7:28

I was strengthened, as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me.

It was no small work that the good Ezra had undertaken. To lead a great expedition across the inhospitable desert; to convoy the sacred vessels and a large treasure of gold and silver; to set-magistrates and judges over all that great district beyond the river— this was no slight task, and he needed strength. But in the simple language of his heart the good hand of his God was upon him, and that was sufficient to nerve and strengthen him.

It is wonderful what resistless might comes to the soul, when it realizes that it is treading the path, and working out the career, determined for it from all eternity by the Almighty. The thought imparts the same kind of impulse to the soul, as the touch of love or authority on the arm. We are reminded of the veteran, who, when charged by the Duke of Wellington to take a difficult position, turned to him and said, "I will go, sir; but first give me a grip of your conquering hand."

Think, soul, of what that hand is which holds the waters in its hollow, and spreads the curtains of the sky, and was nailed to the cross; that brought blessing with its touch to so many weary sufferers, and now holds the mysterious book, sealed with seven seals; that caught Peter, and lay lightly on the heads of the little babes. That hand is strengthening thee for a work for which by nature thou art unequal, but to which thou hast been evidently called. Go forward: it holds, guides, empowers thee. It can lead thee before kings, princes, and nobles, so that thou shalt not fear; it can preserve thee from dangers innumerable; it can shield thee from the fire of the enemy; and none, man or devil, can pluck you out of the Father's hand.

Ezra 8:29

Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them at Jerusalem.

They were protected by God, whose presence with them across the wild desert made it needless to ask for an escort of soldiers; but they had to take care of the precious vessels of His house. It was a reciprocal trust. So it must be with us, as we are taught in 2 Timothy 1:12, 14. There are two deposits, as the margin shows. We deposit ourselves, and all we are and have, with God; whilst He deposits with us His sacred Gospel, the vessels of which we must "guard through the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us," and be prepared to defend with our blood.

Our deposit with God.— How safe are they who commit their all to God! Faraday was asked, when dying, on what supposition he depended as he contemplated the other world; and he replied, "I am relying on no supposition, but on a certainty; I know in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him."

God's deposit with us.— But let us be true to our trust. The Holy Bible, the Doctrines of the Christian Church, the Day of Rest, the House of God, the ordinances of the Lord's Supper and Christian Baptism— these are some of the vessels which have been passed down to us, and we must hand on intact. Be ye clean that carry them! Oh, what joy it will be when we reach our destination,

and can resign our trust, and weigh out the deposit, and hear the Master's "Well done!" But, in the meanwhile, whilst marching across the yellow sands, where wild dangers lie in wait, let us not seek the escort of creature or worldly might; but boast of the Hand of our God, which is for good upon all them that seek Him.

Ezra 9:1

The people have not separated themselves.

This was only too true! There had been, on the part of princes and rulers, gross intermarriage with the people of surrounding lands. The holy seed had become mixed and diluted. And it was the more sad that this should have taken place, when it was to cleanse His people from such alliances, and the evils to which they inevitably led, that God had passed them through the purging fires of the seventy years' captivity. It afflicted the good Ezra sorely. With every sign of Oriental grief he poured out his soul before God. And this is the lesson we should carry with us. It has been truly said that communion with the Lord dries many tears, but it starts many more. We no longer sorrow with the sorrow of the world; but we become burdened with some of the griefs that still rend the heart of the Lord in the glory.

This fellowship between the Lord's people and the world is becoming increasingly close as we near the end of the age. In the appointments of our homes, our amusements, books, and practices, there is very little to choose between the one and the other. If there is any distinction, it lies in a certain sadness with which Christians take their pleasures, as though remembering a something better. But the rest of us do not grieve over it; we do not rend our clothes: we do not take these things to heart, as though they especially concerned us.

Let us at least separate ourselves after the manner of Christ, who frequented the temple, acknowledged the State, accepted invitations to great houses; but His heart and speech always revolved about His Father. What if it led to our being cast out without the camp!

Ezra 10:4

We also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

This narrative reminds us of the story of Achan, who took of the accursed thing, and kindled the anger of the Lord against the children of Israel. There must be confession and the putting away of evil ere communion with God can be reestablished.

It is not given to every one to be an Ezra. There are abuses to deal with, and wrongs to right, on every side; but they require to be dealt with by those who are specially adapted or qualified for the work. Be always ready to do such work, if there should be no one else. It was the life motto of a great man always to act as though there were no one else who would. Still, Nehemiahs and Ezras are not given very largely to the Church or the world; and, for the most part, we must be content to be of those who say, "Be of good courage, and do it; we also will be with thee." But though this seems but a little thing, it may lead to great results. Many a man has been urged to a noble deed by the encouragement he received at a critical hour from some unknown and obscure disciple.

If you cannot do a great thing, identify yourself with one who can. Stand by him, identify yourself with him in public or private, by sympathy and prayer. Though the strongholds of evil are great and high, they may be swept away before an avalanche of snowflakes, any one of which would melt in the warm hand of a child.

Oh for more of that magnanimity, which is quick to recognize the matters that belong to certain elect souls-not envying, nor disparaging, but frankly confessing their eminent qualifications, and falling in to further and accelerate their success, which will be the gain of all!

C H Spurgeon

Devotionals

Morning and Evening

Faith's Checkbook

Ezra 7:22 (Morning and evening)

“Salt without prescribing how much.” — Ezra 7:22

Salt was used in every offering made by fire unto the Lord, and from its preserving and purifying properties it was the grateful emblem of divine grace in the soul. It is worthy of our attentive regard that, when Artaxerxes gave salt to Ezra the priest, he set no limit to the quantity, and we may be quite certain that when the King of kings distributes grace among his royal priesthood, the supply is not cut short by him. Often are we straitened in ourselves, but never in the Lord. He who chooses to gather much manna will find that he may have as much as he desires. There is no such famine in Jerusalem that the citizens should eat their bread by weight and drink their water by measure. Some things in the economy of grace are measured; for instance our vinegar and gall are given us with such exactness that we never have a single drop too much, but of the salt of grace no stint is made, “Ask what thou wilt and it shall be given unto thee.” Parents need to lock up the fruit cupboard, and the sweet jars, but there is no need to keep the salt-box under lock and key, for few children will eat too greedily from that. A man may have too much money, or too much honour, but he cannot have too much grace. When Jeshurun waxed fat in the flesh, he kicked against God, but there is no fear of a man’s becoming too full of grace: a plethora of grace is impossible. More wealth brings more care, but more grace brings more joy. Increased wisdom is increased sorrow, but abundance of the Spirit is fulness of joy. Believer, go to the throne for a large supply of heavenly salt. It will season thine afflictions, which are unsavoury without salt; it will preserve thy heart which corrupts if salt be absent, and it will kill thy sins even as salt kills reptiles. Thou needest much; seek much, and have much.

Ezra 8:22 (Morning and evening)

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

A convoy on many accounts would have been desirable for the pilgrim band, but a holy shame-facedness would not allow Ezra to seek one. He feared lest the heathen king should think his professions of faith in God to be mere hypocrisy, or imagine that the God of Israel was not able to preserve his own worshippers. He could not bring his mind to lean on an arm of flesh in a matter so evidently of the Lord, and therefore the caravan set out with no visible protection, guarded by him who is the sword and shield of his people. It is to be feared that few believers feel this holy jealousy for God; even those who in a measure walk by faith, occasionally mar the lustre of their life by craving aid from man. It is a most blessed thing to have no props and no buttresses, but to stand upright on the Rock of Ages, upheld by the Lord alone. Would any believers seek state endowments for their Church, if they remembered that the Lord is dishonoured by their asking Caesar’s aid? as if the Lord could not supply the needs of his own cause! Should we run so hastily to friends and relations for assistance, if we remembered that the Lord is magnified by our implicit reliance upon his solitary arm? My soul, wait thou only upon God. “But,” says one, “are not means to be used?” Assuredly they are; but our fault seldom lies in their neglect: far more frequently it springs out of foolishly believing in them instead of believing in God. Few run too far in neglecting the creature’s arm; but very many sin greatly in making too much of it. Learn, dear reader, to glorify the Lord by leaving means untried, if by using them thou wouldst dishonour the name of the Lord.

TODAY IN THE WORD

DEVOTIONALS FROM

Moody Bible

(Note this section also includes devotionals from G Campbell Morgan, James Smith and Iain Paisley)

EZRA 1**Ezra 1**

In order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia. - Ezra 1:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon controlled a vast empire and enriched his capital with captive peoples and looted treasure. He had been warned in a dream, interpreted by Daniel, to repent of his sins, but instead he proclaimed: “Is this not the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” God responded with judgment for his pride. Only after his extraordinary humiliation did Nebuchadnezzar respond: “Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever” (see Dan. 4:28-37).

The Babylonian kingdom was soon overtaken by the Persian Empire (see Dan. 5:28). In contrast to Nebuchadnezzar, King Cyrus of Persia exhibited a measure of humility about his position. Here in the opening verses of the book of Ezra, we see a key theme emerge: Leaders are important—but only if they allow God to work through them.

Notice throughout today's reading how often the text describes God working in the hearts of leaders. First, "the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus" in order to fulfill His promise, which we read about yesterday (v. 1). Historians have said that the Persians, particularly Cyrus, were interested in encouraging their conquered peoples to retain their native religion, assuming that this would keep them happier and less likely to revolt. Scripture provides us with the behind-the-scenes peek, however—whatever political motives Cyrus might have had, it was the work of God that prompted him to make the proclamation to initiate the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem (vv. 2-4; see Isa. 44:28).

God worked through Cyrus to fulfill His promise, and He also moved the hearts of the tribal leaders, priests, and Levites to desire to return to rebuild the temple (v. 5). Remember that the people had been exiled for several generations; many of them had extended families, good jobs, and comfortable lives throughout the empire. A spiritual prompting made them willing to embrace the arduous task of repairing their decimated spiritual center of worship.

APPLY THE WORD

This chapter concludes with a list of items that Cyrus returned to the Jews. We might be tempted to skim or disregard the lists in this book as irrelevant to our contemporary devotional life. But it reminds us that the Lord cares about details, and He provided for the practical needs to accomplish this task. He restored some of the treasure to His people and equipped them for their journey. When the Lord calls you, He will also equip you to obey Him!

Ezra 1:1–2:2; Haggai 1:1-15

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. - Lamentations 3:40

TODAY IN THE WORD

A beautiful building in Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine, has recently been reclaimed for its original purpose, and is now home to a thriving Christian congregation. Like so many churches in the former Soviet Union, this church was confiscated by the government and used for other purposes during many of the seventy-four years of Communist rule. The building suffered from years of neglect, and still needs a lot of repair and restoration work.

Many centuries before the Communists formed the Soviet Union, a foreign conqueror swept through a nation and left a house of God in ruins. A little more than twenty years after the death of King Josiah, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar swept into Judah in a final conquest of the southern kingdom.

Most of God's people were sent off into exile in Babylon in fulfillment of God's judgment, and the magnificent temple of Solomon was leveled. But the godly line survived in Babylon, and when the seventy years of captivity God had decreed were finished, He kept His promise to restore Israel to her land.

The book of Ezra records the fulfillment of this promise of restoration, as the first exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. A man named Zerubbabel was among this group (Ezra 2:2). He was a prince of Judah, the grandson of King Jehoiachin who had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:8-16). We're studying Zerubbabel today because he was one of the last descendants in the godly line mentioned in the Old Testament.

The prophet Haggai says that Zerubbabel was appointed governor of Jerusalem. The main task of the returned exiles was to rebuild the temple, a job they began with great enthusiasm. But after the temple's foundation was laid, opposition from the people living in Samaria caused Zerubbabel and the people to stop the work (Ezra 4:1-5, 24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's study finishes our survey of some of the people in the Old Testament lineage of Jesus Christ.

G Campbell Morgan

Ezra 1:1

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus - Ezra 1:1

To human observation the purposes of God often seem to tarry. The one thing of which we may remain assured is that they are never abandoned. Indeed, there is a very true sense in which they never for a moment tarry. In the Books we have been reading, we have had the story of the complete failure and break-up of the chosen nation. That nation had become "a people scattered and peeled," having lost national position and power; and, to a very large extent, national consciousness also. Nevertheless, God still moved on toward the fulfillment of His ultimate purpose of redemption, not of His people only, but of the race, through them. Through the seventy years of captivity, by the very processes of suffering, He prepared a remnant to return, to rebuild, and so to

hold the fort, until He, the true Seed and Servant, should come. The history of this return sets forth clearly the truth concerning this direct overruling of God. He compelled the most unlikely instruments to contribute to the accomplishment of His will. Babylon had carried away His people into captivity, and by so doing had fulfilled His purpose. They, however, treated the conquered nation with undue severity. In process of time, and in fulfilment of the distinct foretelling of Jeremiah, Cyrus the Persian broke the power of Babylon. This Cyrus was now chosen and commissioned as the very instrument for restoring God's remnant to their own land. His proclamation made that return possible. It was the result of Divine dealing, and, moreover, he was conscious that this was so. How constantly in human history God has compelled kings and rulers to carry out His sovereign will!

Ezra 1:1-11 James Smith THE STIRRED-UP SPIRIT.

"Not to the rich He came, and to the ruling

(Men full of meat, whom wholly He abhors);

Not to the fools grown insolent in fooling—

Most, when the lost are dying at their doors.

Nay! but to her who, with a sweet thanksgiving,

Took in tranquility what God might bring;

Blessed Him and waited, and, within her living,

Felt the arousal of a holy thing."—Myers.

The clock of God's providence may seem at times to go slow, but it always strikes at the proper minute. During the seventy years of the Jews' captivity, the cup of Babylon's iniquity was being filled, so that the time of their deliverance synchronised with the time of Babylon's downfall. The quiver of the Almighty is full of arrows. In the first year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar carried many into captivity. He reigned forty-five years; his son (Evil-merodach), twenty-three; and his grandson (Belshazzar,) three years—which make up the seventy predicted years of their bondage. In the third year of Belshazzar, Darius, the Mede, captured the city of Babylon, and Cyrus, the king of Persia, became ruler (Dan. 5). The accession of Cyrus to the throne was another marvellous fulfilment of prophecy (Isa. 44:28). The very name of the Jews' liberator was mentioned one hundred and fifty years beforehand. This is no mere coincident or random occurrence, it is an indisputable proof of inspiration. At this crisis three distinct prophecies found their fulfilment:

1. The punishment of the king of Babylon (Jer. 25:12).

2. The end of the seventy years' captivity (Jer. 29:10; Da. 9:2).

3. The coming of the deliverer named. We may use these words, "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus," as a key to unlock some of the treasures of this chapter.

I. The Spirit Needs Stirring Up. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (Ezra 1:1). The will of God will never be done by us until the spirit within us is stirred up to do it. Man is not a machine. Cold, mechanical service is an insult to the living God. Selfishness is death in His sight. It is possible to have the form of godliness while the spirit is sleeping the sleep of death. You hath He quickened who were dead in trespasses and sin.

II. God Alone can Effectually Stir up the Spirit. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." The source of all spiritual life and power is with Him. Every God-quickened spirit is a spirit raised from the dead, that He might work in that spirit both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13NLT). There is a divine purpose in every divinely-awakened soul. It is the Spirit that quickens (Jn 6:63KJV).

III. The Means by which the Spirit was Stirred up. There was...

(1) the Word of God. Daniel understood by books the number of the years... that the Lord would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem (Da. 9:2). Daniel may have showed Cyrus the prophet's reference to himself, as the divinely-appointed shepherd by whom the temple was to be built, and the captives freed without a price (Isa. 44:28; 45:1-13).

(2) The providence of God. The fact that Cyrus was now made Governor of Babylon, he was in a position to carry out the prophetic declaration. He discovered that the means of accomplishing these purposes of God were committed to him. Woe must come upon him if he obeys not the heavenly call. Thus, God still stirs up the spirits of men, by making them to know and feel that His word has special reference to themselves in the doing of His will. No man will heartily obey the Gospel of God unless he has, like Cyrus, been powerfully convinced that it is for himself, as if there were no other to whom it could be so applied, and whose only alternative is to obey or sin against the clearest Light. A woman was once led to claim the bare promise of God through receiving a

letter addressed to another woman of the same name. She concluded that, if her name had been written in the Bible, she could never have believed that it was her that was meant. When the Holy Spirit applies the word of God, it is always unmistakably luminous and personal.

IV. The Evidences of a Stirred-up Spirit.

(1) There is faith in the word of God. Cyrus said, "The Lord God of heaven... hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2). The king of Persia was no more clearly and urgently charged to build the temple than we are to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and serve Him without fear, in holiness, all the days of our life (Luke 1:74-75). This call to us is quite as personal and imperative as the call that came to Cyrus. Have we as heartily believed it?

(2) There is confession of the purpose of God. "He made a proclamation through all the land" (Ezra 1:1). When we discover what the will of God is concerning us, we should not be ashamed to make it known publicly what our attitude is toward this revealed will. Has he not warned us that "Whosoever is ashamed of Me and of My word, of them will I be ashamed."

(3) There are liberal things devised for the honour of God. The large-heartedness of Cyrus is seen in his offer to let all the captives go who desired the restoration of Jerusalem (Ezra 1:3). in his providing for the sojourners by the way (Ezra 1:4), and in his delivering up of "all the vessels of the house of the Lord" into the hand of "the prince of Judah" (Ezra 1:7-8). The liberal devises liberal things (Isa. 32:8). The spirit that has been stirred up by God will surely be constrained to do God-like things. The spirit of **Carey** was powerfully stirred up when he said, "Expect much from God, and attempt much for God." **Moody** said, "God never uses a discouraged worker." The stirred-up spirit is always on the alert for opportunities of helping on the work and people of God, and devises means whereby His banished ones may be restored. Such spirits seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and God works in them both to will and to do of His good pleasure. (Phil 2:13NLT)

EZRA 2

Ezra 2

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give ... for God loves a cheerful giver. - 2 Corinthians 9:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

The test of commitment lies not in starting out but in following through when difficulties arise. We don't evaluate the strength of a marriage on the wedding day—it's only possible after we see how a couple respond to adversity and the passing of time. We don't award medals for athletes who begin a race; they have to earn them by completing the distance despite their burning lungs and quivering legs.

One theme of Ezra and Nehemiah is the test of commitment when tested by opposition and challenges. In our reading yesterday we saw that the tribal and religious leaders followed the prompting of the Lord to return to Jerusalem. Today we see the first step of their follow-through on that commitment.

The list of the people who returned might cause our eyes to glaze over. So many strange names, and seemingly irrelevant list of numbers! But interesting information is embedded in this list that gives us clues about the important message communicated to us through the book of Ezra. Notice the main categories described after the geographical list: the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers of the temple, the temple servants and servants of Solomon (vv. 36, 40, 41, 42, 43, 55). This return to Jerusalem had spiritual significance, indicated by the list of religious leaders. Throughout the Exile, God had preserved the spiritual leadership for His people.

The importance of spiritual leadership is highlighted further by the incident in verses 59 through 63. As the book of Ezra will stress repeatedly, the purity of God's people is vitally important for their obedience and relationship with God. With no family records to verify their claims of Jewish or priestly identity, this group was instructed not to participate as religious leaders until God's divinely appointed tools for seeking wisdom could be used by a priest (v. 63; cf. Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21).

Finally, the chapter concludes with their arrival in Jerusalem, and the "heads of families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God" (v. 68). It was another step on their journey of commitment.

APPLY THE WORD

Most of us are better at starting something than we are at finishing. We need only look at half-finished craft projects, rarely used gym memberships, or list of friends whom we need to call. When it comes to our spiritual commitments, our continuing obedience reveals the state of our hearts. If you need to renew your journey, remember that the Lord equips you and take action today—whether it's prayer, serving someone in need, or perhaps giving generously—to live for Him.

Ezra 2:1-2, 64-70; Jeremiah 24:1-10

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. - Jeremiah 24:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

The names of over 4.5 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust are stored in the computers at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Visitors can search for a person's name, and if that name is on file all known information about that individual will appear, including a photo. The memorial continually seeks and gathers information on Holocaust victims, and workers there say that the ultimate goal is to identify each one of the six million victims.

Yad Vashem is a very moving example of the importance of names. Names are important to God, too, as we will see in our study of Ezra and Nehemiah. Today's reading is the first of six daily readings this month that include extended lists of names. In addition to today's reading, you may want to skim Ezra 2:3-63.

Many Bible students wonder about the value of the Scripture's long lists of names. In the case of the Jews who came back to Jerusalem from Babylon, lists like the one in Ezra 2 were important for several reasons. For one thing, since the total number of people who came back with Zerubbabel was 49,987, accurate family records were essential.

It was important, too, that the priests, Levites, and others who were to serve in the rebuilt temple be identified so their service could be established. In fact, those whose family records could not be found were excluded from the priesthood (2:59-63). The list is also important because the Jews who submitted to Babylon and went into exile were the ones who, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, were obedient to God and would be blessed by Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Praise God that He knows our names! Jesus said, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). When you think of friends, coworkers, and family members who don't know Christ as their Savior, do some names come to mind? Take some extra time this weekend to pray for at least three unsaved people you know, and ask God to give you a "divine appointment" to witness and share the gospel with them. To aid you in praying for these friends, add their names to your prayer list.

Ezra 2:70

G Campbell Morgan

So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinim, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities. Ezra 2.70.

These words summarize the chapter which they close, It contains the register of those who, taking advantage of the decree of Cyrus, turned their faces toward their land, and settled in its cities. The list proceeds in a definite order from the leaders downwards. First the names are given of those immediately associated with Zerubbabel, Ezra 2.1-2. Then follow the names and numbers of families, Ezra 2.3-35; the names of members of the priest-hood, Ezra 2.36-39; the list and numbers of the Levites, Ezra 2.40-42 ; after these the Nethinim, Ezra 2.43-54; next the children of Solomon's servants, Ezra 2.55-58; then a number who had lost their genealogical relationship, Ezra 2.59-63; and finally the totals of the people, and the lists of the cattle. It is an interesting record, showing the mixed and representative nature of the returning remnant. There are one or two matters of special note. First, the people thus returning are distinctly spoken of as "the men of the people of Israel," Ezra 2.2. The reference is patently not to the northern kingdom only, for it was the southern kingdom that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away. It does, however, undoubtedly mean that representatives of those tribes which composed the northern kingdom, also returned. Again, it is noticeable that few comparatively of the Levites are named; ten times as many priests as Levites returned. Another point of interest is the Nethinim. Their origin it is almost impossible to determine. In all probability they were of foreign extraction, and had been admitted to some of the minor forms of service connected with Levitical work. The name signified "giver." Jewish tradition identified them with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9.3-17).

EZRA 3

Ezra 3:1-13

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done. - Luke 22:42

TODAY IN THE WORD

A small congregation purchased ground and saved for several years to build a new church building. Members cheered aloud the day the contractor put up the first wall. But once they began worshiping in their new building, a strange thing happened. The church

experienced a collective sense of depression. They enjoyed the amenities of their new church but missed the intimacy of their old building, even though it had only been a storefront in town.

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem and saw the foundation of the second temple laid in Ezra's day felt a similar ambivalence. Although Cyrus had issued the original decree that opened the way for the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the work did not begin in earnest until the time of Artaxerxes I. Ezra returned with about 5,000 exiles to complete the work Nehemiah had begun.

Ezra's commission did not reflect genuine faith by Artaxerxes. Although the king expressed concern about the wrath of Israel's God, his policy seems to have been driven more by motives of political expediency than by religious conviction. Persian rulers found it more effective to accommodate the religious customs of the nations they subjected than to disrupt and relocate them like the Babylonians had done. God used this more "enlightened" policy to accomplish His goals and fulfill His promise to restore Jerusalem.

The initial efforts of the returned exiles, led by Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor, begun three months after their arrival, reflected both faith and fear. According to Ezra 3:3 they built the altar on the foundation of the original "despite their fear of the peoples around them." Faith is not incompatible with fear. The two often coexist.

When the time came to lay the foundation of the temple itself, the builders did so to the sound of trumpets and cymbals as the Levites sang a psalm. The people shouted in response—but not everyone cheered. The older priests who could still remember Solomon's temple wept so loudly that it was impossible to distinguish the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping.

APPLY THE WORD

If fear is sometimes compatible with faith, so is ambivalence. Jesus' prayer in the garden is proof of this. In His prayer Jesus speaks of two "wills." One is His own, and the other is the will of His heavenly Father (Luke 22:42). Jesus' confidence that the Father's will was superior is what separated His understandable ambivalence from our sinful rebellion. If you are struggling with this, pray the words of Jesus and ask the Spirit to strengthen you to obey the leading of the Lord.

Ezra 3:1-6

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar ... to the LORD. - Ezra 3:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Jacob and his sons went to Egypt to escape the famine in the land God had promised to Abraham, the Lord told him that his descendants would one day return to the land of promise (Gen. 46:3-4; 50:24-25). God kept this promise, miraculously leading the people of Israel from Pharaoh's bondage. Yet on the verge of entering the Promised Land, the people balked. They heard the report from ten of the spies that focused on the dangerous inhabitants. They rebelled against Moses, preferring to base their decision on fear of others' power rather than faith in God's promise (see Num. 13:28-14:4).

Centuries later, the people of Israel were again returning to their land. Again God had kept His promise. And again, dangerous people inhabited the land. Anyone familiar with the history of Israel would wonder: What will they do this time? Will they respond in fear or in faith?

Notice in our passage today that the Israelites still feared the peoples who were in the land (v. 3). As we will see this month, this fear was not without reason. But they did not focus on their fear or their foes—they responded with worship. The leadership of Zerubbabel is introduced here, and he led the people in starting right away to rebuild the "altar of the God of Israel" (v. 2).

Although the temple had not yet been rebuilt, Zerubbabel and the people didn't use that to excuse themselves from worship. The tone of the text indicates that they eagerly hurried to complete the altar so that they could resume worship. Obedience and worship are integrally connected throughout Scripture, including in the book of Ezra. The people of God exhibit their identity through worship offered to the Lord and obedience to His decrees. The specific offerings are listed in verses 3 through 5, and notice the refrain describing them: "in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses," "required number," and "appointed sacred festivals" (vv. 2, 4, 5). The people took God's Word seriously, and they acted in faith and obedience.

APPLY THE WORD

The Lord does not promise us a life free from opposition or obstacles, but He does promise to never leave us or forsake us (Deut. 31:6; Heb. 13:5). He doesn't guarantee that we will never have people or situations to fear, but He does promise that He will reward our faith (1 Cor. 15:58). If you are facing a frightening situation, commit the outcome to God and choose to worship and obey Him. Offer Him your praises and service, knowing that His Word will never fail.

Ezra 3:1-13

Reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. - Jeremiah 26:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

When the Olympic Games resumed in London in 1948 after a twelve-year absence due to World War II, the competitors included two athletes who represented what could be called the old and the new of Olympic champions. A Dutch track star who had first competed in the 1936 Games in Berlin, Germany, returned in 1948 at the age of 30. She was relatively old by Olympic standards, but she won four gold medals! Another hero at the 1948 Games was a 17-year-old American named Bob Mathias, who won gold in the decathlon.

Interesting things happen when the old and the new come together. One of the most famous examples of this in the Bible is found in today's text, as the older exiles cried and the younger ones rejoiced when sacrifices were offered in Jerusalem for the first time in fifty years. The purpose of the exiles' return to the land of Israel was to rebuild the temple and to re-establish worship as God's covenant people.

Jeremiah had warned the people of Judah before their captivity to reform their ways, but they failed to obey God and suffered exile and the destruction of the temple. The people who came back under Zerubbabel knew they could not afford to make the same mistakes.

The first thing the people did under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the priest Jeshua was to build an altar on which to offer the sacrifices prescribed in the Law of Moses. The temple itself was still in ruins, and it would take some months to gather all the building materials that were needed. But the worship of God could not wait.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The exiles had to build their altar and worship God in the midst of people who didn't know Him and were a cause for fear (v. 3). That sounds very familiar. As God's people today, we are called to serve and worship Him in the middle of a culture that has forgotten Him and is often hostile to Christian faith. And if we're honest, we have to admit that we are fearful sometimes. The next time you are tempted to fear, turn to 2 Timothy 1:7 and claim the truth of this great verse.

Ezra 3:7-13

They sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever." - Ezra 3:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Amish communities are known for the practice of barn raising. Within just a few days, the community gathers to build an entire barn for one family, usually in response to a natural disaster that destroyed a barn or sometimes to assist a new family in the community. Typically, participation is mandatory—everyone, even children, has a role to ensure a successful barn raising.

In our reading today, we see the continuing leadership role of Zerubbabel to direct the rebuilding of the temple, and the entire community needed to participate to make this project of obedience to God a success. Masons and carpenters had to be paid, and a trading arrangement needed to be made with Tyre and Sidon (v. 7). Next, Zerubbabel ensured that diligent work on the temple foundation progressed (vv. 8-9).

The skilled workers built the physical foundation of the new temple, and the priests and Levites provided the appropriate spiritual context for this occasion. As we saw yesterday, again they were careful to obediently follow the instructions for praise; obedience and worship continue to be linked (v. 10). Not only did the people offer sacrifices, they also offered shouts and songs of praise to the Lord in recognition of the significance of this new temple foundation. Their praise acknowledged the love and faithfulness of God who keeps His promises (v. 11).

The older generation, those who had seen Solomon's temple, had been carried into exile, and now had returned to see the new foundation, wept aloud (v. 12). Some think that these were tears of sadness from comparing the new temple unfavorably to the glory of the old one. Others see the weeping as an emotional expression of amazement: after seeing the destruction of Solomon's temple, this older generation was overwhelmed at God's provision to allow them to see the construction begin on a new temple. It's clear that this foundation produced a tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual response. A hint for the events to come is at the end of the chapter: "The sound was heard far away" (v. 13). When we respond to the work of God, others will notice.

APPLY THE WORD

This has important lessons for us today. First, we each have different gifts and roles in order to accomplish the work of God (see 1

Cor. 12:4-11). We need not be jealous of the technical skills or spiritual leadership of others—every member of the community of faith is necessary. Second, our different gifts all come together in unity to praise the Lord for what He has done. Here is the spirit of true unity: recognizing the goodness and glory of God and responding in praise and obedience.

Ezra 3:12

G Campbell Morgan

The old men that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy. Ezra 3.12.

The leaders in this great movement of return were conscious of the matters of real importance in the life of the people. This is evident from the fact that directly they were settled in their cities, the altar of God was established in Jerusalem. They also observed the Feast of Tabernacles, the most joyful of all the feasts of Jehovah, established all the feasts, and so far as was possible restored the Divinely appointed order of worship. The reason for this activity is expressed in the words, "For fear was upon them because of the people of the countries." Different interpretations have been given of the meaning of this statement, but that which seems to suit the situation best is that they were conscious how, in the neglect of the altar of God in the past, they had become contaminated by the idolatrous practices of surrounding peoples, and in order to prevent a repetition of such failure, they immediately set up the true altar. It is at least significant that they never returned to idolatry. The next step was that of the rebuilding of the Temple. The foundations were laid, and in the second year of the return, with fitting ceremonies, they rejoiced. Then it was that the lamentations of the old men broke out. This can well be understood when the comparative poverty and insignificance of the people and building are remembered. Yet it was an element of weakness. The backward look which discounts present activity in true directions, is always a peril. Regrets over the past which paralyze work in the present are always wrong. Moreover all such regrets, as in this case, are in danger of blinding the eyes to the true value and significance of the present. The Temple these men were building was destined to have more honour and glory than the old one.

Ezra 3:8-4:6

He is good; his love towards Israel endures forever. - Ezra 3:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

James Meredith was the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi. His application was rejected twice until the Supreme Court finally ruled that Meredith had a right to be admitted. Riots broke out on the university's campus and Meredith's life was threatened, but his resolve did not waver: "I believe now that I have a Divine Responsibility ... I am familiar with the probable difficulties involved in such a move as I am undertaking and I am fully prepared to pursue it all the way to a degree from the University of Mississippi."

Meredith showed courage in the face of opposition, and so did the Israelites in the wake of their return from exile. As we read yesterday, the nations of Israel and Judah abandoned covenant faithfulness to Yahweh, and as punishment for their sin, God allowed enemy nations to overrun the land, capture the people, and send them into exile. Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 B.C.; Judah fell to Babylon in 586 B.C.

By God's mercy, He granted them a return to the land of Judah, which had been virtually uninhabited for a period of 70 years. The walls of defense encircling Jerusalem had been torn down; the temple had been destroyed. The exiles faced the work of rebuilding their capital, their house of worship, and their lives.

At first, the work proceeded quickly, and the foundation for the temple was laid. But the neighboring nations did not support the reconstruction, and the Israelites met with fierce opposition. It slowed their work considerably for at least a decade.

The challenge facing them was to refuse to be discouraged. They needed to continue to believe that God was good and that God would allow them to complete the work He had called them to do. At the end of the book of Ezra, the author records that the people did indeed persevere and see the completion of the temple.

APPLY THE WORD

Courage comes when we've convinced that God has commissioned us for a particular work. But the challenge is always to tune our ears to the voice of God and to silence the voices of our opponents. Can we hear what God is saying to us? When He speaks, it is to strengthen us, to encourage us, and to remind us that all of His resources are sufficient and available to us. Enemy voices seek to discourage and disempower us. Which voice gets airtime in your heart and mind?

EZRA 4

Ezra 4

Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me. - Psalm 27:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Christ Liberty Family Life Center in Avondale Estates, Georgia, was a church focused on serving the poor, providing youth ministry, and worshiping in their leased building. They were forced to leave their building just a few months later, however, when the city enforced a zoning ordinance requiring churches to have a minimum of three acres of property. Without a suitable building, tutoring classes and youth ministry had to be canceled, and attendance dwindled as the church was forced to move from one temporary location to another.

Our text today depicts how difficult it can be to carry out the Lord's work in the face of opposition. As we saw, others will notice when we praise and serve God—but they won't always be happy about it.

The news of the rebuilding of the temple was met with hostility by the people living in the land, mostly various tribes who had been resettled into Samaria during the Assyrian Empire after Israel had been taken captive (see 2 Kings 17:24-41). Their claim to worship God was true; the problem was that they mixed the worship of the Lord with worship of their own gods (2 Kings 17:33). Zerubbabel understood the spiritual stakes. They could not dilute or defile the true worship of the true God with pagan rituals and sacrifices (v. 3).

The peoples of the land revealed their true motives by their actions. Instead of a desire to participate in worship, they were opposed to the return of Israelites, the restoration of the temple, and the reassertion of Jewish faith and identity. Since their first plan to corrupt the building of the temple failed, they turned to another strategy: political and legal manipulation. They sent letters to the Persian monarchs accusing the Jews of insubordination (v. 15). They preyed on that most sensitive subject for a ruler: his pocketbook. They alleged that a re-established Jewish presence would undermine royal revenues and even imperial control of the region (vv. 13, 16).

The ploy succeeded. The Persian king ordered the work to stop. The Samaritan peoples enforced the decree. As a result, construction of the temple ceased for over a decade.

APPLY THE WORD

This low point in the story should encourage us—because even today, we will face opposition when we are serving and praising God. This is not retaliation for obnoxious provocation; this is spiritual resistance to the work of the Lord. When these times come, we can take comfort knowing that we are not the first of God's people to experience opposition. Reading the psalms is especially helpful as they cry out for God's righteousness, justice, and protection to prevail.

Ezra 4:1-24

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. - 1 Corinthians 1:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

Former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev often denounced Joseph Stalin in an attempt to move the Soviet people away from idolizing the brutal deceased dictator. During one public meeting at which Khrushchev was denouncing Stalin, someone in the crowd shouted, "You were one of Stalin's colleagues! Why didn't you stop him?"

"Who said that?" Nikita Khrushchev roared. The place went quiet as the audience froze in fear. Then in a quiet voice, Khrushchev said, "Now you know why."

Some people are so intimidating they can stop us in our tracks, while others are more subtle in their attempts to manipulate us. The exiles of Israel experienced both kinds of opposition once word got out to the surrounding peoples that the Jerusalem temple was being rebuilt. These "enemies of Judah" first tried to join God's people in the work so they could disrupt it, and when that didn't work, they tried to intimidate them into quitting.

The people in question were primarily the descendants of the pagan peoples that the Assyrian Empire had imported into the northern kingdom of Israel after conquering and deporting the Israelites to Assyria. This policy helped to ensure that a conquered area would not rise up in a new fervor of nationalism. Zerubbabel's enemies were a mixed group in every sense—the ancestors of the mixed-race Samaritans of Jesus' day.

Ezra 4 is disjointed chronologically because Ezra went on to show the long history of opposition that the returning exiles faced. The

events of verses 6 through 23 are a historical parenthesis that covers the period of time to King Artaxerxes, who reigned many years later.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The exiles who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple must have looked foolish and weak to the people around them. But those workers and worshipers who obeyed God by returning to the land of Israel with Zerubbabel and Joshua were still God's choice to accomplish His will.

Ezra 4:3

G Campbell Morgan

Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God. Ezra 4.3.

This chapter gives us the account of the opposition of the Samaritans to the work of Temple building, an opposition which proved successful for a time. The first method of opposition was that of an offer of co-operation. Zerubbabel was asked to admit into partnership such as were really enemies of the work. It was a very subtle ploy. Human reasoning, acting on the level of policy merely, might be inclined to think that there could be no harm, but only advantage in gaining help from any source. Men of faith have often fallen into this blunder, and have associated with themselves those not sharing their faith, and therefore in the deepest sense opposed to their enterprises. These leaders were not deceived. They detected the peril. Their reasoning was complete, in that it was illuminated by their faith, and took in all the quantities in coming to a decision. This is seen in the answer of Zerubbabel: "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God." The words reveal a principle of perpetual application, and persistent urgency. God must be our God, before we can build a house for Him. Men who are not submitted to Him, can have no part in doing His work. That is a false breadth which proposes to seek the aid of those in rebellion against God, in the doing of the work which is in the interest of His Kingdom. Such inclusion of the unyielded is, moreover, a wrong done to them, as it gives them a false sense of security. To have done many works for the King is of no value, so long as He has to say "I never knew you."

EZRA 5

Ezra 5

Let a search be made in the royal archives ... to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God. - Ezra 5:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

On March 6 we shared the story of Christ Liberty Family Life Center in Avondale Estates, Georgia, a church forced from its building because of zoning ordinances. Here's more of the story. In response to the city's action, the church filed suit in federal court alleging that the zoning ordinance, which applied only to religious groups, infringed on religious freedom. In August 2010, a federal judge ruled that the city must permit the church to have access to their facilities while the case is heard.

The Samaritan people thought that they could use political and legal action to halt the building of the temple and the resurgence of Jewish faith and presence. As we'll see today and tomorrow, God can work through government to protect His people and preserve His work.

The chapter begins by recognizing the prophetic work of Zechariah and Haggai, which we examined in more detail yesterday. No sooner had rebuilding begun, however, when government officials appeared, demanding to know who had authorized this construction project (v. 3). They send a report to the Persian king Darius about the matter.

Several things were different on this occasion than fourteen years earlier. First, the Jewish leaders seemed to understand that they had God's protection, and they did not respond out of fear (v. 5). They tell the government officials the truth about Cyrus's decree and their authorization to rebuild (vv. 11-16). Second, the rebuilding work does not cease while they wait to hear back from Darius. In fact, the description given by Tattenai and the other officials indicated that Zerubbabel and the people had taken the message of Haggai to heart. Not only did they continue to work with diligence, but they were also "making rapid progress" (v. 8).

The report from the hostile Samaritans referenced the rebellious nature of Jerusalem before its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., which the royal archives confirmed. But this report referenced the more recent decree by Cyrus in 538 B.C., which according to Persian law must be honored.

APPLY THE WORD

We've seen how God can work through political leaders and how the government and legal system can affect the people of God.

Take time to pray specifically and by name for each of your elected officials. Pray that they will be instruments of God's will in their city, state, and nation. Pray that their hearts will be open to the direction of God, even if—like Cyrus—they aren't believers. Pray, too, that you will demonstrate a Christian attitude and response toward leaders.

Ezra 5:1-17

No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. - Isaiah 54:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Dr. C. Everett Koop was appointed U.S. surgeon general by President Ronald Reagan, the public health department was in disarray, with employees suffering from discouragement and low morale. Dr. Koop set about putting things in order, and to boost morale he began wearing the uniform of his office, which was his right because the surgeon general is in a rank equivalent to a vice-admiral in the U.S. Navy. Dr. Koop's capable leadership and deep Christian commitment soon made a tremendous difference in the public health service.

The Jews who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and re-establish Israel's obedience to the Mosaic covenant also became demoralized and needed someone to get them back on track. External opposition and internal complacency had combined to stop work on the temple from about 535 to 520 B.C. It's amazing to think of this crucial project sitting idle for that long, which indicates how much the people's commitment had lagged.

Finally, God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to challenge His people to turn from complacency and self-absorption and to get back to work on the temple (vv. 1–2, cf. Hag. 1:1–8).

Ezra did not mention the people's spiritual problems because his emphasis was on the external opposition they faced. This opposition certainly did make tough times even more difficult, because the exiles had to watch out for the people around them while trying to rebuild their ruined temple and nation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If we are to follow God faithfully in tough times, we have to be honest and transparent before Him. The exiles of Judah were candid in telling Tattenai that Israel's destruction came about because their forefathers "angered" God (v. 12) by their disobedience. The Holy Spirit is faithful to convict us when we are off track spiritually. Ask God to search your heart and point out any area of sin or disobedience to be confessed and cleansed, which God has promised to do (1 John 1:9).

Ezra 5:2

G Campbell Morgan

With them were the prophets of God, helping them. Ezra 5:2.

This page of Old Testament history is interesting in itself, and valuable in the light it sheds on the true relationship between prophetic ministry and national life. A study of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah make it perfectly clear that the cessation of the work of building was unworthy of the men who had commenced that work. Judged by human standards, they could fairly urge the difficulties of the situation, and the necessity for obedience to the edict of the reigning king. Judged by the Divine standard, which was the true gauge of national prosperity, there was no reason for cessation, and they had no right to cease. It was to this end—the discovery of the true standard—that the burning words of these prophets were addressed. This is ever the contribution which the prophets of God are called upon to make to national life. They introduce into human thinking the quantities which are all too easily forgotten: those of the Divine government, and of the fact that national strength consists in recognition of that government, and right relation thereto. Statecraft which forgets God is powerless to realize the highest conditions for any people. When all the other quantities are considered in the light of His will and wisdom, they assume their proper proportions. Under the inspiration of the prophetic teaching, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the people, commenced their work again, and carried it through to completion. Opposition did not cease, but under the influence of the prophets their consciousness of relation to God had been renewed, and they went forward in spite of the challenge of their foes. The moral of national life is ever lifted to the highest degree of strength when there is a sense of right relationship with God.

EZRA 6

Ezra 6:1-12

May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree. - Ezra 6:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Part of the delight in reading the book of Esther comes from the wonderful use of irony. Haman thought he would manipulate the king into bestowing great honor upon him—but the honor went instead to his archrival, Mordecai (Esther 6). Then Haman's plot to destroy Mordecai and all the Jewish people resulted in his destruction on his own gallows, the promotion of Mordecai, and the protection of the Jews (Esther 7-8).

Our passage contains another account of irony in Scripture, and it's notable that this isn't merely a reversal of fortune or expectation. It's an example of God going above and beyond for His people.

In response to the request from the local governors, King Darius ordered a search for the alleged decree from Cyrus that granted permission for the temple to be rebuilt. As Zerubbabel had said, the scroll was indeed found, and it matched their account of events (vv. 1-5).

At this point, Darius could have sent a notice to Tattenai and the local governors that, in fact, the Jews were correct about the decree of Cyrus. He could have simply instructed the officials to leave Zerubbabel alone to continue the construction of the temple, as he stressed in verses 6 and 7. But the decree continued on. Not only did the Lord halt the opposition, He went above and beyond to ensure that His people were provided for.

Darius commanded that the governors pay for the temple construction expenses out of their own treasuries (v. 8). They also had to provide the materials for the sacrifices, from the animals to the drink and grain offerings, directly facilitating the ability of the Jews to worship God (v. 9). Of course this was motivated by Darius's own self-interest—he welcomed prayers on his behalf to any and every deity his subjects might worship (v. 10). But despite Darius's motives, God was divinely superintending every step.

Tattenai might have thought his appeal to Darius would be the end of temple construction. But God used this to reverse the situation from oppression to protection, and then even beyond, to provision.

APPLY THE WORD

In the middle of struggles and heartaches, it's comforting to know that the Lord knows the whole story: beginning, middle, and end. He understands your sorrow, and He also prepares your joy. You see the past and the present, but He also knows the plans He has for your future (Jer. 29:11). Just as He was faithful to His people to protect and provide for them, He will be faithful for you.

Ezra 6:1-12

When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. - Proverbs 16:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dwight L. Moody faced more than his share of opponents and critics during his incredible ministry in Chicago and around the world. In the early days of Moody's work someone nicknamed him "Crazy Moody," and Moody himself said that some people probably considered him a fanatic. Others complained that he was in ministry for the money and was using his work to gain favor with the wealthy. But instead of driving people away from Moody, his critics' attacks increased Moody's popularity, helping to expand his work. God used all these attacks against Moody to further spread the gospel.

Anyone who doubts that God can turn a negative situation around needs to spend some time in the book of Ezra. We can't say for sure that Tattenai, the Persian-appointed governor of the area that included Palestine, was a bitter opponent of the Jews. But his challenge of their right to rebuild was a major obstacle to the completion of the temple. These events became the biggest boost the Jews had for their project since King Cyrus's original decree.

Tattenai's letter was received at the Persian court and the requested search for the historical decree was made. Interestingly, the scroll was found not in the city of Babylon but in Ecbatana, a provincial capital three hundred miles to the northeast. This was the summer residence of the Persian kings and the place from which Cyrus issued his decree. The search revealed details of the decree that were not in the public announcement (see Ezra 1:1-4). These included the fact that the costs for the temple's construction were to be paid from the royal treasury, and that the gold and silver articles originally taken by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar were to be given back.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's exciting to see how God turned tough circumstances around for His people in days past. It's not always easy to stay faithful to God and wait patiently for Him when we are going through trials, when our present circumstances aren't so wonderful. God may want to change the situation, or your response to the situation, by showing you His power to sustain you. Are you willing to wait for God to accomplish His will and bring about His glory through your tough times? Tell Him so today.

Ezra 6:13-22

Then the people of Israel ... celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. - Ezra 6:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

When the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place hotel opened in 1998, lavish celebrations commemorated the event. Invitation-only parties and a ribbon-cutting ceremony with Chicago dignitaries signaled that construction had been completed and the hotel was open for business.

In today's passage, we have the description of the completion of another construction project—the temple of God in Jerusalem was finally finished. A great celebration was held, but instead of parties and celebrities, the event featured worship and an acknowledgment of God's goodness.

The governors of the area obeyed the decree of Darius, and the next four years offered great physical and spiritual blessing to the exiles in Judah. They were continuing to obey God's command to build His house, and they were blessed by the spiritual leadership of Haggai and Zechariah (v. 14). After the many descriptions of disobedience and turmoil, these verses hearten and encourage us that seasons of obedience and blessing do happen for God's people!

Notice three related themes in the account of their celebration: joy, obedience, and worship. The dedication of the temple was an occasion for joy (v. 16). But the people didn't assume that they deserved the credit for this construction project. They were careful to follow "what is written in the Book of Moses" and order their worship through offerings and the installation of their religious leaders (vv. 17-18).

The people observed Passover, and they coupled their ceremonial practice with obedient lifestyles—separating themselves from the "unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors" (v. 21). The word joy appears two more times, and again we see the relationship between joy, obedience, and worship. They were obeying the Lord's instructions for their relationship with Him, they were committed to His worship, and they were filled with joy (v. 22).

Finally, notice how God received the glory. He had changed the heart of the king. He had assisted them with building. The recognition of who God is and what He has done will result in joy, obedience, and worship.

APPLY THE WORD

Has God done something wonderful in your life? Rejoice and praise Him! Has God been faithful to you? Obey His commands and follow Him! Has God proved Himself full of love, mercy, provision, and protection? Worship Him and give Him the glory! Our lack of joy, obedience, and worship always stems from a failure to focus on who God is and what He has done. When we think of the goodness of Jesus and what He's done for us, we will respond with a life of praise.

Ezra 6:13-22

If you fully obey the Lord your God ... [he] will set you high above all the nations on earth. - Deuteronomy 28:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Sometimes God's people are very slow to learn the lessons He teaches. Israel's centuries-long infatuation with idolatry is Exhibit A of this fact. It took the destruction of the temple and seventy years of Babylonian captivity before God's chosen people finally put away the false gods of the pagan nations. Idolatry was never again the problem for Israel the way it had been before the exile.

The returning leaders of Israel learned this lesson so well that one of the recurring themes in Ezra and Nehemiah is their determination to worship and live in accordance with God's commands (vv. 18, 20–21). It was this commitment, and God's promise to restore and bless His people following their captivity, that brought the Jerusalem temple to completion in 515 B.C. This was more than four years after the work was resumed at the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and about twenty-three years after the first exiles arrived in Jerusalem.

The joy at the temple's dedication is easy to understand. The people had seen God turn a potential threat, Tattenai and his officials, into their "bank account" for the needs of the work. When the foundation had been laid, the older men cried because the new temple was so much smaller and less glorious than Solomon's. One indication of this is the smaller number of animals offered in sacrifice at this dedication as compared to Solomon's offerings (v. 17, cf. 1 Kings 8:62–63).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Reflect for a few minutes on some of the lessons God has taught you recently. Write them down if it will help you recall the

circumstances, people, and Scripture that God used to show you an important truth about your work, finances, family, or some other issue. Then consider some questions about your list. For instance, were you quick to learn the lesson, or did it come to you with difficulty? Have these experiences made you more sensitive to and aware of God's leading? Finish your time of reflection with a prayer for wisdom to "fully obey the Lord" at all times and to discern God's direction.

Ezra 6:14

G Campbell Morgan

According to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.—Ezra 6.14.

The right of these men to build had been created by the decree of Cyrus. Tattenai, who was now opposing them as they resumed the work, either did not believe that such a decree had ever been promulgated, or considered that it could not be found. The elders of the Jews, the eye of their God being upon them, persisted in the work, and Tattenai appealed to Darius that search should be made. That he should accede to such a request rather than exercise his immediate authority one way or the other, was in itself somewhat remarkable. He was as certainly the instrument of God as Cyrus had been in issuing the decree originally. That the search was a thorough one is indicated in the statement as to where the roll was found. The search naturally commenced in the house of the archives at Babylon, but it was not there. It was found at Achmetha in the royal palace. It is easy to realize how easily this might not have been found. If such a document was not in the proper libraries, what more natural than to abandon the search? But under Divine compulsion that search was prosecuted until the decree was found, and the elders were vindicated. Later, another royal decree, that of Artaxerxes, made possible the coming of Ezra, and the beginning of a new spiritual movement.

Ezra 6:14. James Smith - THE SECRET OF SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S WORK.

"First, seek thy Saviour out, and dwell Beneath the shadow of His roof, Till thou have scanned His features well, And known Him for the Christ by proof."—Keble.

"They prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah." Those words may be taken as the key to the whole situation, as described in Ezra 3:1-13 to Ezra 6:1-22. Including servants and maids, who had gone with their masters and mistresses, over forty-nine thousand accepted the offer of Cyrus, to leave their captivity and go up from Babylon to Jerusalem. They counted themselves blessed, on hearing such a "joyful sound" (Ps 89:15). (See Luke 4:18). Now, look at—

I. The Work to be Done. "To build the house of the Lord God of Israel" (Ezra 1:3). This house was for the honour of God: it was to be a testimony to His holy Name. We may learn from this that it is the prime duty of those who have been delivered from bondage to seek that the name of God might be magnified among the heathen. Every redeemed one should build for Him an house of testimony.

II. The Start Made. The first thing they did was to set the altar upon his bases (Ezra 3:3). They began with the altar. This is the sure basis of all acceptable work for God. The atoning sacrifice must have its true place if the great house of God's Church is to be built up and established. The altar of the Cross is not upon its proper basis when it stands on the wisdom of men instead of the wisdom of God. The true basis of the Cross of Christ is to put it where God has put it, between sin and salvation. Then they laid the foundation (Ezra 3:10). After the burnt-offerings came the laying of the foundation. Those who lay the foundation, and go on with the building before the altar of the Cross is placed upon its right basis, are vainly working outside the gracious purposes of God. The foundation of God's house is laid on the rock of Christ's atoning sacrifice. God's order is, first, reconciliation, then stability and progress. After this they praised the Lord (Ezra 3:11). This was not formal Psalm-singing, it was the spontaneous outburst of hearts filled to overflowing with joy and thanksgiving. "They shouted with a great shout" (Josh. 6:5). Such a result surely proves that this is the right method and spirit in which to do the work of God.

III. The Adversaries. When the people of God begin to shout and praise, then the enemy will be stirred up to envy and opposition. "The adversaries of Judah came... and said, Let us build with you" (Ezra 4:1, 2). They professed to be seeking also the honour of the God of Israel. These may have been the "fathers" referred to by the woman of Samaria in John 4:20. The work so far has been a success, and now they wish to become partners in the business. But the answer of those divinely commissioned ones was fearless and unequivocal. "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves will build" (Ezra 4:3). Those sent ones were not going to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. What part hath he that believeth with an infidel? (2Cor 6:14-16). When they saw that they were to have neither part nor lot in the matter, then they sought to "weaken their hands... and trouble them;" they also "hired counselors to frustrate their purpose" (Ezra 4:4,5). But one thing they forgot, or refused to believe, and that was, that "their purpose" was God's purpose. The cause of God cannot be properly advanced but by those who know that they have been called of God.

IV. The Temporary Interruption. "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:24). The wicked may

have their day of triumph, but their time is short. How was the work stopped? Those "hired counselors" wrote a letter to the new king of Persia, representing Jerusalem as a "rebellious and bad city," and that these Jews who had lately come from Babylon were rebuilding it for the purpose of fortifying themselves against the power and authority of Babylon. The king on receiving the letter made search, and found "that the city of old time hath made insurrection against kings" (Ezra 4:19), and because of the city's past glory and power he "gave commandment to cause these men to cease." This must have been a staggering blow to those enthusiastic men. What could it mean? Does the providence of God contradict His Word? In the time of perplexity, wait.

V. The Renewed Effort. "Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied unto the Jews that were in Jerusalem,... then they began to build the house of God" (Ezra 5:1, 2). This revival came through the word spoken "in the Name of the God of Israel." There is need for a prophet to ring out the message of God when His work has come to a standstill. These discouraged workers needed to be reminded that they were saved out of Babylon to serve the Lord in Jerusalem, and that "the eye of their God was upon them" (Ezra 5:5). The prophets doubtless made it clear to them that this was God's work, and that they had been called of Him to do it, so in His Name the work is resumed with more determination than before, for "with them were the prophets of God helping them" (Ezra 5:2). Nor was it in vain, for Darius the king discovered in "the house of the rolls" the decree of Cyrus concerning the Jews and the house of God, and straightway sent a letter to the "adversaries" saying, "Let the work of the house of God alone" (Ezra 6:7). So "they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah" (Ezra 6:14). And the house was finished (Ezra 6:15). The remedy for our helpless hands and feeble knees is a clearer apprehension of God's purposes of grace in par individual lives, and a fearless, whole-hearted devotion to the fulfilment of the same. He gives power to the weak, and to them that have no might he increases strength.

EZRA 7

Ezra 7

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD. - Ezra 7:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

The explorer David Livingstone was commissioned by the Royal Geographical Society as Her Majesty's Consul for the East Coast of Africa. The British authorities hoped that Livingstone's discoveries would benefit their trading access and acquisitions, but Livingstone had spiritual interests, not just geographic ones. A committed Christian, he believed that his gifts as an explorer could aid the spread of missions work in Africa. And in fact, his work opened up much of central Africa to missionaries who opened schools, founded hospitals, and shared the gospel.

Sometimes God works both through the tainted motives of rulers and the talents of His followers, to accomplish His will. Today's passage introduces Ezra, and we learn something significant about worldly and godly leadership.

This text opens with the phrase, "After these things" (v. 1). The Persian Empire left a tremendous historical record, and most scholars conclude that the phrase captures a time lapse of some fifty years between chapters 6 and 7. As we transition to Ezra's ministry, we read of his godly heritage, verifying that he was a legitimate priest from Aaron's line (vv. 1-5).

Ezra certainly didn't coast on his family background. His commitment to the Word of the Lord is repeated several times: he was "well versed in the Law," and he "had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law" (vv. 6, 10). He was respected by the king, blessed by God, and dedicated to knowing and following the Lord's teaching.

The commission by Artaxerxes reveals the provision for the work in Jerusalem that we've seen several times from the Persian kings. And Artaxerxes, like Darius, was motivated by his own self-interest. He wanted protection from every deity he thought he could please (v. 23). Worldly leadership views power as how much stuff it controls—how much money, how many people, or how many weapons. But Ezra wasn't deceived by worldly leadership. He knew the source of his protection; he knew that ultimately God worked through this Persian leader to accomplish His own will (vv. 27-28).

APPLY THE WORD

Ezra understood that godly leadership is submission to the call of God. Therefore he could say, "I took courage" (v. 28). No matter what your gifts and talents are, you have been called to serve the Lord. And where God has called, He will also provide. That means that you can serve with confidence. Have you resisted "taking courage" because you were distracted by worldly leaders? Focus on what God has given you instead, knowing that no service for Him will be wasted.

Ezra 7:1-10

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. - Psalm 119:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Of all the lessons we can learn from a study of Ezra and Nehemiah, one of the most important is that God never does anything halfway. That's good news for us, giving us hope even in tough times. Once His judgment of the seventy years' exile for Israel was completed, God began moving His hand to restore His people to their land and to Himself. And He didn't stop until the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem were rebuilt. The return of Ezra to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. was another crucial step in the fulfillment of God's plan.

About fifty-eight years elapsed between the events of Ezra 6 and the beginning of Ezra's story in chapter 7. Those years are silent in the book of Ezra, but not in the Bible. The king who ruled in Persia before Artaxerxes was Xerxes, who played a very prominent role in the story of Esther's heroism in rescuing the Jewish people from annihilation. The events of that book concerned Jewish exiles who chose to stay in Persia rather than return to Israel, which many Bible commentators believe was an act of disobedience against God.

But Ezra had a different spirit. We learn that this godly man was a descendant of Aaron, which established his right to function as a priest and teacher (vv. 5–6). This would become important later when Ezra acted to rid the exiles of sin in their midst. Ezra also knew the Word of God and lived it, which was one of the most important features of his life. Being "well versed" in the Scripture means that Ezra was skilled in understanding God's law and explaining it to others.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Ezra's commitment to know and live God's Word was one reason for the impact he had for the Lord in his time.

Ezra 7:6

G Campbell Morgan

A ready scribe.—Ezra 7.6.

This phrase, descriptive of Ezra, is full of interest, as it is connected with the emergence of a new order in the life of the nation, that, namely, of the Scribes, which continued through four centuries, and was found in strength numerically, but in degeneracy spiritually, in the times of our Lord's earthly ministry. It is a good thing to study it at the fountain-head. During the time of the monarchy of the united Kingdom, a scribe was a royal secretary. During the later period of the disrupted kingdom, the scribes had become men whose business it was to copy and to study the laws of the nation. With Ezra a new order began. The scribes now became men whose chief business was to interpret the Law, and to apply it to all the changing conditions of life, and the new circumstances constantly arising. 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. The word "ready" does not apply to his pen, but to his mind. He was expert in exposition and application of the Law. The qualifications for such work are very clearly set out in the statement made concerning him in the tenth verse of this chapter. He "set his heart to seek ... to do ... to teach."

Ezra 7:11-28

Those who honor me I will honor. - 1 Samuel 2:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to a recent newspaper story, some local governments of the United States have come up with a variation on the idea of prepaid expenses. The new initiative includes prepaid traffic tickets, which means putting money on deposit with the local authorities so that if you are stopped for speeding, your ticket has already been paid. Some people, bothered by the idea, see it as giving drivers permission to speed.

Those who object to the concept of prepaid speeding tickets have a point. Human nature is such that it's hard to be good and it's easy to abuse a privilege when the bill has already been paid. All of the expenses for Ezra's trip back to Jerusalem, and his ongoing needs in Israel (and then some), were "prepaid" by the generosity of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Ezra carried with him a sizable wealth that had been entrusted to his care, and he didn't abuse this privilege.

That's worth noting, because the letter of authorization that Artaxerxes gave to Ezra also granted him and his fellow Jews permission to use "the rest of the silver and gold" in any way they chose. But the king added that this must be done "in accordance with the will of your God," a condition that we can safely say Ezra would have followed anyway because of his faithfulness to the Lord.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How much can God trust you with, and how far can He trust you with it? We're not necessarily talking about money, although that's part of a Christian's life management. The three Ts—time, talent, and treasure—are a good way to summarize the "stuff" of life that God has given us. Are you using these gifts to bless Him and serve others? Paul said, "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Turn this verse into a prayer that God will help you be faithful with all of your resources.

Ezra 7:10 James Smith - EZRA: HIS LIFE AND CHARACTER.

"Thou canst not choose, but serve; man's lot is servitude,

But thou hast thus much choice—a bad lord or a good." —Trench.

Ezra, who led the second party from Babylon to Jerusalem, was both a priest and a scribe—a minister of the sanctuary and an exponent of the law of Moses. Between the first and second detachments there is a period of fifty-seven years. The last four chapters of the book are descriptive of the work done under the personal guidance of the author. In looking at this man and his work we shall find much that stimulates to faith and service. Observe his—

I. Preparation. "Ezra prepared his" heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach" (Ezra 7:10). The preparations of the heart belong to man (Pr 16:1). When a man is prepared in his heart to seek the Word of God, to do it and to teach it, a great work of revival has already begun. The heart must first be put right with God before the life can become useful for Him. These preparations belong to man, but the revelations belong to God. Christ's first message was Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Change your mind; prepare your heart for that new order of things which has, in grace, come within your reach.

II. Qualification. "The hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (Ezra 7:6). Because of this invisible and powerful hand upon him, the king granted him "all his requests." The mighty hand of God's guiding and upholding power came upon him after he had prepared his heart to seek those things by which His Name might be glorified. The All-conquering Hand is the accompaniment of the prepared heart. We think of the disciples of Christ preparing their hearts during those ten days in which they waited for the promised power of the Holy Ghost. All who are filled with the Spirit have the hand of the Lord their God upon them.

III. Provision. "I, Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree... that whatsoever Ezra shall require of you, it be done speedily, unto an hundred talents of silver" (Ezra 7:21, 22). Here he had the assurance that all his wants would be supplied. Ezra prepared his heart, and God in this singular manner prepared against all his needs. He never sends His servants a warfare on their own charges. The measure of supply was to be unto even "an hundred talents of silver" (22,000), but the measure of our supply is "according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Unsearchable riches. "Look unto Me, and be ye saved" from your poverty and powerlessness.

IV. Commission. "And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thy hand... teach ye them that know not the laws of thy God" (Ezra 7:25). Those who have the wisdom of God in their hearts must become the "messengers of the Lord of Hosts" (Mal. 2:7). The counsel of this heathen king would put many professing Christians and religious teachers to shame. If God is to have a chance of gaining moral victories among those who know not His will, surely His Word must be plainly taught to them by those who have experienced the power of it in their own hearts and lives. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. The hearing that stirs up faith in God is not the hearing of the words of man's wisdom, but the hearing of that word which is the wisdom of God. Preach the Word.

V. Consistency. "I was ashamed to require of the king soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way, because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him" (Ezra 8:21, 22) To say the least, this is the simple honesty of faith. If our faith is in God, and we know that the cause is His, why should we beg for the patronage of men? Our life should be consistent with our testimony. To preach "faith in God," and be found catering for the favors of the ungodly, is to make the religion of Jesus Christ to stink in the nostrils of reasonable men. If the Lord be God, follow Him. But what did Ezra do? He made it a matter of special prayer, and the Lord of Hosts answered him (Ezra 8:23). Cast all your care upon Him.

VI. Devotedness. "The holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands... When I heard this thing I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head, and sat down appalled" (Ezra 9:2, 3). This was a violation of the Divine command (Deut. 7:3), and the tidings of it came to Ezra as a heart-breaking sorrow. He felt it the more keenly because of the warmth of his own heart towards the Word and ways of God. The depth of our sorrow over the sins of others will be according to the depth and reality of our sympathy with the cause of God. For a people, separated unto God (Deut. 7:6), to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, is enough to make every true servant of Christ sit down astonished. It is a paralyzing and soul-sickening sight. If we had more of Ezra's devotedness we would know more about the sufferings of Christ (Jer. 8:21). What else could he do than fall upon his knees and spread out the case before God (Ezra 9:5-15), for he felt that as long as they lived in sin they could not stand accepted before Him (Ezra 9:15).

VII. Success. "Then all the congregation answered, As thou hast said, so must we do" (chap. 10:12). And the guilty priests "gave their hands that they would put away their wives" (v. 19). The earnest prayer and faithful testimony of this consecrated scribe prevailed, and a great victory was won for God in the spiritual uplifting of the people. Some of those "strange wives" may have been as dear to some of those men as an eye or a right hand, but they must be cut off. The more closely the affections become entwined with any forbidden object, the more fatal is the snare. The secret of Ezra's success is an open one, and is within the reach of every servant of Christ—true-hearted, whole-hearted loyalty to God's Word and work. Have faith in God; the prayer of faith shall save.

EZRA 8

Ezra 8

The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him. - Ezra 8:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

The three young men had every advantage—they were from elite families, handsome, smart, well-educated, cultured, and well-liked. No wonder they were fast-tracked into leadership positions, where they seemed destined for success. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were also hard-working, but they drew the line at one order: they would not bow down and worship the statue of the king. They placed their trust in God above loyalty to the king, and God rewarded the three—better known by their Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—with a dramatic rescue from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (see Daniel 1; 3).

It's likely that Ezra knew the story of his Jewish ancestors and their choice to trust the power of God over the power of the king. In our passage, we see that Ezra was also cultured, educated, and respected by the monarch. He had been given a royal commission to journey to Jerusalem. But Ezra knew that his ultimate protection came from God, and he put more faith in prayer to a gracious God than confidence in the power of a fickle king.

Ezra left Persia with a group of over one thousand people (vv. 1-14), but he soon realized that he didn't have any Levites in his company, required for conducting appropriate worship according to the Law (vv. 15-20). Once he had demonstrated fidelity to God's instructions, Ezra told the people to fast and pray for safety on their journey.

Notice that Ezra had the option of requesting protection from the king. But he understood that the request would undermine his testimony of faith in God's character and work (v. 22). Darius most likely would have provided the necessary troops to accompany the large group of Jews. But the bottom line came down to faith: did Ezra have the faith to back up his claims about God? Or would he put his trust in the soldiers and horses of the Persian Empire?

The decision to trust the Lord and commit their protection to Him led to a further testimony about His goodness: "He answered our prayer ... and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way" (vv. 23, 31). Yet again, God proved Himself faithful.

APPLY THE WORD

Ezra was not being foolhardy here, taking an unnecessary risk and claiming that God would protect him (see Matt. 4:5-7). Instead, he was refusing to put himself in the king's debt in a way that would compromise his testimony about God. Whom do we trust? Do we put more faith in politicians, doctors, or bankers than we do the Lord? Are we more willing to fret about our health or investments than we are to fast and pray? We can trust in God, because He alone is always faithful.

Ezra 8:1-20

May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts. - Psalm 119:173

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine arriving at your church today, or any given Sunday, and finding no one on duty: no Sunday school teachers or children's workers; no ushers; no volunteers to help in the parking lot or welcome visitors; and no custodial staff to unlock the doors, turn on the lights, clean the classrooms, and arrange furniture or whatever is needed for each class. If that happened, it would be a very frustrating and chaotic day at your place of worship. Even in smaller churches, it takes the dedicated service of many people to fulfill the church's ministry.

The analogy isn't perfect, but the problem described above is similar to the problem Ezra faced as he and the Jewish exiles with him prepared to leave Persia for Jerusalem. The problem was that Ezra didn't find any Levites among the families who had chosen to return with him. The group probably numbered several thousand including women and children, but apparently no Levites volunteered to go. This meant there would be a shortage of leaders to teach God's law to the people, which Ezra knew was absolutely vital to Israel's well-being. In fact, he refused to leave for Jerusalem until some Levites could be found to go.

Most of the families who left Babylon with Ezra were related to the families that returned with Zerubbabel many years earlier. The group camped for three days before leaving Persia for good, and it was during this time that Ezra discovered the absence of Levites.

God had designated the tribe of Levi to serve in the temple, and Ezra was determined to do things according to God's Law. He appointed a delegation of leading men to go to a place called Casiphia and ask for Levites and temple servants who would be willing to serve at the temple in Jerusalem.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can say for sure that there may be people among the pastors, Sunday school teachers, and other committed people, who serve at your church, who could use a note or call of appreciation. Ask God to bring a name to mind, or you may already know of someone at church who is facing a tough time and needs your encouragement. Jot down the name or names of the people you plan to contact, and make it a point to write notes or make phone calls this week.

Ezra 8:21-36

The good hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him. - Ezra 8:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story of missionary Gladys Aylward and her trek over mountainous terrain in China with one hundred children was so incredible that it became the subject of the classic film, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. Gladys was a British woman who overcame huge obstacles and paid her own way to China to serve the Lord after being turned down by several missionary societies. When the Japanese army invaded China in 1940, Gladys led the group of Chinese children to safety in a journey filled with hardships and danger.

We can only guess at the dangers involved in the four-month, nine hundred-mile trip that Ezra and his fellow Jews made from Babylon to Jerusalem. He recorded nothing about the trip except the all-important fact that "the hand of our God was on us" (v. 31). Ezra certainly knew the danger involved, especially considering that the exiles would be carrying gold and silver worth millions by today's standards. Ezra may have felt he had been premature in telling King Artaxerxes that God would protect the travelers, since he was "embarrassed" to ask for a military escort. But whatever the case, Ezra can't be faulted for his strong faith in God's ability to see His people through a very tough trip.

It's interesting to see the way Ezra prepared himself and the people spiritually for the return to Israel. He proclaimed a fast to seek God's favor, which revealed Ezra's humility. Fasting is a powerful ministry; when God's people fast, we are telling Him that He is more important to us than the food we need to sustain our bodies.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Has God brought you through some tough times and rough "trips" of your own? If so, the story of His grace in your life is worth telling. Consider writing out your testimony--whether to share with family and friends, to keep for your children to read someday, or to use for your own blessing and benefit in reminding yourself of God's goodness to you when times weren't so easy. When you're finished, spend some time offering God a "sacrifice of praise" (Heb. 13:15). Thank Him for being with you always, in all the seasons of life.

Ezra 8:22

G Campbell Morgan

I was ashamed to ask of the king.—Ezra 8.22.

These words constitute a fine revelation of the quiet strength and true greatness of this man, Ezra. The journey before him and those who were about to accompany him was full of peril. He was keenly conscious of these perils, and yet would not ask help of an earthly king, however well-disposed that king might be. He said he was ashamed to do so, because he had boasted to that king of the strength of his God. That boast was by no means an empty one; and to this man, the matter of supreme importance was the honour of the name of his God in the mind of the king. The voluntary gifts of the king were welcome. They were expressions of the king's sense of the greatness of his God. These Ezra accepted with gratitude. It would have been quite another matter if he had asked the king to help him to do what he had declared God was able to do for him. To ask for soldiers would have been to make a tacit confession of some doubt in his own heart as to the ability or willingness of God to protect his enterprise. He had no such doubt, and therefore he made no such request. This is a fine illustration of the dependence and independence of those who put their confidence in God. God never fails those who act in full dependence on Himself, and so in complete independence of all others.

EZRA 9

Ezra 9

Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire. - Malachi 3:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1995, 150 years after its founding, the Southern Baptist Convention released a statement of confession, grief, and apology for its role in promoting slavery, segregation, and barriers to fellowship with African Americans. The resolution said, "We lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest," and asked "forgiveness from our African-American brothers and sisters." It committed "to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry."

When sin permeates the work and ministry of the people of God, deep repentance and confession is called for. Ezra demonstrated spiritual leadership by humbling himself to intercede on behalf of the people of Judah.

Except for the pause in building the temple (see Ezra 4), the account of the return from Exile had been moving along beautifully—the people were obedient, God was faithful, the Persian kings had offered provisions, and the Jewish leaders had followed the Law. But now Ezra learned that an insidious sin had infected the people: they had intermarried with the surrounding peoples (vv. 1-2).

The core problem was not racial impurity (see Josh. 6:25; Ruth 4). Rather, the problem was religious impurity (vv. 11-12). Intermarriage meant that the people began to blend worship of the true God with pagan practices, including child sacrifice (see 2 Kings 17:17). The Lord had repeatedly warned His people to resist cultural pressure to adopt sinful values and had even sent them into exile; yet here they were again, falling back into the same patterns of sin (v. 7).

No wonder Ezra mourned. The heartbreak palpitates through every verse of his prayer. Ezra knew the history of his people and the character of God. The Lord had restored them to their land and to their worship—and again, they had sinned against Him. There can be no bargain, no negotiation, no excuses. Ezra simply wept at the sin of the people and acknowledged the righteousness of God (v. 15). His justice is like a refiner's fire; how could they stand in His presence (cf. Mal. 3:2)?

APPLY THE WORD

Our culture promotes meaningless apologies: "I'm sorry if you took that the wrong way"; "I apologize if anyone was hurt"; "Mistakes were made." The reality of our sinfulness and God's holiness doesn't allow wiggle room for insincere confessions like, "God, I'm sorry if I sinned in some way." When confronted with the reality of sinful actions and attitudes, our only response should be like Ezra, to throw ourselves before the Lord in repentance and confession, knowing that He is gracious (v. 8).

Ezra 9:1-15; Daniel 9:3-13

I urge, then ... that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for ... kings and all those in authority. - 1 Timothy 2:1-2

TODAY IN THE WORD

O Lord our Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations on the earth. To the President and members of the Cabinet, to Governors of States, Mayors of Cities, and to all in administrative authority, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties.—The Book of Common Prayer

It's not always easy to know how to pray for "all those in authority." Sometimes we can get so frustrated with political issues and leaders that we don't feel like praying at all! The prayers of the priest Ezra and the prophet Daniel, both of whom insightfully prayed for their nation, are instructive.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When we consider praying for our own country, many of us might not begin with confession of sin. Yet humbly coming before the Lord, acknowledging the ways we have failed in our witness to our society, is a good place to start and keeps us from judging others in their sin. As Ezra and Daniel did, we can use God's character as the basis of our prayers. For example, we can pray that our elected officials uphold God's justice and that they rule with integrity and honor

Ezra 9:1-15

"Come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." - 2 Corinthians 6:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Someone has said that God's people tend to have short spiritual memories. Most of us can verify the truth of that statement. We're usually pretty good at following God in tough times because, after all, where else can we turn for strength and help? But when times get better, or God gets us out of a tight spot, it's easy to forget His deliverance. Worse yet, sometimes we wind up back where we started, doing the things that got us into trouble in the first place.

It seems almost inconceivable that the Israelites of Ezra's day could have fallen into the sin of intermarrying with the idolatrous peoples around them. This was the one sin that, as much as any other, led to Israel's spiritual downfall and captivity. God had strictly forbidden intermarriage with other nations, because He knew that His people's hearts would be led astray by these unholy unions. This was not an issue of racial purity, but spiritual purity. Israel's long spiritual decline can be traced back as far as Solomon, who married many foreign women who worshiped detestable idols. Solomon's wives turned his heart from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1–8), and the worship of idols was established in Israel.

We said at the beginning of our study that Israel's seventy-year captivity in Babylon finally cured God's people of their infatuation with idol worship. But here were some of the former exiles, including the leaders, disobeying God and inviting His judgment again by taking foreign women as wives for themselves and their sons. No wonder Ezra tore his clothes and even pulled out some of his hair, a sign of extreme anguish. He knew what was at stake in this mess, and he was very zealous for God's honor.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If spiritual amnesia comes so easy to us, maybe we need to practice our "remembering." Here's a brief prayer checklist list you can use each day to keep your memory of God's grace and His holiness sharp. 1) Give thanks in everything (1 Thess. 5:18). 2) Ask God to search your heart and show you any "offensive way" (Ps. 139:23–24). 3) Don't be anxious about anything, but bring your requests to God (Phil. 4:6). 4) Ask God to cleanse you from "hidden faults" and keep you from "willful sins" (Ps. 19:12–13)

Ezra 9:4

G Campbell Morgan

I sat astonished until the evening oblation.—Ezra 9.4.

On Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem the princes acquainted him with the failure and sin of the people. During the sixty years which had elapsed since the Return under Zerubbabel, there had been no return to idols, but there had been the wilful breaking of the law of God against inter-mixture with the peoples of the land, and the chief offenders had been the princes and the rulers. This picture of Ezra in presence of this confession is full of light. It is that of a man tempest-tossed with righteous indignation, and profound grief. As the storm of his passion subsided in which he had rent his garments, and plucked off his beard, he sank into silent astonishment until the evening oblation. Then he fell upon his knees before God, and poured out his soul in prayer. The prayer is recorded. Beginning with his confession of personal shame, he gathered into his cry the whole of the people, identifying himself with them as he spoke of "our iniquities ... our guiltiness." He went back over all the history in contemplation as he knelt before God, and saw clearly that it had been one long story of failure and of consequent disaster. He then remembered and spoke of the grace of God as it had been manifested in the making possible of the return of the remnant through the favour of the kings of Persia. Then the surging sorrow of his heart concerning the new future found expression in free and full confession, until at last, without any petition for deliverance, he cast the people upon God, recognizing His righteousness and their inability to stand before Him. This is a revelation of the only attitude in which a man may become a mediator. He must first have a sense of sin. This is the outcome of the deeper sense of the righteousness and grace of God. It finds expression in a confession of sin in which he identifies himself with the sinners.

EZRA 10

Ezra 10

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. - James 5:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

The old saying quips that you can't be a leader if nobody follows you. So part of the question of leadership is How do you get people to follow you? Different leaders have tried different tactics. Authoritarian rulers rely on exerting power to mandate obedience. Some bosses manipulate employees with a mixture of threats and bribes. And probably nearly every parent has at one time told a child to follow "Because I said so!"

Ezra demonstrates that spiritual leadership provides a different model for why people will follow: the power and conviction of a godly example. Notice in our passage that the national repentance that transpired was not instigated by Ezra's decree, insistence, manipulation, or threat. Instead, while he wept and prayed at the temple, the people noticed and were spiritually moved (v. 1).

Shecaniah spoke for the people in admitting their culpability for the sin of intermarriage with the pagan women. He also understood a key spiritual truth: “We have been unfaithful to our God... But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel” (v. 2). He encouraged Ezra to take the bold step of a public assembly, with confession and restitution. Ezra responded the way he had when confronted with the challenge of leaving Persia without the king’s troops for protection—he fasted and prayed and trusted the Lord (vv. 4-6).

The gravity of the assembly was emphasized by the penalty for failure to attend (v. 8). Although not every Jewish man had married a heathen wife, the standing of the entire community before God was at stake. In case the situation was not bad enough, the weather captured the dreary circumstances as it poured rain on the gathered nation (vv. 9, 13). Ezra’s proclamation here was brief: he explained their sin and what they must do to remedy their disobedience.

“The whole assembly responded with a loud voice: ‘You are right! We must do as you say’ ” (v. 12). Ezra’s godly example gave him the authority to instruct the people on repentance and restitution before God. The people agreed to reject their idolatrous marriages, and within a few weeks they had complied with the instructions.

APPLY THE WORD

Ezra’s leadership included humility, courage, and, above all, a commitment to know and obey God. This spiritual leadership transforms others and inspires them to seek God more faithfully. Certainly, church leaders should have these qualities; but even if you aren’t ordained or hired by a Christian ministry, you can still affect others with your example of love for God and your trust in Him. Your prayers can be some of your most powerful tools of spiritual leadership.

Ezra 10:1-17

Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly. - Psalm 102:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

The late Sam Rayburn, legendary Texas congressman and former speaker of the House of Representatives, once offered this advice to other members of Congress: “On any piece of legislation, if you’re convinced in your heart that something is right, do it, go after it, fight for it, even if you find yourself in a minority of one.”

Ezra wasn’t a politician, but he knew that he was doing the right thing in seeking God’s forgiveness and confronting the people who had entered into unholy marriages with non-Israelites. And in this case, he was not alone. Ezra’s deep and sincere grief brought forward a large group of people who were also deeply distressed over this violation of God’s Law.

This was a difficult issue, but the Law of Moses on this point could not have been more clear. Speaking of Israel’s dealings with the Canaanites around them, Moses said, “Do not intermarry with them” (Deut. 7:3). But apparently the practice of marrying foreign women had been widespread among the returned Jewish exiles, and these marriages must have been tolerated for some time.

Ezra called for the hard but necessary step of separating the Israelite offenders from their unlawful spouses. The outdoor meeting at which he issued this decision must have been quite

a sight: thousands of people gathered near the temple, shivering from the fear of God’s punishment and the cold winter rain that was falling on them. Ezra wanted to be sure each case was thoroughly reviewed, so he allowed local judges and elders to hear the cases in their districts. This way, any foreign wives who had become true followers of the God of Israel could make a case for staying with their husbands.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Getting involved in sin and then trying to undo the damage can be compared to driving down an extremely narrow alley between two buildings and coming to a brick wall. The only way out is to go back the way you came in, except that going back will be a lot harder. How much better to avoid those narrow alleys. Today is a good day for a mid-week checkup to examine your heart before the Lord and make any needed corrections. And our God is faithful to help you!

Ezra 10:4

G Campbell Morgan

Be of good courage and do it.—Ezra 10:4

The sincerity and passion of Ezra’s vicarious repentance produced immediate results. The people had gathered about him during the long hours of the day, and it would seem that they were brought to a keen consciousness of the enormity of their sin as they saw how this man was affected thereby. At last one of their number, Shecaniah, spoke to him, acknowledging the sin and

suggesting the remedy. In these words he urged Ezra to courageous action. It was true advice, and that for which Ezra had been waiting. He immediately responded, first calling them into sacred covenant, that they would put away the evil thing from among them; and then proceeding to lead them in the carrying out of that covenant along the line of strict and impartial justice and severity. All the marriages contracted with the women of the land were disannulled. By these drastic measures the people were brought back into the place of separation. How widespread the evil was, may be gathered from the list of the names with which the record closes. Priests, Levites, princes, rulers, and people had been guilty. None was exempt from the reformation, which was carried out with complete thoroughness. Such action is ever the true outcome, and only satisfactory expression, of sorrow over sin. The man who sets himself "to seek, to do, to teach" the law of God invariably brings himself into places where sorrow will be his portion, and intrepid courage necessary.

Christ in All the Scriptures

A. M. Hodgkin

Christ in Ezra

The decree of Cyrus is one of the most remarkable proofs that God's Spirit speaks to those outside the covenant of His grace. Seventy years before, Jeremiah had prophesied the return of the Children of Israel from Babylon at this time [Jer 25:12; 29:10]. Isaiah, a hundred and seventy years before, foretold that one who did not know God, but whom He called by name-- Cyrus-- was to perform all God's will in the restoration of His people [Isa 45:1-6]. The Hebrew text reads Koresh for this name, instead of Kuresh, which latter would be the exact form for Cyrus. But the Hebrew points (vowel signs) were not inspired-- not occurring in the ancient [manuscripts]; the word, therefore, could be read either way, and no doubt is to be read Kuresh, when it exactly represents Cyrus. A marvelous prophecy, naming him long before he was born. It may well be that Daniel drew the attention of the great Persian conqueror to these prophecies, and that Cyrus learned much from him about the religion of the one true God.

God's Spirit was at work also among His people, stirring many of them up to take this opportunity to return to Jerusalem and build the Temple. It was only the bitter persecution they had met with in Egypt that led them to come out from that land, leaving not a soul behind. In Babylon, on the other hand, they had prospered, and it was only those "whose spirit God had raised" who were willing to go back under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest. They numbered in all nearly 50,000 [Ezra 2:1-70]; a very small remnant compared to the numbers of the old days of Israel's prosperity, and also compared to the number who remained behind in Babylon.

Restoration.

The Key-note of this book is Restoration; for in this faithful remnant, we have a picture of restoration from backsliding, of individual faithfulness, and of a true effort after a closer walk with God. The worldliness and unbelief that we see all around us in the Church today need be no hindrance to a faithful walk, on our part, with the God who is still calling us to come out and be separate unto Himself [2Cor 6:17,18].

The restored remnant seem to have begun at the core, and to have worked from within outwards. They did not begin with building up the walls, nor even with building the Temple, but "they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God, and they kept the feast of Tabernacles" [Ezra 3:1-13]. At the very heart of this book, we see Christ and His great atoning work in these burnt offerings. The restored people are pointed forwards to Him that was to come. And every soul that returns from its backsliding today must begin afresh at the foot of the Cross.

The next step was laying the foundation of the Temple amidst praise and thanksgiving. But some of the old men who remembered the glory of the former house wept with a loud voice, so that the people could not distinguish between the shouts of joy and of weeping. As the restored soul rests back upon the one foundation-- Christ Jesus-- there is mingled the sadness over wasted days with the joy of restored communion.

Separation.

We next come to a very practical lesson for the Church of Christ today, on the need of separation for service. The adversaries of the Jews were semi-heathen Samaritans (Ezra 4:1,9,10) whom Shalmanezzer, King of Assyria, had transplanted to the cities of Samaria, in the place of the captives whom he had carried into Assyria at the time of the captivity of the ten [northern] tribes. We have a full account of this in 2Kings 17:1-41. There we read, also, that the King of Assyria sent back one of the captive priests to teach these people what he called "the manner of the God of the land." The result was that these people "feared the Lord and served their own gods"; and this mixed worship was perpetuated among their children.

These adversaries showed their hostility first by offering to help build the Temple [Ezra 4:2,3]. That is how the world often begins its hostility to the Church today; and we need to take the firm stand these restored Israelites took, and not compromise God's work by accepting such offers of help, or placing unbelievers in prominent positions in our Churches and Sunday Schools. There is a

growing tendency in these days to seek to bring about union with the Church of Rome, and meanwhile to join with them in work, through blindness in recognizing that they are as truly "adversaries" as were these to whom Zerubbabel refused any share of the building.

The true nature of these men soon came out. They harassed the people of Judah in their work, and at last succeeded in stopping them. But the Lord sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who so encouraged the leaders, that they began to build again in spite of the opposition. Then Tatnai the Governor asked them, "Who gave you a decree to build this house?" Not believing their answer, he sent to Darius the king to inquire. The decree of Cyrus was found at Achmetha, or Ecbatana, the summer palace of the king; and, encouraged in every way by Darius, the building went forward to its completion [Ezra 4:4- 6:15].

The Samaritan Pentateuch.

The Samaritans were fiercely hostile to the Jews at this time, as we have seen, and their hostility was no less during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, eighty years, and a hundred years, later. In view of this hostility, it is certain that the Samaritans would not have accepted any additions or alterations in the Pentateuch [as modern critics claim were] made by Ezra, for, as we have already seen, they had been taught by a Jewish teacher, sent by the King of Assyria, "the way of the God of the land," which they could only have learned from the writings of Moses as they then were. They had had these writings-- or the teaching drawn from them-- in their possession a hundred and seventy years before Ezra's day, and would never have allowed any additions to be made to them by this their great enemy, or, indeed, by any of the Jews, whom they so scorned and hated. The enmity, we know, was continued down to the time of our Lord [eg., John 4:9], and yet the Samaritans, to this day, possess the whole Pentateuch, which is virtually the same as the Pentateuch of our Hebrew Bible. We seem, then, driven to the conclusion that they must have received their Pentateuch before their enmity with the Jews commenced, which it did eighty years before Ezra's arrival at Jerusalem. The existence of the Samaritan Pentateuch-- written as it is in the ancient Phoenician style of writing-- is a very substantial witness to its antiquity (Dr. Rouse). We have also abundant evidence in this book that the Israelites, likewise, possessed the Law of Moses, the man of God, before the days of Ezra. The altar and burnt offerings and feast of Tabernacles, of Zerubbabel's day, add their testimony to the fact.

As soon as the Temple was finished, the people kept the dedication of it with joy, and among their offerings were "twelve he goats according to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel" (Ezra 6:16,17). This is one of the proofs that among the remnant which returned were some of the ten tribes of Israel, as well as of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin; as also in the next remnant, which returned under Ezra, when "twelve bullocks for all Israel" were offered (8:35). Besides this, before the captivity of Israel, large numbers of those ten tribes "fell away to Judah" on account of the idolatry of Israel (see 2Chr 11:14-17 and 2Chr 31:6). The returned captives were properly representative of the entire nation, and so are the Jewish people throughout the world today, though a number of the ten tribes are no doubt to be found in the Nestorians of Persia [Israel My Glory, p.101, Rev. John Wilkerson]. "The sharp contrast between Judah and Israel was given up in a strange land. To the ten tribes in the penitent sorrow of the exile, the name of Jerusalem was again a dearly loved and cherished one" [Commentary on Esther, Dr. Cassel].

After the dedication of the Temple, the returned exiles kept the Passover [Ezra 6:15-22]. We do not often read of the keeping of this feast. In times of backsliding, Israel neglected to keep the feasts of the Lord; the joy went out of their lives. But whenever we do read of the keeping of the Passover, it carries our thoughts back to the Redemption in Egypt and forward to the Redemption wrought out for us on Calvary.

Ezra.

Between the dedication of the Temple and the return of the next remnant under Ezra [ch. 7,8], there is a gap of sixty years in the history of this book. Then God raised up a great reformer in Ezra. He was by birth a priest. But in Babylon, there was no temple and no altar, so Ezra gave himself instead to the study of God's Law. He was a ready scribe in the Law of Moses, because he had "prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." God's Law was burnt in upon his own soul, and lived out in his life, before he taught it to others. This enabled him to speak with the intensity of conviction.

It was a high tribute to Ezra's character and ability, that Artaxerxes the king gave him a letter authorizing all the people of Israel, who were willing, to go with him, and commanding that he should be supplied with all that was needful for the house of God, and authorizing him to set magistrates and judges to judge the people, and instructing him to teach them the Law of God.

Ezra attributes all his success, the favor of the king, the preparation of the people, the safety of the journey, to the good hand of his God upon him. He was in all things, under the hand of the Lord. Only a few thousand gathered with him at the river Ahava, and there, with fasting and prayer, they committed their way unto the Lord, for Ezra was "ashamed" to ask for a guard of soldiers. No doubt, the remembrance of God's deliverance of His people under Esther, which had occurred during the interval of the sixty years [between Ezra 6:1-22 and Ezra 7:1-28], made Ezra doubly sure of His protection now.

A Man in Dead Earnest.

This interval had been once more a period of backsliding among the Jews at Jerusalem. They had again intermarried with the idolatrous nations around them. The only reason for Israel's existence as a nation was to be a holy people, separated unto the Lord; and when Ezra heard how utterly Israel had failed, he was overcome with grief and "sat down appalled until the evening sacrifice" [Ezra 9:4-5, 1-15]. Again, at that sacred hour, relief came. He poured out his soul in a deep agony of prayer to God, associating himself with his people in confession of sin. His prayer, coming from his very heart, touched the hearts of the people, and, assembling in great numbers, men, women, and children, they caught the fire of his spirit and "wept very sore" [Ezra 10:1-44]. But this contrition did not end with weeping. They took sides with God against themselves, and promised to stand by Ezra in his work of reformation. It needed all Ezra's courage to carry it through, and no doubt the authority of the king's letter was part of God's provision for His servant. Out of the whole population, there were a hundred and twelve cases of these mixed marriages, and the Law of Moses was applied to them all.

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Ezra 10:12 Imperative Obedience "As Thou hast said so must we do" (Ezra 10:12KJV)

Iain Paisley (from "A Text A Day Keeps the Devil Away" - Amen to that title!)

Obedience is imperative in the service of the Lord. God's commandment must not be broken. Any breach therein must be instantly put right. There must be no dilly-dallying in the path of disobedience. We must make haste to obey God.

As Thou Hast Said so We Must Do Reverently

God has to be obeyed in the spirit of reverence and godly humility. This is an age of irreverence. A holy God is neither feared nor obeyed. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and reverence is its offspring.

With humility and respect we should in all godliness seek to obey God as becomes His Holiness and Purity.

As Thou Hast Said so We Must Do Repentingly

The returning tribes had sinned and broken those very commandments of God, the violation of which had caused their captivity. No wonder Ezra refused to drink water and fasted because of the transgression of the people.

No wonder he called on them to repent and make confession and separate themselves from the unequal yoke under which they had harnessed themselves and from their strange wives to which they had joined themselves.

Without such repentance the fierce wrath of God was bound to fall. This work must be done repentingly.

As Thou Hast Said so We Must Do Resolutely

The work must be done resolutely. There can be no going back; no lessening in the separation; no diluting of the judgment. Each unholy alliance must be smashed. Each God-cursed marriage annulled. Each unequal yoke broken.

The whole separation process must be processed and duly registered. It must be done with resolution.

It look from the first day of the tenth month to the first day of the first month to get the job done (see Ezra 10:16-17).

This is the way our sins must be dealt with reverently, repentingly and resolutely. Let us then do it, each day.