

THE KING'S HEART IN THE LORD'S HAND
Ezra 1, 2

Intro: This morning I am beginning a series of messages which will eventually take us through three OT books: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

Just before we left on our vacation to England I started, along with many of you to read Ezra, and then read also Nehemiah and Esther. And it seemed to me that there was a lot of truth in these books that can be helpful to us as a church just now in this period of our history. And I trust that the Lord will show in the coming days that He has led me in my decision to teach these books.

During the weeks that we have recently spent in England, Scotland, and Wales, we have been living much of the time in the past. We have seen castles, churches, university buildings that are hundreds of years old. And we have heard about many people, men and women, from the highest royalty to the leaders of the work of the Lord to people in all levels of society who lived long ago who, in one way or another, have left their mark on history.

In our study of these three books of the Bible we are going to go farther back into history than anything that we saw while we were in Great Britain. We are going to get acquainted with people who lived approximately 2,500 years ago!

Since most of us are not as gifted as we might like to be in remembering dates, and because we are not as well acquainted with the OT as we are the NT, let me repeat today what I have given most of you before, some dates in round numbers to which you can identify some of the outstanding people of the OT.

Let me take the names of Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Ezra and Nehemiah.

Adam is the first man we meet in reading Genesis--the man whom God created "in the beginning." He lived approximately 4,000 years B. C. Abraham came along 2,000 years later, which would have been 2,000 years B. C. Moses came on the scene 1,500 years B. C. Five hundred years later, or about 1,000 years B. C. we have David. And then 500 years after that we come to Ezra and Nehemiah.

I repeat: these are round numbers. But they will help us to place these men and their families in history.

So in learning of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, we are going back to 500 years B. C., which would have been 2,500 years before these days in which you and I are living. They actually lived at the time when the writings of the OT were being concluded.

The story of Ezra is the story of the return of the people of God from captivity. The book of Ezra itself deals with the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. While the book is named for Ezra, he does not appear in the book until the beginning of chapter 7. This gives us a very simple division of the book. The first six chapters tell us about the rebuilding of the Temple; chapters 7 through 10 (the end of the book) tell us about the ministry that Ezra had among the exiles who had returned. He was a priest, and a very godly man whom God used in a very special way. And he is most likely the person who wrote this book.

Today, however, we are not concerned with Ezra. As we can see very clearly from this first chapter, we are concerned with Ezra's God. We can see this in 1:1, and we see it again in 1:5.

This is the most important thing for us to remember about any period in history. Perhaps you have heard that expression which I heard many years ago, that "history is 'His-story.'" God is the God of history. History is the unfolding and the outworking of the plan of God among the nations of the earth. There is a lot of discussion in Britain these days about the unification of Europe--and many people are fearful of what even the unification of Germany may mean for the future. I am sure that most of us never expected to see what has taken place in eastern Europe just in the past year. Let me remind you today that God is writing a new chapter in history. And it is important for us to keep our eyes on the Lord in all of this. He is the God of the nations. The nations may not recognize that, but that is true nevertheless. Psalm 24:1 tells us,

The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof;
the world, and they that dwell therein.

We can only understand history when we see the hand of God in all that takes place. If our eyes are on the Lord, then we are not going to give the credit to Cyrus, nor to Ezra, nor to Nehemiah, BUT TO GOD!

In Proverbs 21:1 we read,

The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord,
as the rivers of water:
he turneth it whithersoever he will.

That verse has given me my subject for this message: THE KING'S HEART IN THE LORD'S HAND. And I want to concentrate

on verses 1 and 5 in this message. The two verses are very closely related to each other, and we would not have the books of Ezra or Nehemiah or Esther if the the statements of these verses were not true.

Now let us look at two men whom God used before we have any reference at all to Ezra. They are:

I. CYRUS AND JEREMIAH (Ezra 1:1).

A. Cyrus.

Approximately 150 years before the event mentioned in this chapter took place, and therefore, before Cyrus was even born, the Spirit of God enabled Isaiah to mention him by name, and to tell what he would do. And this was done while the original temple was still standing.

Read Isa. 44:28 and 45:1.

But now let us look at:

B. Jeremiah.

Ezra made mention here of "the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah," and that that word "might be fulfilled." What word was he talking about?

Look at Jer. 25:11-14 and 29:10-14. These were prophecies made about 100 years before Ezra's time.

And so this is quite a thrilling thing to see. The book of Ezra is a book in which we are able to see the prophecies of Isaiah and of Jeremiah being fulfilled. And this was just as unlikely in that day as the liberation of eastern Europe in our day.

But how did this all come about? Did somebody read to Cyrus what Isaiah had written, so that he felt that he had to do what he did? Or did he know about Jeremiah's prophecy that there was a 70-year limitation on the exile of the Jews?

We have our answer in the very first verse of Ezra, followed up with what we read in Ezra 1:5. Let us speak of it as:

II. THE HAND OF THE LORD (Ezra 1:1, 5).

This is an expression that is very important in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, sometimes called "the hand of my God," or "the good hand of my God." We have it also in

other places in the OT. Cf. Ezra 7:6, 9, 28. See also Psa. 139:5, 9, 10.

Here in Ezra 1:1 it is simply stated that "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom...."

And in verse 5 we read that God raised the spirits of many in Judah, Benjamin, priest and Levites, to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild "the house of the Lord."

The words mean that Cyrus was aroused, was awakened, to take action. The people of God also were lifted out of their discouraged or, in some cases, satisfied condition, to become excited about the prospect of going back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

Both of these expressions clearly indicate that neither of these things would have taken place apart from the sovereign working of the Lord upon the heart of Cyrus first, and then upon the hearts of the people.

What an illustration of Phil. 2:13!

The Lord worked in the hearts of all concerned--Cyrus, and the people of Judah and Benjamin. One without the other would have been incomplete, and the work would never have been done.

Cf. 2 Chron. 36:22, 23.

The work of the Lord is all the more remarkable because it is stated in Isa. 45:4 that Cyrus did not know the Lord. But that makes no difference to the Lord. The Lord is able to make any person, high or low, to be His servant for the accomplishing of His will.

But now let us look at:

III. CYRUS' PROCLAMATION AND PROVISION (Ezra 1:2-4, 7-11).

For the first time in 70 years the people were free!

And the king was not only concerned about their freedom, but also about meeting the needs of the Lord's people so that they would be able to do the work that needed to be done.

Does this not remind you of that first exodus from Egypt and all that the Lord did to meet their needs? He used the heathen then to provide for His people, and here in

Cyrus' day the Lord was doing the same.

Cf. also vv. 7-11.

And now we come to:

IV. THE RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE (Ezra 1:5, 6; 2:1-70).

We need to remember that most of these people had been born in Babylon. And therefore they would have been inclined to stay where they were. The fact that there were so many who returned (see 2:64) was evidence of a special work of God in their hearts.

And although the numbers were far below the numbers of the people before their exile, yet it is to the glory of God that the people of God still existed, that they were identifiable, and that from this relatively small beginning, the work of the Lord was being re-established.

All of this brings us to:

V. THE APPLICATIONS TO BE MADE TO US.

What are some of the main lessons that we need to learn from this lesson in ancient Biblical history? Secular history can be corrupted and written from a biased point of view, but that is not the case with Biblical history. Here we have it just like it was, and so the applications for us are very important.

A. The greatness and sufficiency of our God.

If the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, then the same is true of the heart of every other person. And if that king happens to be the mightiest king on earth (as was the case with Cyrus), then we can be sure that no man, no nation, can successfully stand against the Lord.

That applies to the people with whom we are involved. That applies to the Soviet nation. When God was ready to see the people behind the iron curtain free, it happened as though there had never been a Berlin wall, nor a mighty Russian army.

Will you remember that in your present circumstances. And if you have your own agenda which is contrary to the will of God, then you had better re-think what you are doing.

B. The mercy of God.

The Jews did not deserve what the Lord was doing for them. Cf. Psa. 103:10, 11, "He hath not dealt with us after our sins....." Cf. Ezra 9:13.

C. The truthfulness of the Word of God.

What Isaiah said was true. What Jeremiah said was true. And it was not that they personally had special wisdom about the future. God had revealed to them what He would do for His people after they were gone.

D. The importance of God's Word to God.

Often in times of trial and testing we are inclined to forget the Lord, to forget His Word, to forget His promises, His purposes. But He never does forget His Word! He would not have said what He said if He did not mean it. He would not have said what He has said if He did not want us to believe it, and to trust Him day by day for all of our needs. He would not have said what He has said if we could live without Him. He designs our trials to make us realize that we always need Him. We can fail, and others can fail and disappoint us. But the Lord will never fail. His Word is forever true.

And so it behooves us to know Him, to love and obey Him, TO TRUST HIM, and always, in every circumstance, to seek to honor and glorify Him in all that we think, all that we say, all that we do, and in all that we are.

The God of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, of Ezra, or Nehemiah, and of Esther, is our God. Let us trust Him to deliver us in all of our trials, and to deliver us even from our fears.

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST
Ezra 3:1-7

Intro: When we speak of putting first things first, we do not know what we are talking about until we know what we are seeking to do. The things that are first will not always be the same.

If we are to build a church building, one of the first things would certainly be to purchase property where it can be erected. If we are going to have a family camp, we have to find a place where it can be held. If we are going on a bike trip, a bicycle must be purchased, and there must be training rides. The first things will be determined by what we intend to do. When we arrived at Millersylvania State Park, the first thing that had to be done was setting up the camp. I think we all understand what it means to put first things first. Certain things have priority if we are going to reach our goal.

The Lord was speaking of first things when He said,

For which of you, intending to build a tower,
sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost,
whether he have sufficient to finish it?
Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation,
and is not able to finish it,
all that behold it begin to mock him,
Saying, This man began to build,
and was not able to finish (Luke 14:28-30).

Last Sunday we began the study of the book of Ezra. Chapter one tells us how it was that the Israelites were able to return to Jerusalem from captivity. Chapter two tells us who went, and how many there were.

Today in chapter 3, verses 1 through 7, we are going to see what they did in putting first things first. They were going back to a city which had been destroyed. There was no temple in the city. They had a tremendous job ahead of them, and it was very important for them to know where to begin, what needed to be done first. Where would you have started? What would you have done first?

Let us look, first of all, at:

I. THEIR MOTIVATION.

You can see it in the second statement of verse 3:
"...for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries...."

This tells us that they were not the only people in that part of the world. There were others who were not friendly to the Jews, nor were they sympathetic with what the Jews were going to do. "The people of those countries" not only stood in the way of the work that the Jews had to do, but they were a threat to their lives.

God was very evidently in those circumstances. Sometimes He arranges things so that we are forced to seek His guidance as to what needs to be done first. They were definitely faced with a situation which was too big for them, and so they knew that they were cast upon God.

What would you have done? Would you have called upon Cyrus for military help? Would you have tried to see if there were some friendly people who would take your part? Would you have starting building city walls right away to provide protection? That would have taken more time than they really had. But something had to be done. What did they do?

II. THE FIRST THINGS.

Let me mention them, and then we will talk about them.

There were four things that they did:

- 1) They built "the altar of the God of Israel" (v. 2).
- 2) They began offering burnt offerings each morning and each evening (v. 3). This was called "the continual burnt offering."
- 3) They observed the Feast of Tabernacles (v. 4).
- 4) They gave money and food supplies to those who were going to built the Temple (v. 7).

When you look at that list, it seems that they were ignoring the danger that faced them. But that was not the case. The One they needed on their side was the Lord, and so the object that they had was to do every-thing possible to give priority to the things of the Lord. The first things which needed to be put first were the things of the Lord. As the Puritans used to say, if the Lord is on our side, it makes no difference who our enemies are. The Lord is greater than all of the armies of the earth combined.

Augustus Toplady, who lived in the eighteenth century, expressed it in these words:

A sovereign protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,

Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend,
And walls of salvation surround
The soul He delights to defend.

Let us see what we can learn from what the Jews did at this crucial point in their return to the land.

A. They built "the altar of the God of Israel" (v. 2).

When they did this, they were following a well-established pattern.

This was the first thing that Noah did when it got out of the ark: "And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord...." (Gen. 9:20a).

This was the first thing that Abram did when he moved to each new place when he got into the land of Canaan: "...and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him" (Gen. 12:7; cf. also v. 8).

This meant at least three things:

- 1) They were taking their stand as the Lord's people.
- 2) They were declaring their intention to worship the Lord.
- 3) They were expressing their faith in the Lord. In Genesis 12:8 and also 13:4 it is stated that it was at the altar that Abram "called upon the name of the Lord."

The Jews were doing all of this. It was the first step that they took in showing that their hope for success in coming back to the land was in the mighty God of Israel. He was their Defender.

B. The continual burnt offering--every morning, and every night (vv. 3-6).

This offering was made twice each day regardless of all the other sacrifices they might have. Cf. Ex. 29:38-43. See also Num. 28, 29.

The Exodus 29 passage shows that this was the sacrifice of daily, personal fellowship with the Lord. The burnt offering represented Christ and His complete devotion to the Lord. It also was typical of the fellowship of the people with the Lord, and

(hopefully) their complete, unreserved devotion to the Lord.

How important this is for us--to see that our fellowship with God is through Christ, and that we, too, are to be completely devoted to the Lord.

C. They observed the Feast of Tabernacles (v. 4).

Why this particular Feast?

- 1) Because it was the final sacrifice of the seventh month, and this was all taking place in the seventh month. See Ezra 3:1.

But, more importantly,

- 2) Because this identified the people as strangers and pilgrims in this world, and indicated that they were a people with a future and with a hope. This was a testimony that they intended to keep themselves "from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11).

D. They gave in preparation for the building of the Temple (v. 7).

They did what they could for the present, but then looked ahead to that time when they could do more: the re-building of the Temple that fellowship with the Lord, and their ministry to Him could be fully restored.

Thus, they did what they could, and made plans to fulfill the work of the Lord completely in the construction of the Temple.

Concl: That which made this such a time of great blessing is stated in the latter part of verse 1: their oneness in doing what they did to put the things of the Lord first! This had to be one of those unusual times in Israel when there was real agreement concerning the things of the Lord. Obedience always brings blessing, but when that obedience is from the heart, and in concert with all of the people of God, blessing is sure to come.

What are the important applications which we should make to our lives?

- 1) Their concern that the Word would be obeyed. Cf. v. 2b.
- 2) Their desire to worship the Lord.
- 3) Their daily fellowship with the Lord--morning and evening.
- 4) Their preparation for the future when things would be completed as the Lord wanted them to be.

TEARS OF JOY
Ezra 3:8-13

Intro: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah teach us a great deal about the work of the Lord in any generation. The Lord's work usually gives us great joy and blessing. But these blessings are often accompanied by great trials, great difficulties, and sometimes failures. The work of the Lord is never easy, but we often make it more difficult than it should be by our failure to wait upon the Lord, to trust Him as we should, and to persevere in doing what He has appointed for us to do. These books teach us that the Lord's work is not just for the priests, the Levites, and the governmental leaders of the nation Israel, but it is for all of the people. See 3:1, and then v. 8 in the same chapter, especially the words, "...and all that that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem...." And so that Lord's work today is not just for the pastor, nor just for the elders and deacons, but for all of you. One sign that the work of the Lord in any church is in a healthy spiritual state is the fact that the Lord's people have a desire to work, and an enthusiasm about serving the Lord. This is a test that you should apply to your own heart and life. You may not be able to teach nor to preach, but there are other things that you can do, and should be doing. You may not be called to give your time completely to the Lord's work, but you ought to be eager to serve our Lord in any way that you can.

In the verses we will be considering today we are going to be looking at the work of the Lord in those days when the exiles returned to Jerusalem and the land which God had given to His people. I have a threefold outline--one that is very easy to remember. Here are the divisions of the text as I see them:

- I. THE WORK (Ezra 3:8, 9).
- II. THE WORSHIP (Ezra 3:10, 11).
- III. THE WEEPING (Ezra 3:12, 13).

So there are three points, with two verses for each point. I hope that this will help you to remember what we are taught in these six verses at the end of chapter 3.

Let us turn, then, to consider:

- I. THE WORK (Ezra 3:8, 9).

Probably the reason that the people did not begin the work of rebuilding the temple until the second month of the second year after they had returned to Jerusalem was because they needed that time to gather materials and to make sufficient plans for the work. But it is interesting to note that it was in the second month of

the fourth year of his reign that Solomon began the construction of the temple. Cf. 2 Chron. 3:2. That may have been a coincidence in the rebuilding of the temple, or it may have been something which the people specifically planned; we do not know.

But the work began.

The care with which the work was done is indicated by what might be called the double oversight of the work. Note that both in verse 8 and again in verse 9 we have the words "set forward." In verse 8 "the work" was "set forward"; in verse 9 "the workmen" were "set forward."

"Set forward" means that the leaders were involved in the work along with those who were doing the work, and the leaders were encouraging the people, urging them on in the work, and doing everything possible to see that the work which had been started would be carried on to its completion. The idea of perseverance is in this verb. There are many times in the Lord's work when we begin with enthusiasm, but then, as time goes on, especially when we do not see what we would like to see, we get discouraged, and give up.

The Apostle Paul was setting forward the Lord's work when he wrote to the Galatian churches,

And let us not be weary in well doing:
for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not
(Gal. 6:9).

Ezra 3:8, 9 would teach us that it is extremely important for the leaders of the Lord's work not only to be sure that the Lord's work is being done as the Lord wants it done, but that the Lord's servants are strengthened and encouraged to carry on with the Lord's strength, persevering until the work is finished.

Let us think about this in relation to our own work. Most of us have been together for almost 10 years. We may not be as far along in many respects as we would like to be. But it is important for us to set ourselves forward, and to see to it that we are setting forward the Lord's work. "In due season" we "shall reap if we faint not." The blessing comes from the Lord, and so does the determination to continue on. We must not faint.

But let us go on to see what is said about:

II. THE WORSHIP (Ezra 4:10, 11).

If you are familiar with the building of the first temple in Solomon's day, you will see that here in the rebuilding of the temple, the second temple, we have a most unusual thing which took place.

When the first temple was built, there really was no celebration until the work was completed. But here, after only the foundation of the second temple had been built, a kind of a spontaneous celebration took place.

- 1) The priests were dressed in their priestly garments, and they had their trumpets in their hands.
- 2) The Levites had their cymbals.

Everything was in preparation for the pouring forth of worship which followed--after only the foundation had been laid.

And all of the people began to sing that song which might be called the national anthem of Israel, which we find often in the OT Scriptures, as we find it, e.g., in Psa. 118:1,

O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good:
because his mercy endureth for ever.

Spurgeon called this song

...that everlasting hymn which will never be out of date, and to which our tongues should never be out of tune (II, 1038).

See it in Psalm 136.

And then Spurgeon continued with this exhortation:

Let all the streams of mercy be traced up to the fountain. Whatever our condition is, how many soever our griefs and fears, let it be owned that God is good; and, whatever fails, that his mercy fails not.

The people were brought back to the realization that God had not changed during all of the years of their captivity. He was good when the first temple was built. He continued to be good when that temple was destroyed. And now as the temple was being rebuilt, it was all traceable to the goodness of God, and to His mercy which could never be exhausted; it "endureth for ever." We fail God; He never fails us.

We need to be sure that we appreciate the attitude of the people at this time, and I want to call your attention to a couple of verses in the prophecy of Zechariah which apply here. Zechariah was one of the prophets of the restoration when the Lord's people were restored to the

land. This is what Zechariah said about this very thing that we are considering today. He said (and the words are recorded in Zech. 4:8-10),

Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands also shall finish it; and thou shalt know that the Lord hath sent me unto you. For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the land of Zerubbabel with those seven: they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro throughout the whole earth.

And the latter part of this prophecy would undoubtedly have reminded many of those Jews of the words which Hanani the prophet rebuked Asa the king of Judah when he sought help from the king of Syria rather than trusting in the Lord to help him. I refer to those words in 2 Chron. 16:9a,

For the eyes of the Lord
run to and fro throughout the whole earth,
to shew himself strong in the behalf of them
whose heart is perfect toward him.

The people were not despising the day of small things, the day when only the foundation of the temple was laid. They believed that the laying of the foundation was evidence to them that the work of rebuilding the entire temple would eventually be finished. And so they could not wait to praise the Lord!

I would say that this is what suffering had done for the people of God.

Do you remember those words of the Psalmist in Psalm 119 when he said,

Before I was afflicted I went astray:
but now I have kept thy word (Psa. 119:67).

Also,

It is good for me that I have been afflicted;
that I might learn thy statutes.
The law of thy mouth is better unto me
than thousands of gold and silver (Psa. 119:71, 72).

These were people who had suffered for their disobedience to the Lord. They had been in circumstances where all they had was the Lord. And it was when they reached the bottom, so to speak, that they found that their God was "good," and that "his mercy endureth for ever." And so they could not wait until the temple was finished before they praised the Lord.

Paul told the Thessalonian church,
 In everything give thanks:
 for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus
 concerning you (1 Thess. 5:18).

The people not only praised and worshiped the Lord, but they shouted their praises. They "shouted aloud for joy" (v. 12), and they did it so that "the noise was heard afar off" (v. 13).

How often do our fellow-believers hear the praises of the Lord from our lips? When people shout like those Jews shouted, it is because their joy is uncontainable.

But when we come to the last two verses we see that not everyone was shouting. There were those who were weeping.

III. THE WEEPING (Ezra 3:12, 13).

Everyone had been singing, but with some it brought shouts of joy; with others it brought them to tears.

Who was it who wept?

Verse 12 tells us. (Read.)

Many of the commentators say that they were weeping because they were disappointed with the foundation, that the temple they had seen before was far superior to the one that was now being built.

If I had preached on this passage 11, 12, 13 years ago, or longer, I might have agreed with them. But I do not agree with that interpretation now. These were not tears of regret and disappointment; these were TEARS OF JOY! With some people, joy can best be expressed in singing and shouting, but with others, joy moves them to weep!

And I believe that this is the explanation.

Some have estimated that it was less than 60 years since the Babylonian captivity, and so some of the older priests and Levites and "chief of the fathers" remembered very well the first temple and the blessing of God in the past. And then they had lived in exile, praying for the mercy of God to be shown toward them when it all seemed so impossible. And now, right before their eyes, was evidence that the temple would be rebuilt, the blessing of the Lord would be restored, and the presence of God would soon be manifested among them.

It seemed too good to be true, and yet they knew that it was true. And they sobbed out their joy as they anticipated the even greater blessing of the Lord.

Do you not know what this is? Are you not able to understand this?

Let me give you my own testimony.

We do not have 50 or 60 or 70 years behind us as a church, but we do have almost 10 years. During these ten years we have prayed about many needs--and I am thinking, not about building needs, but about needs in the lives of people. I am praying, as I know many of you are, about problems and people that I have been praying for for all of these years, but as yet the burdens remain. Many problems are not solved. As far as we know, some today are just when they were spiritually ten years ago.

But many times I have had this experience as I have prayed for various people and their needs (some of which have been answered). I have been moved to tears, TEARS OF JOY, as I have anticipated in my own heart the greater joy that will be mine when those prayers are finally answered. We are not heard because we make many prayers, nor because we have a lot of people praying. God acts in answer to the prayers of individual people. But He does answer prayer! Prayer is our greatest work. Let us "set forward" that work. Let us persevere in prayer, moved to tears at time, if need be, as we contemplate the joy will be ours when the answers do come, when lives are changed, and needs that have existed for a long time are finally met by our God Who is only good, and whose mercy endures forever.

Concl: May the Lord use this passage of His Word in all of our lives today, setting our hopes afresh on Himself, encouraging us to believe that it is still true that our "labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

THE WORK OF THE ENEMY
Ezra 4:1-24

Intro: One thing that is not sufficiently emphasized in our Bible schools and seminaries is that we can count on the fact that the Lord's work will always face opposition. It is usually felt that if we are faithful in seeking to live for the Lord, faithful in prayer, and faithful in preaching and teaching the Word of God, that we will see great victories. In the last 40 or 50 years, probably longer in some places, there has been a growing emphasis upon what has been called Christian education. In Christian education there has been a strong emphasis upon ways and means of doing the work of the Lord. Hundreds of different attempts have been made to guarantee good results in the work of the Lord. Undoubtedly some of these procedures have been beneficial because they have been based upon the Word of God, but no one has been able to put an end to opposition in the Lord's work! In fact, when we turn from Scripture to man's methods, we become even more vulnerable to THE WORK OF THE ENEMY.

The Lord Jesus Christ, Who was the greatest Teacher of all, had severe opposition which finally culminated in His death. Read the book of Acts and you will see the troubles which the early church had to face. The New Testament epistles have much to say about affliction, sufferings, persecution. It seems that none of the apostles died a normal death, but they were martyred for their faith in Christ.

And the same is true of the Old Testament. Our Lord Jesus Christ said on one occasion with respect to Jerusalem,
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
thou that killest the prophets,
and stonest them which are sent unto thee,
how often would I have gather thy children together
as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,
and ye would not (Matt. 23:37).

In Acts 20 where we have the record of Paul saying a final farewell to the Ephesian elders, we read that this is what he told them:

For I know this, that after my departure
shall grievous wolves enter in among you,
not sparing the flock.
Also of your own selves shall men arise,
speaking perverse things,
to draw away disciples after them (Acts 20:29, 30).

Paul had warned them day and night for a period of three years that their work would not escape opposition! (See Acts 20:31.) Some of their troubles would come from outside of

the church; others would come from the inside. But they would certainly come.

So we should not be surprised when there is trouble in the work of the Lord. Instead, we should expect it, and plan for it. However, no one can really be prepared for it when it comes. It usually comes when the Lord's people are experiencing blessing, or when the Lord is preparing to give His blessing.

When the Jews went back from captivity to rebuild the temple, it seems that there was a time of quiet progress as the foundation was being laid. But, once it was laid, trouble appeared. It came from the people of various nations who were living in the land of Israel, people who did not want the Jews, nor did they want their temple. You will see who they were by reading Ezra 4:7-10.

What we need to be interested in are the tactics which they employed because, while the circumstances are obviously different for us today, yet the methods are the same. It is important to note also that, although "the adversaries" were not successful at the first, in a short time they were successful, and the work was stopped for a time.

This is a very significant passage because, as Derek Kidner remarked in his commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah,

From this point onwards right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now go unchallenged, and scarcely a tactic be unexplored by the opposition (p. 48).

What did they do?

It seems that we have four tactics that they employed, one in verse 3, a second in verse 4, and third in verse 5, and the fourth in verse 6.

Let us look at the first. We can call it:

I. ASSOCIATION (Ezra 4:2, 3).

They expressed the desire to become a part of this project. They wanted to work with them. They offered their help.

They claimed to be people who sought the Lord, and who were anxious to offer sacrifices to Him, but this was all a cover-up. They were attempting to conceal what their real motive was.

It may have been true that they were offering some sacrifices to the Lord, but it was also true that they never gave up their heathen worship. Cf. 2 Kings 17:41. They had not really turned to the Lord. They were not children of God. They knew nothing about salvation. And yet they wanted to be numbered with the Lord's people.

This is very popular today. The big thing is for all of us to get together. Unity is more important to some people than anything else. They will sacrifice doctrine for unity. They will deny the great truths of Scripture and still claim that they are Christians. And so in many churches today there is light and darkness, and, where this is the case, there is usually more darkness than light.

Now let us remember that, although the Jewish people were contending with Gentiles from various nations, their real adversary was the Devil. Long after this Paul wrote words that applied to the history of the Lord's people from the time of Eve's temptation right down to this day in which you and I live. Most of you are familiar with the words, but let me remind you of them. They are found in Ephesians 6:11, 12:

Put on the whole armour of God,
that ye may be able to stand against
the wiles of the devil.
For we wrestle not against flesh and blood,
but against principalities, against powers,
against the rulers of the darkness of this world,
against spiritual wickedness in high place.

The Devil is very clever. Would it not have been better to have those Gentiles as friends instead of enemies? And didn't the Jews need help? Surely if they had entered into an alliance with the Gentiles the work would have been finished quicker, and the work of God would have been stronger.

But would it? Was not idolatry one of the main reasons for their captivity and exile? There is no place for compromise in the work of the Lord regardless of how reasonable a compromise might seem. The work of the Lord is to be done by the Lord's people, and the Lord is sufficient for His work and does not need the help of the world.

The Devil has seen to it from the beginning that there is a mixture of wheat and tares. There are no perfect churches. But we must keep a careful check on the Lord's

work, and stand our ground against any compromise with the truth of God. And it behooves every one of us to make sure that we really know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. Ask yourself, too, how much the truth of God's Word means to you. Would you sacrifice any truth of Scripture in order to admit those who are not saved?

That which professes to be the work of the Lord in many places is not really the work of the Lord because they have really departed from Christ and from the Word of God.

We can thank the Lord for the response of "Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel." Note what they said in verse 3.

The second tactic that the adversaries employed was:

II. INTERFERENCE (Ezra 4:4).

The adversaries sought to discourage the Lord's people. And there are always those who are not too excited about the Lord's work, plus those who have been enthusiastic, but, as time goes on, lose that enthusiasm. And so they will listen to those who want to discourage them. The adversaries will point out how great the task is, how little has been done, how much there is yet to do, and how few there are to do it. Discouragement is a mighty instrument in the Devil's hand, and we are all susceptible.

"Troubled" means that many were suddenly seized with fear concerning the work of rebuilding the temple. Perhaps nothing had bothered them until their enemies started to point out some of the obstacles that stood in the way.

The Devil loves to get our eyes off the Lord, and get them focused on ourselves, or the difficulties. The only cure for discouragement, and the only way to keep from getting discouraged in the first place, is to keep our eyes on the Lord, and to strengthen ourselves on the promises of God. It is no wonder that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:10b, 11).

The Devil loves to discourage us, but encouragement is always to be found in the Lord.

But there is a third tactic that we find in Ezra 4:5.

III. COUNSELLORS (Ezra 4:5).

This can mean nothing but the injection of human wisdom into the work of the Lord. Counsel from the Lord, from the Word of God, is what we need. There is nothing better than the wisdom of God in doing the work of God. But there is nothing worse than human wisdom. And yet one of the tragedies of our day is that there are so many "Christian" counsellors who are doing nothing but giving out the wisdom of man to people who really need the truth of God.

"...the counsels
of the wicked
are deceit" (ful)
(Prov. 12:5b).

If you think that the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God are the same, then you need to read 1 Cor. 1, 2. And you need to remember also what Isaiah wrote about 2,700 years ago. The words I refer to are found in Isa. 55:8, 9. Our daughter, Carolyn, embroidered these verses for us with counted cross-stitch, and they are framed and hanging on a wall in our dining room. I personally need to be reminded of what those verses say every day. Listen to them. The Lord is speaking.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

If you follow the wisdom of men, you will be frustrated in your purpose to serve the Lord. This word "frustrate" in the original Hebrew means to make void the purpose of God. The devil cannot do this permanently, but this is always His purpose. He not only wants to hinder the work of the Lord, but he wants to stop it altogether--and permanently.

Sometimes our problem is that we do not know the Word of God. At other times we know it, but do not accept it. And there are a host of untaught believers who accept the wisdom of men as though it were the Word of God, without taking the time to find out whether the advice they are getting is in harmony with Scripture, or not.

The Lord's work today is saturated with human wisdom. It is not an uncommon thing for churches and Christian schools to bring in secular fund raisers to show them how to get money out of the Lord's people. If the people of Israel had followed the heathen counsellors in their day I can assure you that the temple would never have been completed. Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission used to talk about doing God's work in God's way. That

is the only way to do it. We do not learn how from the world and its wisdom; we learn that from the Spirit of God teaching us the Word of God. *CF. ROM. 11: 33-36.*

It seems that none of these three tactics was successful. The Lord was watching out for His people so that they did not fall into any of these three traps. **HOWEVER, ONE MORE TACTIC REMAINED, AND THIS WOULD SUCCEED. WITH THIS LAST ONE THE MATTER WAS TAKEN OUT OF THE HANDS OF THE LORD'S PEOPLE.**

IV. GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTION (Ezra 4:6-24).

I am not going to take this long section up in detail. It has been read to us. We know that the adversaries wrote to Artaxerxes, and this led to the stoppage of the work.

This whole time of conflict probably occupied about sixteen years. It was not pressure that was put on the people once, and then dropped. These pressures continued on and were increased in the hope of achieving what they were designed to do. But the first three failed. Now the fourth was to be exercised--and it would succeed!

The letter that was sent to Artaxerxes portrayed the people of God as a threat to the Persian throne. So after proper investigation, the king ordered the work stopped, and it was stopped. But we know that it was not stopped permanently. The work would eventually be resumed, and finally completed--all to the glory of God!

Concl: What do we learn from all of this?

As I stated at the beginning, we see that the Lord's work will always face opposition, persistent opposition, always designed first to hinder the Lord's work, then to stop it altogether!

Secondly, we see the importance of standing fast, persevering, refusing to listen to the enemy.

Finally, we can see that though the devil and his people may cause us a great deal of distress, and often gain temporary victories over us, yet the work of the Lord will ultimately prevail.

So we need to take courage and continue on, seeking by God's grace to do His work in His way. This means by prayer, by faith, by the Word of God, depending upon the power and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

THE EYE OF THEIR GOD
Ezra 5:1-6:15

Intro: The book of Ezra begins by telling about the return of the Jews from their long captivity in Babylon. By this time Babylon was in the hands of the Persians, and Cyrus was the king. In some miraculous way, Cyrus had been given a charge to build the Lord's house in Jerusalem. So he sent as many of the exiles as would go back to Jerusalem. The names of the families are recorded in chapter 2, and the total number of the returning exiles is given in Ezra 2:64: 42,360.

Chapter 3 records for us the laying of the foundation, which became the cause of much shouting and much weeping when it was completed. The people could not wait until the temple was finished because their joy was so great in seeing the first phase of the work completed.

However, their joy did not last long. In chapter 4 we saw how the enemies of the Lord's people began their insidious attempts to destroy the work, first by offering to cooperate with the Jews, and, when that failed, by openly opposing the re-building of the Temple. After some correspondence with Artaxerxes, who was then king in Persia, a letter came from him ordering that the work be stopped. And it was. It probably seemed to the Jews as though their hopes for restoring the temple worship had now come to an end, and that their hopes were dashed!

This brings us to chapter 5. It is interesting to notice the "then" at the beginning of the last verse of chapter 4, and to compare it with the "then" in the first verse of chapter 5. The adversaries of the Jews had seemed to win a final victory, but it soon becomes clear that the Lord had not forsaken His people.

All of chapter 5 and the first fifteen verses of chapter 6 form one section, and I want to take the time to read this passage this morning because I am afraid that most of you have not read it. And I will make some comments about the text as I read it. If we are to learn what God was doing, and how He did it, we need to have the details clearly in mind. After we read the account, then we can draw from the passage some lessons that ought to be helpful to us.

(Read Ezra 5:1-6:15.)

The first thing for us to notice in this rather long section is the appearance of two names which have not appeared before in this book of Ezra. They are:

I. HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH.

Probably most of the children who are here today could tell me who these two men were. They were prophets. Each one was responsible for giving us one of the prophetic books of the OT. There is only one prophecy which comes after their books in the OT as they are arranged in our English translation of the Bible. The last three books of the OT are Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

So, when you read the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah you know that these were two men that the Lord used in Judah at a time when the work on the temple had stopped, and the people were discouraged by the success of their adversaries.

Now let me point out from verse 1 two things that we are told about these prophets.

A. They prophesied "in the name of the God of Israel."

What does this mean?

This means that God told them what to say to the people, and that is what they said. They did not make up what they had to say; they spoke the very words of God. And when they spoke it was just as though the people had heard the voice of God Himself.

Now keep this in mind. This is why I asked Dr. McCaleb to read the first part of Zechariah 4 as our Scripture reading. Zechariah told the Jews, among other things, that Zerubbabel, who had started the work, would finish it, that the obstacles would vanish away, that the Holy Spirit would enable him to finish, and that when the work was done, the people would shout, "Grace, grace," because they would know that to the Lord belonged all of the glory.

That was the first thing.

The second follows from that, but the Spirit of God must have felt that this should be mentioned too. I am referring to the last three words of Ezra 5:1,

B. "Even unto them."

Some of the translators of this verse tell us that those three words can be translated, "Who was over them."

The words that Haggai and Zechariah spoke "in the name of the God of Israel" were spoken, not by a God Who was unable to help them, nor One who was unwilling to help them, but by One Who was present with them, and sovereign over them, their circumstances, and all who opposed them. Those three words, "even unto them," speak of a present God, a powerful God, a God Who was in complete control of the work He had called them to do.

Those were wonderful words, the gist of the message of the prophets, but were they words that could be trusted? Did the Lord really send Zechariah and Haggai, or were they just trying to give the people some encouragement on their own?

Well, let us look ahead into the chapter.

No sooner had the work on the temple started again, than we see the opposition beginning. This time it came from the leader of the government in that area, the representative of the king, whose business it was to make sure that nothing was going on that would be a problem to the king.

So he went to the Jews and asked them two questions:

- 1) Who commanded them to resume the work?
- 2) What were the names of the men who were responsible?

All of that had an ominous ring to it. It seemed to point to more trouble from Judah's adversaries.

But then we read about:

II. "THE EYE OF THEIR GOD" (Ezra 5:5).

This must have brought back to the minds of the Jews some wonderful things that had been recorded for them in their Scriptures. There were several things that they had been taught about "the eye of their God," or "the eyes of the LORD."

For example, what about Psa. 94:9?

He that planted the ear, shall he not hear?
he that formed the eye, shall he not see?

Or Prov. 15:3,

The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
beholding the evil and the good.

There is a wonderful verse in Psa. 34--verse 15:

The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,
and his ears are open unto their cry.

In our Scripture reading today we heard that "the eyes of the Lord...run to and fro throughout the whole earth"

(Zech. 4:10b). And these probably reminded every Jew of those words with which Hanani the seer rebuked Asa because he had trusted in the king of Syria rather than in the Lord. Do you remember these familiar words?

For the eyes of the Lord
run to and fro throughout the whole earth,
to shew himself strong in the behalf of them
whose heart is perfect toward him (2 Chron. 16:9a).

Nothing escapes God's sight. He can see just as well in the darkness of the night as on the brightest day. David recorded for us those words about God in Psa. 139:12b where we read that "the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

God sees you and me right where we are this morning. He not only knows where we are, but He knows what we are thinking, our worries, our fears, our troubles. He knows them all. And the fact that He sees them is evidence not only that He knows, but that He cares, and that His heart is turned toward us. He will not leave us, nor forget us, but will help us. We can be sure to count on that.

What evidence do we have that "the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews"?

III. THE PROOF OF GOD'S CARE.

I see in the remainder of the chapter at least four things which shows the Lord's care over His people in those difficult circumstances.

While the whole matter was under investigation, while Tatnai wrote to Darius, and was waiting for the king's answer,

A. The work on the temple did not stop. Cf. Ezra 5:5.

Let us remember that when God has a work for us to do, all of the powers of earth and hell cannot stop it.

B. The decree of Cyrus was found. Cf. Ezra 6:1, 2.

It was not found in Babylon, but in Achmetha, the capital of the Medes! This was a marvelous provision from the Lord. It guaranteed that the government would do all in its power to see that work on the temple would be finished!

C. The preaching of Haggai and Zechariah continued. Cf.

Ezra 6:14a. The Lord kept sending His Word, and it was through the Word of God that the people had their faith strengthened to continue on with the work.

D. The work was finished. Cf. Ezra 6:14b, 15.

What God wills will be done. The work He has ordained will be completed. There may be all kinds of obstacles standing in the way, and the enemy may be great in numbers and strong in power, but God is greater and stronger than all.

Concl: What are we to learn from these two chapters? Let me suggest four lessons.

First, the work of the Lord is important to the Lord. The temple in particular was important to Him because it was there that He would dwell among His people, and it was the temple where their fellowship with the Lord was to be maintained.

Second, the importance of the Word of God. Not only did the people get back to the work through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, but the ministry of these two prophets continued until the work on the temple was finished.

We not only need the Word in starting to serve the Lord, but we need it daily to strengthen and encourage our faith. No child of God will continue to live for the Lord, and to serve the Lord, unless he (or she) is continually feeding upon the Word of God.

Third, we need to remember the Lord--that He sees us, He hears our prayers, He knows our need. And He is with us. He is for us. He is on our side. He never forsakes His own. Even when we are unbelieving, He continues to be faithful to us.

Fourth and finally, we need to persevere in the work of the Lord. The opposition may be great. It may come from within the work, or outside. The Enemy may be relentless in His attacks upon us. But we must never give up!

Let us keep all of this in mind in our personal trials and struggles. But let us also profit from these chapters as we think of the work that the Lord has called us to do. While we hope to have a church building of our own some day, this is not the main work. The work of the Lord is in the hearts of His people. We are the temple of God. He not only dwells with us, but in us. So in working with people we must persevere knowing that the Lord will enable us to accomplish

all that He intends to do to complete His work, and to bring the greatest possible glory to His holy Name. It will not be by our strength individually or collectively, but by the power and blessing of the Spirit of God. And as we realize that we are His instruments, that the power and blessing come from Him, then we, too, will gladly shout, "Grace, grace," as we see the hand of God at work in our work.

THE DEDICATION OF GOD'S HOUSE
Ezra 6:16-22

Intro: When those who had returned from exile had completed the foundation of the temple, there was much praise offered to the Lord in song, in shouts of joy, as well as with weeping! We read about that in the latter part of Ezra, chapter 3. Today as we come to the latter part of chapter 6, the whole temple has been completed, and it was time for the dedication. This, too, was a time of great joy!

What the people did in dedicating the temple carries with it a great deal of significance for us even today. And so I want to examine these verses very carefully with you making the applications that we can, knowing that we in this age, since the coming of Christ, are the temple of God.

In case some of you are not familiar with the NT teaching regarding the temple of God, let me call your attention to Paul's words in 1 Cor. 3:16, 17 and 6:19, 20.

The first of these two passages says this:

Know ye not that ye are the temple of God,
and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?
If any man defile the temple of God,
him shall God destroy;
for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.

The second has this to teach us:

What? know ye not that your body
is the temple of the Holy Spirit,
which is in you, which ye have of God,
and ye are not your own?
For ye are bought with a price:
therefore glorify God in your body,
and in your spirit, which are God's.

With these verses in mind I want us to note not only what the Jews did in dedicating that ancient temple, but I want us to see the application that it has in dedicating our bodies to the Lord.

First of all, let us make sure that we understand what we are talking about when we speak of a dedication.

I. WHAT IS A DEDICATION?

Right down to the present day a dedication is a public declaration of the way in which, in this case, the temple, was to be used.

Three times in our text the building which they had just finished was called, "the house of God." Cf. vv. 16, 17, and 22. And just in case there might be any doubt in people's minds as to what God this was, He is called in verse 22, "the God of Israel."

This was to be God's dwelling place among His people. It was to be the place where, according to verse 21, they would "seek the God of Israel." In verse 18 we have another expression that we ought to notice. It is "the service of God."

When we put all of this together we see that at the dedication of the house of God the people were declaring that this was God's house, where He would dwell, where the priests and Levites would serve Him, and where the people would come to seek the Lord. Implied in this also was the promise on the part of the people that they would not seek any God but the Lord God of Israel.

Therefore, we can see that the dedication was a very important event.

This was also Solomon's purpose when the first temple was dedicated. However, we know that before Solomon died he was worshipping other gods, and that after that the temple was used as a place to worship heathen gods. But that was not the purpose for its dedication. Both temples were originally dedicated to the Lord, to the God of Israel, and they were not to be used for any other purpose.

NOW—WHAT ABOUT THE APPLICATION FOR US?

The answer is to be found in Romans 12:1, 2.

We hear very much today, too much, about being able to exercise our rights. Freedom has come to mean to us in America the right to do whatever we want to do. But even among Christians we hear far too little about God's rights. When I read to you a moment ago from 1 Cor. 6: 19 and 20, you will remember that Paul said, "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

When we present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, we are giving Him that which really belongs to Him, and we are declaring that it will be our purpose to live for Him, and only for Him!

Have you done this, and is it evident from the way you live? Are you living primarily to please yourself, or are you living to please the Lord? If you are going to please the Lord, then this means that your life is being directed by the Spirit of God, and by the Word of God!

Perhaps some of you need to have a dedication service of your own, and it may be that the rest of us need to have a re-dedication service. You know your own heart. May the Holy Spirit show each of us our need with regard to our dedication to the Lord.

But let us go on to notice that which was included in the dedication of the temple.

Notice that all of this was done:

II. WITH JOY.

Some of these people had never been truly happy. Joy was not a characteristic of the Lord's people which they were in captivity. They had been uprooted from their land, persecuted, oppressed. Many had died. But now we begin to read about JOY! We saw their joy in chapter 3 when the foundation of the temple was finished, and now here in chapter 6 we read three times of their joy. See it in v. 16, and twice in verse 22.

Our hearts are so corrupt that we think we know more about what will bring us joy than God does. And we really feel that dedicating ourselves to God, to do His will, can only mean a life of misery. But that is not true. The happiest life is the holiest life. The happiest life is the life lived to please God. That which pleases God is that which bring the greatest joy, the greatest satisfaction, the greatest blessing to us.

When the Lord was speaking to His disciples about keeping His commandments, He said,

These things have I spoken unto you,
THAT MY JOY MIGHT REMAIN IN YOU,
AND THAT YOUR JOY MIGHT BE FULL (John 15:11).

The main reason that we as the Lord's people do not have more joy is because we are guilty of so much disobedience.

So we should not be afraid of dedicating ourselves to the Lord; we should be afraid NOT to be dedicated. When you read about the dedication of the temple, be sure to notice that the joy of the people was back, and that it

was back because they were doing the will of God.

Now let us notice what made up the dedication service.

III. THE DEDICATION SERVICE (Ezra 6:17-22).

It seems to have been patterned, for the most part, after the dedication of Solomon's temple. There were differences, but there were also their similarities. Cf. 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 7.

Basically there were three parts:

- 1) Sacrifices.
- 2) The Passover.
- 3) The Feast of Unleavened Bread.

In all three of these we have Christ set forth in types.

A. The sacrifices (vv. 17, 18).

Since the sin offerings were singled out from the others, we can safely assume, I believe, that the 100 bullocks and 200 rams and 400 lambs were burnt offerings and peace offerings. They picture our Lord's complete dedication to the Father's will, and the joy that He had in doing the Father's will. As I have said many times before, the burnt offering was offered completely to the Lord; the peace offerings were primarily offerings of thanksgiving.

The sin offering, of course, pictured the nature of our Lord's sacrifice—not for His own sins, but for the sins of His people.

Together these sacrifices show that it is only through Christ and His sacrifice that we can approach God, and that we can offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

B. The Passover (vv. 19, 20).

This was like a great OT communion service. The Passover was the first great, detailed type of the sacrifice Christ that we have in the OT.

I am sure that it had special significance here.

Do you remember that I have raised the question as to why God had His people built the temple before they built the walls of the city. For security sake, it would have seemed wisest to build the walls first,

and then, behind the security of the walls, build the temple. I think we have our answer here as to why the temple came first, and why the Passover was observed in the dedication service.

What is the origin of the word, Passover? The Passover was first observed the night the Lord took His people out of Egypt. But do you know what the word Passover suggests?

Please turn to Exodus 12. I want to read two verses for you where the words "pass over" are used.

The first is Ex. 12:13. (Read and explain.)

The second is Ex. 12:23. (Read and explain.)

When you put these two things together you can see that the Passover meant:

- 1) Deliverance from death.
- 2) Security from the Destroyer.

The One to Whom this temple was being dedicated was not only their Savior, but He was their Protector. And to use Paul's argument which was given to us by the Holy Spirit in the book of Romans much later, we can say that, if God is able to do the greater, He is able to do that which is not as great, but very, very important. I refer to Rom. 8:31, 32:

What shall we then say to these things?
If God be for us, who can be against us?
He that spared not his own Son,
but delivered him up for us all,
how shall he not with him
also freely give us all things?

The Passover was God's continuing testimony to His people that He was not only their Savior, but their Protector. Their security was in the Lord to Whom they were dedicating the temple. No person is more secure than the one who walks with God.

C. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 21, 22).

Leaven in Scripture always speaks of sin. And so that which is unleavened speaks of separation from sin. These were people who had "separated themselves ...from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel...." (v. 21b).

This is what Paul said in Rom. 12:2 that we are to

do. Cf. also 2 Cor. 6:17, 18.

Was this bad for the people in those days? Read v. 22. It made them happier than they had ever been before, and they saw how the Lord had protected them from the days when the King of Assyria took the first captives, and then how He had brought them back to their land to re-establish His fellowship with them.

Concl: You see, sin has corrupted us to the point where we avoid that which will make us really happy, and we choose the things that are sure to make us unhappy. We, even as the Lord's people, refuse to dedicate ourselves to the Lord, which would bring us the greatest happiness, and we turn to our own ways and engage in sin, and then wonder why we are so unhappy.

Can I ask you a question, or two or three, this morning. Have you ever had a dedication service in which you presented your body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, to the Lord? If not, will you obey Rom. 12:1, 2 this morning—not publicly, but in your heart? It will soon be evident publicly if you really mean it in your heart.

Perhaps some of you who know the Lord remember a time when you gave yourself to the Lord, but you have not been living as a man or woman or young person who belongs to the Lord. Have you forgotten the One to Whom you belong? Will you in the quietness of your own heart today turn back to Him, place your life in His hands, and begin again to live for His glory.

Perhaps there are some here today who have never trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. You have been living your life the way you have wanted to, and it has gotten you into all kinds of trouble. If you leave this life without Christ, your sins will get you into the worst possible trouble, eternal trouble, suffering the torments of hell forever! Let me plead with you to turn to Christ this morning. Trust Him Who died on the Cross to save you from the penalty of your sins. He will save you, and He will be your Lord. The only true and lasting joy that there is in this world is in knowing Christ as your Savior, and then living each day according to His Word for His glory. May God enable any of you who are without Christ to come to Him today to be saved.

THE LORD'S HAND ON EZRA
Ezra 7:1-10

Intro: In chapter 7 we are introduced for the first time to Ezra! There is a gap in the history of Israel of some fifty-seven years. In fact, not all of the members of Ezra's family are mentioned in the genealogy that appears at the beginning of this chapter. Instead of being the immediate son of Seraiah, he was probably the great, great grandson of Seraiah. Nor does it seem that Ezra was a high priest. He had ancestors in that line, but it seems that he was the child of a younger son in one of the generations following Seraiah. And so he was a in the priestly line, but not the high priestly line.

The gap in the history should not bother us. The Bible nowhere claims to be a thorough history of the godly line from Adam to Christ. The Spirit of God has been selective in giving us all of the information we need to trace the working of the Lord with His people in connection with the redemption that we have in Christ. None of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph are given in complete detail. There is a gap of time between Joseph and Moses--more than 400 years. We have a period of silence between the prophesying of Malachi and the birth of Christ of another 400 years. So all of this should lead us to see that the Holy Spirit has given us all that we need to know, and that nothing which is vital to our understanding of the plan and purpose of God has been omitted.

We can, therefore, assume that nothing significant to our understanding of God's redemptive plan took place during those fifty-seven years. After the completion of the new temple, the next important event was the appearance in Israel of EZRA! Appearing in sacred history some 1,000 years after Moses, he has been regarded in Israel by many as the second Moses. This is due in large measure to the way in which his name has been linked with the law of Moses. He was as zealous to see it obeyed as Moses had been when God first gave the Law.

But let us take up the text, and begin to get acquainted with this man whom God was to use in such an important way.

The first thing that we can say about this man is that he was:

I. AN IMPORTANT MAN.

We can say this for two reasons.

A. Because his genealogy is given.

Whenever this is done in Scripture, it is meant to indicate that the person whose genealogy is given is an important person, important in the outworking of God's eternal plan.

But there is a second reason which helps us to see that Ezra was important.

B. Because the hand of his God was upon him.

Notice this statement which is given in verse 6, and repeated with one word added in verse 9. See also 7:28; 8:18, 22, 31

This means that God's blessing was on Ezra. It means that God was leading him in what he did. It means that God by His grace was strengthening Ezra to do what Ezra had been divinely appointed to do. Ezra was a man with a single purpose, and that was to do the will of God for the glory of God. As wonderful a man as Ezra must have been, and as great as his accomplishments were, none of the good things which he did could have taken place if the hand of God had not been upon him. In a special sense Ezra was a man who lived and worked under the sovereign hand of His almighty God.

The hand of the Lord can be against us, as it was against Pharaoh. Moses told him in Ex. 9:3,

Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thy cattle which is in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep:

there shall be a very grievous murrain.

Or it can be upon us for good. We see this in Ezra's case. The OT has a great deal to say about blessing connected with the hand of the Lord. In Psalm 145:16 we read,

Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.

The evidence that the Lord's hand was upon him is seen in three things:

1. His love for the Word of God.

We see this in verse 6a. He is called "a ready scribe in the law of Moses...." I want to deal with this part of Ezra's life more in detail when

we get down to verse 10, but let us note here that he was "a ready scribe in the law of Moses."

What did this mean--"a ready scribe"?

"Ready" suggests that he quickly and accurately grasped the meaning of Scripture. He was a skilled student of the Word of God. And, as we shall see, this was not some miraculous insight that was given to him all at once, but it was the result of long, careful, prayerful attention to the Word of God. As we shall see, Ezra was a man of one Book, and he had a burden to make his people a nation of one Book: the law of God.

As a "scribe," he may have done some copying of the law, but the word here seems to indicate that he was a scholar and a teacher, a real authority as to the meaning of the law.

I want you to recognize that no man is going to give himself with such zeal and such determination to the study of the Word unless the Lord's hand is upon him. Whatever your love for the Word may be, and whatever understanding you have of the Scriptures, however meager it may be, thank the Lord for it. It is an evidence of the good hand of the Lord upon you.

The second evidence of the Lord's hand upon him was:

2. His favor with the king. See verse 6b.

And this is explicitly stated to have been the case.

The Word of God is full of instances where kings have shown favor toward the Lord's people. And such a thing as this can only be explained in terms of the mighty hand of God. I remind you again of those words in Prov. 21:1,

The kings' heart is in the hand of the Lord,
as the rivers of water:
he turneth it whithersoever he will.

Think of Joseph with Pharaoh. Think of Moses with a later Pharaoh. Think of Daniel with Darius. Artaxerxes gave Ezra all that he wanted with respect to going back to Jerusalem from exile. This is the Lord's hand. There can be no other explanation.

But there is another evidence of God's good hand upon Ezra:

3. The journey back to Jerusalem with those who went with him. See verses 7 through 9.

Talk about a passage lacking detail, we have it here: four months of desert travel covered in three verses! We learn more about this later. There was disappointment and delay, dangers, and very likely those who were discouraged. But Ezra persevered in leading this group. And after four months they arrived in Jerusalem.

Again, this can only be appreciated when we understand that it was because of the Lord's good hand upon them that this project succeeded.

But once they were in the land, what was Ezra's primary concern (as the remainder of this book shows)? Here we have even more evidence that Ezra was:

II. A MAN OF THE WORD.

Read verse 9 with verse 10. There you will see what God did for Ezra according to the latter part of verse 9, and then what Ezra did, and wanted to do, according to verse 10.

Many years ago, when I was a young man, I was introduced to this verse by the Navigators. I memorized it at that time, and have never forgotten it.

But let us put this verse into its proper context as far as the book of Ezra is concerned.

The temple had been finished--almost sixty years before! The temple was God's dwelling place. It was the place where the children of Israel brought their sacrifices. It was the center of Jewish worship. BUT WE KNOW THAT THERE HAD BEEN A TEMPLE BEFORE THIS ONE, PERHAPS EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THIS ONE. AND YET THE TEMPLE ITSELF HAD NOT PROTECTED THE PEOPLE FROM IDOLATRY, FROM REBELLION, AND FROM ALL OTHER KINDS OF SINS. BUILDINGS, EVEN THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD, DO NOT HAVE THAT ABILITY.

Bringing this down to our own day, there is nothing about a beautiful church building that guarantees that the people who meet there will continue to love the Lord, to walk with Him, to do what is pleasing in His sight, and to do it for God's glory. Buildings do not do that for

us. In fact, there have been many churches which have seen the blessing of God when they have been in modest quarters, but it has been lost over a period of time when they got into larger, more modern, more beautiful facilities. LET ME REPEAT: BUILDINGS DO NOT KEEP PEOPLE WALKING WITH THE LORD!

What does?

There is only one way we can be kept from sin. Dr. Mitchell used to say it so often: It is when the Spirit of God uses the Word of God in the people of God. This was Ezra's burden. As I said before, and as others have said, he wanted to make his people a people of one Book!

But, if a man wants to do that, where does he begin? What can we learn from Ezra 7:10?

Three things:

- A. It must begin with us: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord."

Notice that in preparation for knowing the Word of God, he did not just get a lot of books, nor did he enroll in some school. He prepared his heart for seeking the Word of God!

How did he do this?

1. By prayer. He recognized that he did not have the ability to understand the Word by himself. He needed the Lord to teach him, and he knew that if the Lord did not teach him, he would remain in his ignorance.

There are many believers in this world who have never been to school who know the Word better than a lot of us who are seminary graduates. Why? Because it is wrong to go to seminary? No! But because our seminary education often keeps us from seeing how dependent we are upon the Lord for what we need to learn from the Word.

No person can prepare his heart unless he prays.

2. By reading the Word itself.

So often our study of the Word is concentrated upon books about the Word instead of the Word of God itself. Reading the Word has a cleansing

effect upon our lives, a strengthening effect, an enlightening effect. Ezra undoubtedly spent much of his time reading the Word itself. Read what others have written about the Word, but never let that take the place of reading the Word itself!

3. By concentrating upon himself.

No person will have a prepared heart who studies the Word primarily so that he will have something to give to others. We want to give what we learn to others, but we need to study the Word concentrating on our own needs, and be just as zealous in doing so even though we may never tell any other person, nor teach a class, nor preach a sermon. When Ezra was pouring over the Word of God, he did it as a man who was alone with his God.

But let me go on to the second part of verse 10.

B. "And to do it."

When we are really learning the truth of God's Word, the evidence will be seen in our lives. If our lives remain the same, we are not really learning very much. One of the greatest sins of us as the Lord's people is that we do not practice what we preach. The real joy of knowing the Word comes when we live the Word.

Ezra knew that his life needed to be changed, and this was a real priority with him as he sought to understand the truth of God more and more. There will be greater power and blessing in our churches when we are just as concerned about doing what the Word says as we are in knowing what it says.

One more thing:

C. "And to teach in Israel statutes and judgments."

This is God's order for the teacher:

- 1) First, heart-preparation for the Word.
- 2) Second, obedience.
- 3) Ministry to others.

It is very doubtful if there were many, maybe even any, who had this as the burden on their hearts. It was good to have the Temple. But the Temple without the Word was not enough. It was only as the people

learned the Word, and walked according to the Word, that their worship could be what it needed to be in order to please the Lord. Isaiah's prophecy right at the very beginning shows us that it is possible for people to be very faithful and orthodox in their worship while at the same time be corrupt and sinful in their lives. Without knowing the Word and obeying the Word, it is only a matter of time until the work of the Lord is corrupted and becomes displeasing to the Lord.

Concl: What a message these verses have for us today! It may be old fashioned just to teach the Word of God, but this has been God's plan from the very beginning. And just as in Ezra's day, the people who seek to teach the Word in today's world have very little competition (if we can refer to it that way).

But what we need to learn as pastors, as parents, as Christian school and Bible school and seminary teachers, and even when one Christian tries to help one other Christian, is that we need the Word of God in our hearts first, and then in our lives, if our teaching is to have the desired effect in the lives of those we teach.

May the Lord enable us to learn this lesson well. Why not memorize Ezra 7:10, and then ask the Lord to make it as important to you today as it was to Ezra 2500 years ago. Be an old fashioned Christian; they are the best kind.

SHOWERS OF BLESSING

Ezra 7:11-28

Intro: At the beginning of chapter 7 we entered into the second part of the book of Ezra. The first six chapters told us about the construction of the temple in Jerusalem—the temple which was built by the exiles who had returned from Babylon.

Chapter 7 introduces us to Ezra for the first time. He returned to Jerusalem about 57 years after the temple was finished. The Lord had put in his heart the desire to go to Jerusalem, and it was the Lord who moved upon Artaxerxes to give him permission to go. But the important thing about Ezra's reason for wanting to go to Jerusalem is related for us in verse 10 of chapter 7. He was a godly priest, a man of the Word of God, and he went back to Jerusalem to teach the people the Word of God. He went as a Bible expositor, "to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." His purpose was not only to teach them what the Law of God had to say, but to show them what they were to do. He knew that the temple with all of its sacrifices was not sufficient to keep them walking in fellowship with God. Fellowship with the Lord can only be maintained as the Word of God gets into the hearts and lives of His people, causing them to live in obedience to the Word of God.

This is the important lesson for us from the first ten verses of chapter 7. We, too, need to know the Word, not just in a doctrinal way (although that is very, very important), but to live it. In living the Word, which means in obeying it, we experience the blessing and the rewards which only come when we live the way the Lord wants us to live. We need to take the exhortations of Scripture seriously.

In the passage before us today we can see how important Ezra's mission was to God. Both in OT times and in NT times it has always been God's way to encourage the obedience of His people with blessing. When Ezekiel spoke of the coming reign of Christ upon the earth, one of the things that he said was, "There shall be showers of blessing" (Ezek. 34:26).

Back in the 1800's a man by the name of Daniel Whittle composed a Gospel song in which he took this theme, "Showers of Blessing," and spoke of the blessings we seek today. In the chorus he said this,

Mercy drops round us are falling,
But for the showers we plead.

There is no question but that God was fulfilling His purposes in the ministry of Ezra, and yet, at the same time, we have to recognize that the great blessing which Ezra saw was

related to the godliness of Ezra as a man, and his earnest desire to see the people of God continuing to walk in fellowship with the Lord. He wanted to see that fellowship grow! So the Lord gave him unbelievable blessings. Verse 6 of this chapter seems to indicate that Ezra had asked for many of these things, but, as we see at the end of the chapter, Ezra attributed to goodness of Artaxerxes to the hand of God upon him. God really showered blessings upon Ezra and the people of Israel.

But what were those blessings? Let us see.

I. THE LORD'S BLESSING UPON HIS PEOPLE (Ezra 7:11-26).

You can see that most of this chapter is taken up telling us about the blessings the Lord gave to Ezra and the people of Israel. And it was all issued in the form of a royal decree from a heathen king!

Let us notice what each one was.

A. The release of more exiles (vv. 13, 14).

Every Jewish exile could have left Babylon is that had been their desire.

B. Money.

1. The money which the king and his councilors gave (v. 15).
2. Any money which might be given to them from others in Babylon (v. 16a).
3. The money that the people of Israel and the priests might willingly want to give (v. 16b).

Note: The money was to be used to buy sacrifices for the people to offer to the Lord (v. 17). And whatever money might be left over was to be used, as Artaxerxes said, "After the will of your God" (v. 18).

C. The vessels (v. 19).

Since the Law carefully prescribed what was to be used in the temple, these were probably vessels which were overlooked when Cyrus restored most of the vessels according to Ezra 1:7-11. Artaxerxes evidently respected the fact that the vessels were not to be used for any other purpose than for the

service of the Lord.

D. Provisions for the future (vv. 20-22).

The purpose of this generous provision was to guarantee that nothing interrupted the service of the temple.

E. Special exhortations (vv. 23-26).

1. The people were to be diligent in worshipping the Lord (v. 23).

Cf. Ezra 6:10 as to why Darius did essentially what Artaxerxes was prescribing here and why. They knew that, when Israel was blessed, they would be blessed. And that the blessing of Israel was vitally related to their fellowship with their God. It is too bad the the Israelites were not as diligent themselves in loving and obeying God.

2. No taxes for those who were involved in the temple ministry (v. 24).

3. The authority of Ezra (vv. 25-27).

And we need to notice again that Artaxerxes was concerned that the people would be diligent in obeying the Law of God. Those who disobeyed the Lord were to be severely punished.

Note: All of the way through this decree we can see that Artaxerxes was concerned about the relationship of the people of God to God. And it is amazing to see how faithful God was in meeting the needs of His people in this time of special need. Who would have expected such great blessings from the hand of the Lord, blessings which must have exceeded his prayers and his greatest expectations? What God did through Cyrus, and then through Darius, He did here through Artaxerxes--each one of them a miracle of the grace of God!

Let me remind you again of the verse which is so abundantly illustrated by what God did in the lives of these three heathen kings:

The king's heart is in the hand
of the Lord, as the rivers of water:
he turneth it whithersoever he will

(Prov. 21:1).

When Solomon spoke of "the rivers of water," he was evidently thinking, as one writer has expressed it (cf. Bridges, p. 364), of the way in which the Lord directs the rivers of the earth for the irrigation of the fields of the earth without which the farmers would have no crops. So Solomon was thinking of the blessing of the Lord. We see other illustrations of this truth in Joseph's acceptance by Pharaoh in Egypt. We see it in the way that Darius' heart was turned toward Daniel. Even in connection with our Lord's life on earth, we see that the taxation decree that was issued by Caesar Augustus so that our Lord was born in Bethlehem. And even in our Lord's death, God worked through Pilate that His will might be done. The hand of the Lord could be clearly seen in Paul's life and his involvement with various political rulers.

Such accounts in Scripture are meant for our encouragement. God is always in control. If He works in the hearts of man with the greatest human authority so that they do His will as though it had originally been their own ideas, then there is no man who is greater than God, no man who can overrule or stand against God. Sometimes it may mean judgment for the Lord's people; sometimes great blessing. But it is always for the fulfillment of God's purposes and for His glory.

We should see this today in the crisis our nation faces in the Middle East. The heart of Haddam Hussein is in the hand of the Lord. The heart of Mikhail Gorbachev is in the hand of the Lord. The heart of our President is in the hand of the Lord.

And, if their hearts are in the Lord's hand, if the Lord is sovereign over the world's greatest leaders, then He is certainly sovereign in the lives of people who affect your life and mine in any way--that neighbor of yours who is so hard to get along with.

This was a lesson that Isaiah had to learn at the beginning of his ministry. Cf. Isa. 6; and 2 Chron. 26 to see the kind of of king

Uzziah was, and the circumstances under which he died. Clearly he had been an Isaiah's ally in the work of the Lord. But he died in disgrace. However, the Lord was still upon His throne, and He was the only ally that Isaiah really needed.

See what the Apostle Paul wrote late in his ministry regarding the sufficiency of the Lord when his friends had forsaken him and he was in the hands of Caesar. See 2 Tim. 4:17, 18:

Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me,
and strengthened me; that by me
the preaching might be fully known,
and that all the Gentiles might hear:
and I was delivered
out of the mouth of the lion.
And the Lord will deliver me
from every evil work, and will preserve
me unto his heavenly kingdom:
to whom be glory for ever and ever.
Amen.

Whether things look good or bad to us, let us always be assured that the hand of the Lord is evident in everything. He is not only greater than any king, but He is greater than the power of all kings combined. He is the One Who raises one up, and puts down another. And He can, and has, made sovereigns out of the lowliest of men. Some day we will understand this better than ever when we see that our Lord Jesus Christ is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. No one is greater than He is, and all sovereigns hold their power from Him--and only as long as He determines for them to have it.

Remember what our blessed Lord told Pilate when Pilate said,

...knowest thou not that I have power
to crucify thee,
and have power to release thee?
Jesus answered,
Thou couldest have no power at all
against me, except it were given thee
from above.... (John 19:10b, 11a).

Cf. also Ezra 6:22.

This brings us to the last verses of the chapter in which we

see:

II. EZRA'S BLESSING FOR THE LORD (Ezra 7:27, 28).

Since the Lord is sovereign, and all of our blessings come from Him, then we need to praise Him that He is in control. Here we see that because the Lord had blessed His people with "showers of blessing," Ezra blessed the Lord. His blessing was praise, a service which has been sadly neglected in our day. We worry when we should be at peace, praising the Lord.

This prayer was prayed while Ezra was still in Babylon!

Matthew Henry (II, 1054) wrote that Ezra did not say, "God save the king" (although that would have been perfectly proper); but he did say, "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers...." The extreme kindness which Ezra was experiencing did not originate in the heart of King Artaxerxes, but in the heart of God. And it was God Who put it into Artaxerxes' heart. Therefore, it was God Who deserved the praise.

And then Matthew Henry added this:

If any good appear to be in our own hearts, or in the hearts of others, we must own it was God that put it there, and bless him for it; for it is he that worketh in us both to will and to do that which is good. When princes and magistrates act for the suppression of vice, and the encouragement of religion, we must thank God that put it into their hearts to do so, as much as if they had granted us some particular favour (II, 1054).

How was the temple beautified? Was it by some outer adornment, by renewing it within? After all, it was about 60 years old, time for some kind of renovating.

No, it was adorned when the sacrifices were being offered as the Lord had ordained that they should be. The temple had no greater adornment than to be the place where the Lord was worshiped and honored and glorified in the hearts and by the voices of His people.

Concl: Perhaps this is what Moses had in mind when he wrote in Psalm 90:17,
And let the beauty of the Lord our God
be upon us: and establish thou the work
of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands
establish thou it.

May these truths strengthen us as they strengthened Ezra.

FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM

Ezra 8:1-36

Intro: At the risk of being tedious and boring you, let me briefly review with you what we have learned from the book of Ezra. It is important for us to keep this in mind as we come today to consider chapter 8.

The first six chapters tell us about the miraculous rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. It was miraculous because it was done on the orders of a heathen king by the name of Cyrus, of Persia.

After the temple was built, nothing of great significance in the divine history occurred until almost sixty years when, in chapter 7, we are introduced to Ezra for the first time in this book.

The first ten verses of chapter 7 tell us that Ezra was a priest, and that he was "a ready scribe in the law of Moses" (v. 6). This means that he knew the law of Moses, and that he was a skilled teacher. We would say today that he was a gifted expositor of Scripture. His main purpose in going to Jerusalem was to teach the people there the law of Moses!

The latter part of chapter 7, from verse 11 on to the end, tells us about the authority under which Ezra went to Jerusalem, and the provision that was made in order that the sacrifices of the people might continue. This also came as a royal edict from a heathen king. This time it came from Artaxerxes, a later king of Persia.

As we come to chapter 8, Ezra, or whoever wrote this book, went back to pick up the details of the trip FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM even though he had said in Ezra 7:8 that Ezra had successfully made the journey to Jerusalem.

There are three main points in chapter 8:

- I. THE MEN WHO MADE THE JOURNEY (Ezra 8:1-14).
- II. THE JOURNEY (Ezra 8:15-32).
- III. THEIR FIRST ACTIVITIES IN JERUSALEM (Ezra 8:33-36).

Let us briefly consider this chapter in the time that we have, and hopefully learn the lessons that the Spirit of God had in mind in having these details recorded for us.

- I. THE MEN WHO MADE THE JOURNEY (Ezra 8:1-14).

Passages where names like this occur are quite common in the OT. These are the passages which we are inclined to skip in our reading. However, when we are inclined to do that, we

need to remind ourselves that these verses are just as much a part of the Word of God as any other in the Bible. Why are these names here?

Let me mention three reasons. There may be more, but I would like to suggest three.

First, it confirms the account. There are over 1,500 men accounted for in these verses. When you add the women and children, it would indicate that there was a sizeable number of people who left Babylon with Ezra--possibly four or five thousand people.

These were people who could verify that Ezra made such a trip, that it was authorized by King Artaxerxes, and that they were all a part of this phase of the Lord's work.

Many of these would not have been born when the first group of exiles returned. In the mouth of two or three witnesses anything can be established. These names show that this was not something that Ezra, or some other writer, made up. We have the evidence that it really happened.

Second, it shows evidence that the Lord was working in the hearts of the people in those days. Artaxerxes' decree had said,

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

The verse actually means that anyone who wanted to go to Jerusalem, could go with the king's blessing. But we know that no one wills to do God's will unless God puts that desire in his heart. We learn that from Phil. 2:13 and Heb. 13:20, 21. Going to Jerusalem meant that the people had to uproot themselves from the only home that they had known, make a long dangerous journey, and face hardship when they finally did arrive in Jerusalem as they sought to get settled with enemies all around them.

It is really amazing that so many were eager to go. It can only be explained as a work of the Lord.

Thirdly, this shows that the Lord is interested in names and numbers.

We are very inclined to misuse both names and numbers, and so there may be a tendency to overlook their importance to the Lord. The Lord had a nose-count on the men who went to Jerusalem with Ezra. We know from Scripture how many men

there were who left Egypt with Moses. We know from Scripture how many were saved on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. We know how many apostles the Lord had. Paul tells us how many people saw the Lord at one time after our Lord's resurrection. Numbers are important to the Lord.

Names are also important. If that were not the case, we would have no genealogies in Scripture. There are names written in the Lamb's book of life. The Lord told Israel, "I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine" (Isa. 43:1b). Our Lord said of the shepherd and his sheep, "He calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out" (John 10:3b). When the Lord called Samuel, He used his name. When He spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, He used Moses' name--twice! Names are very important.

The Lord knows you by name. He knows me by name. He never gets us mixed up with each other. He never forgets our names. And this chapter would teach us that our names are especially dear to the Lord when we are obedient to His will even though He has worked in us for that purpose.

Don't skip over any list of names in Scripture. They might be the names of those who have displeased the Lord, as well as those who have pleased Him. But names are important to Him, and this is one thing that this passage teaches us.

But let us go on.

II. THE JOURNEY (Ezra 8:15-32).

If we are to profit from these verses, we need to look upon this journey, and that which happened when these exiles got to Jerusalem as all a part of the work of the Lord. The best place to learn what it means to serve the Lord is from your Bible. We get ourselves into practices that are not right in God's sight when we get away from the Word of God.

There are four parts to this section of chapter 8 in Ezra: verses 15 through 32.

A. The need for Levites (vv. 15-20).

We do not know exactly where Ahava was, nor do we know if there was a river by that name. It is generally agreed that it was near Babylon, and that Ezra had not taken the people very far before he stopped there for three days to take care of some necessary business.

In reading this section over we need to ask ourselves, Why would Ezra have been so concerned about the lack of any

Levites among the exiles?

The last part of verse 17 gives us our answer. Ezra needed them because they were "minister for the house of...God."

Undoubtedly Ezra knew about David's experience in bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem when Uzza put out his hand to steady the ark. Uzza was not a Levite. We have David's explanation in 1 Chron. 15:13. In speaking to the priests and the Levites about his failure to bring the ark the first time, he said,

For because ye did it not at the first,
the Lord our God made a breach upon us,
for that we sought him not after the due order.

God's will not only includes what we are to do, but how! Never say that the means to the end are not important to God. They are---very important! We must do things in God's way, not in any way that we might choose. Ezra knew this being a ready scribe in the law of His God.

B. Fasting and prayer (Ezra 8:21-23).

The journey ahead of them was long. It took them four months. Cf. Ezra 7:9. It was dangerous. Cf. Ezra 8:31. There were many people to care for, some were children. And, as we shall see in the next verses (24-30) they had some valuable things with them.

The dilemma facing Ezra (and probably enforced by some who were with him): Should he ask the king to protect them, or should they trust the Lord?

Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for help because of the testimony he had given to the king. See v. 22.

So, if they were going to trust the Lord, what should they do? They needed to fast and to pray. And this is what they did, earnestly seeking the Lord's blessing (which time would show would be enough).

What a lesson for us in this sophisticated age in which we live, and in a day when even in the church we have maneuvered our way to make it unnecessary to trust the Lord. When we do the Lord's work in the Lord's way, prayer with fasting will have a major role in all that we do. The people who are weak in prayer are weak in power and ineffective in seeking the blessing of the Lord.

No three verses in this entire chapter are of greater importance than verses 21 through 23.

C. Integrity (Ezra 8:24-30).

Ezra charged twelve of the most important priests with the responsibility of caring for the gold, the silver, the vessels, the brass--all that was to be used in the worship of the Lord. His charge is given in verse 29.

The priests and the Levites accepted the charge to bring all of these things to the house of God in Jerusalem.

The work of the Lord must always be above reproach where money is concerned. That which is devoted to the service of the Lord must not be used for any other purpose. The care which Ezra exercised in this matter must have been an example to the Apostle Paul which made him so scrupulously careful in handling the Lord's money in his day. cf. 2 Cor. 8.

With this the business by the river of Ahava was completed. But there was one other thing that yet had to be done.

There was no question but that what the people were doing was the will of God. And so it is not surprising that the last point in this section should be:

D. Obedience (Ezra 8:31, 32).

The people left Babylon, traveled to Jerusalem, and arrived safely, not because there were no enemies, but because of the good hand of the Lord upon them. The enemies were there. The people were subject to weariness and discouragement. But the Lord prospered them, protected them, not a person nor a piece of gold was lost.

Obedience, like prayer, is often the missing ingredient in that which professes to be the Lord's work today. We need to pay attention to the methods we use, but we also need to make sure that we persevere in doing what the Lord wants us to do, not in just what we think that He wants us to do.

III. THEIR FIRST ACTIVITIES IN JERUSALEM (Ezra 8:33-36).

Not only did the people go where the Lord wanted them to go, but they did what He wanted them to do when they got there.

There are three things to be noted here.

A. They delivered the temple vessels and the money (vv. 33, 34).

Nothing was missing. The priests and Levites had been 100% faithful. This is what the Lord wants, and this is what the

Lord blesses.

B. They offered burnt offerings (v. 35).

Remember that this was expressive of their complete dedication to the Lord, to live for Him, and to serve Him with all of their hearts. Outwardly, at least, they wanted to be known as the people of the Lord God of heaven and earth.

C. They delivered the king's decree to the leaders of the government (v. 36).

This especially had to do with verses 21-26 of the king's letter recorded in chapter 7. The king was putting all of the people in that part of his domain under obligation to live according to the Law of God. Judges were to be appointed to interpret and enforce the Law, and punishment was to be meted out to any who were disobedient.

Concl: What important lessons there are for us today in doing the work of the Lord even though our circumstances are altogether different. As we approach our Day of Prayer on Wednesday, let us give special attention to what this passage says about fasting and prayer. We see what the results were in the case of Ezra and the people who were traveling with him. We never know how the Lord may see fit to bless, but it seems clear that when we humble ourselves before Him, and seek His blessing through fasting and prayer, His blessing is poured out to the glory of His Name. You might not think that it would be wise to fast for a whole day before they left on a journey like they had before them, but they did. And it does not seem that anyone suffered for it. Instead, all were blessed for months afterward.

A BROKENHEARTED PRIEST

Ezra 9:1-15

Intro: We do not know how much time elapsed between the end of chapter 8 and the events described in chapter 9-- but it probably was not very long! Chapter 8 tells us that the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem had been safely completed, and the will of God expressed, in this instance, by the decree of King Artaxerxes, had been carried out completely. The foundation had been laid for great blessing. Publicly, in their worship, it appeared that the will of God was being done.

But what had actually taken place?

I. THE SIN OF THE PEOPLE (Ezra 9:1, 2).

But privately Ezra got a completely different picture of what was going on in Jerusalem. The people of God had failed to keep themselves separated from the Gentiles, called here, "the people of the lands" (Ezra 9:1). It had become a generally accepted practice for the Jews to take wives from "the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites." The men did this not only for themselves, but also for their sons.

We need to observe two things about this:

- 1) This was specifically forbidden by the Mosaic Law. Exodus 34:16 and its context indicate that this prohibition was made in order that the people would not be led into idolatry. The same is indicated in Deut. 7:1-6. God had called His people to be separate from the other nations.
- 2) Idolatry was one of the main reasons for their captivity in Babylon.

In cases where the Lord's people are mixed in with the people of the world, it is always the Lord's people who are pulled down to the ways of the world, not the world that is pulled up. Cf. Gal. 1:6.

There is a real lesson for all of us here. Our attendance at church, our involvement in the Lord's work, does not necessarily mean that things are right in our personal lives. We can be like the Jews in that day: Look at our involvement in the worship in the church, and you would think that everything is in accordance with the will of God. But go home with us, and you may find that things are not as well ordered in our personal lives as we would like for others to think that they are. And yet the Lord knows whether or not we are guilty of some sin, or sins, which ultimately must

bring His judgment upon us. We may be able to hide things from each other, but we can't hide anything from the Lord. If there are things in our lives that are in conflict with the Word of God, in the quietness of your heart, confess them and forsake them NOW!

What did Ezra do when he learned about the disobedience of the people?

II. EZRA'S HUMILIATION BEFORE THE LORD (Ezra 9:3, 4).

In expression of his great grief, he tore his clothes, pulled the hair out of his head and beard, and "sat astonished"—which means that he was stunned, grief stricken, desolate, and motionless (cf. Keil, p. 177).

Charles Simeon said in his sermon on this text that "this was more violent than any of which we read in the Holy Scriptures" (Vol. 4, p. 258). And then Simeon went on to say that Ezra was so distracted and overwhelmed that he was incapable to speaking.

Ezra was aware of the awfulness of sin, and of the threat that this posed to the nation. It could well mean the repetition of the captivity from which he had just come—only the next one would be far worse than the last. The sin was made even worse because at the end of verse 2 we read that "the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass." Whatever may have been the reason for their sin, an attempt to get along with the people through compromise, or the satisfaction of their lusts, Ezra was heartbroken.

However, we see how gracious God was to him.

He sat there most of the day, apparently, until the time of the evening sacrifice. And gradually, throughout the day, the Jews who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" joined him in his grief and in his humiliation before the Lord. See v. 4. The fact that they "trembled" means that their minds were filled with terror, as Ezra's mind was, in thinking "of the punishments which such faithless conduct toward a covenant God involved" (Keil, p. 118).

And then, at the time of the evening sacrifice, Ezra got up, having eaten no food during the day, and still in a state of great humiliation before God, he began to pray.

III. EZRA'S PRAYER OF CONFESSION (Ezra 9:5-15).

Verse 1 of chapter 10 tells us that Ezra was weeping as he prayed. How wonderful it would be for all of us if we could

be even half as distressed over sin in the lives of the Lord's people as Ezra was! One of the characteristics of a truly godly person is that he will have a hatred of sin in any form.

It is important to note that Ezra did not pray as an accuser of his people, but as one who was involved in their sin. It was as though he had violated the commandments of the Lord, although in reality he had not.

Ezra had humiliated himself before God by what he had done; now in his prayer we hear

A. His words of humiliation (Ezra 9:5, 6).

The sin of Israel was so great that Ezra had trouble spreading out his hands and lifting his face to the Lord. In his heart it seemed that Israel's sin was in a pile that reached up to heaven. The people may have tried to hide it, or ignore it, but it could be clearly seen from heaven, and by godly people like Ezra. It was no light, excusable thing. Ezra was thoroughly ashamed!

B. Israel's sinful record (Ezra 9:7).

Ezra was keenly aware of Israel's past sins, and the terrible consequences that they had experienced. Sometimes we learn very little when we sin, and when God deals with us because of our sin, but Ezra had learned much, and he could not forget the judgments of God in the past. It seems that he may have been comparing the sin of Israel with the sin of Sodom (cf. Gen. 18:21). But perhaps Ezra was also aware of David's words found in Psa. 36:5,

Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens;
and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.

Paul's words are needed here also:

But where sin abounded,
grace did much more abound (Rom. 5:20b).

If our eyes were opened to see our sins, we would probably feel also that we have never done anything but sin.

And so it is not surprising that next we read of

C. The grace of God in their present situation (Ezra 9:8, 9).

Ezra called what had happened to the Jews, a revival. It was like a resurrection from the dead. Humanly speaking Israel had no prospect of being restored to their land and to the blessing of God. But they did have the promises of God, and God had proven Himself faithful to them. The "nail" spoke of

their stability under the blessing of God. But Ezra attributed every blessing that they had experienced to the grace of God. The people deserved none of it. The darkness had been turned to light. The prospects were great under the blessing of God. But now it seemed as though once again it had all been ruined. How slowly we learn, and how quickly we forget!

D. Israel's guilt (Ezra 9:10-15).

Ezra spoke of "now" in verse 8; he came back to the "now" again in verse 10.

Verses 10 through 12 show that they had violated the message which had been given in the Law, and emphasized by the preaching of the prophets. So their sin was not a sin of ignorance, but willful sin (which made it all the worse). One of the last things that Moses had done before he died was to warn them of this very thing. Cf. again Deut. 7:1-3.

In verse 13 we see that their guilt was still greater because the nation had suffered captivity for seventy years for this very thing. So their guilt was magnified by:

- 1) Moses' warning in the Law.
- 2) The prophets who preached what Moses taught, and this, according to verse 11, at the Lord's direction.
- 3) The judgment of the Babylonian captivity.

And Ezra had to acknowledge that, as hard as the Babylonian captivity had been, the Lord had been merciful in not judging them as they deserved to be judged. And then He had added the merciful deliverance which they had just experienced. Cf. Psa. 103:10.

In verse 14 Ezra recognized how unthinkable it was that they could do the same thing that had brought judgment upon them before. Surely they had no right to expect anything but to be consumed by the Lord until there was no remnant left.

Ezra's prayer closed without a petition being presented to the Lord. He recognized that the Lord was right; they were wrong. He obviously felt that he had no right to seek the mercy of God, and so his prayer indicates that he chose to leave the matter in the Lord's hand, trusting Him to do with His people whatever He chose to do.

Concl: Thus we see what great faith Ezra had in God, that however He might dispose of the problem, it would be as it should be. He was willing to trust the Lord even though it might mean going right back into captivity--OR EVEN

WORSE: DEATH!

Kidner ended his comments on this chapter with these words:
Ezra had not even the heart to plead, as Moses did, that God's name would suffer in such a case. His prayer was a naked confession, without excuses, without the pressure of so much as a request (Ezra and Nehemiah, p. 69).

And Charles Simeon said,
O that we felt even for our own sins, as he (Ezra felt for the sins of others! However "fools may make a mock at it," sin is no light evil: there is no contrition too deep for us to feel on account of sin, nor any earnestness too great to use in order to obtain the remission of it. Let the view then of this holy man put us all to shame: let us blush and be confounded at the thought that our repentance from day to day is so cold and superficial; and let us tremble for ourselves lest we be found at last to have been hypocrites and dissemblers (people who put up a false front) with God.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthian church, he mentioned "godly sorrow" as compared with "the sorrow of the world." Often we are sorry for sin because we do not like the consequences. But Ezra was sorry for the sin of Israel because it had been an offense to God. And in Ezra's case, as with the Corinthians much later, it caused him to be more careful about his life, and more indignant against sin. It also gave him a greater fear of God in his heart, and a stronger determination that, by the grace of God, he would avoid sin in the future, and serve God with a greater zeal than he had ever realized before.

We should not be able to consider a prayer like this and not reflect upon our own needs. Are we here at Trinity putting up a good front when we are together, but would have to confess, if we were forced to do so, that things are not right in our personal lives? We want the blessing of the Lord, and we need His blessing. The confession and forsaking of sin is one big step that all of us must take if we are to experience a revival in our hearts and in the work of the Lord here.

May the Lord work in our hearts to make us love what He loves, and to hate what He hates. He loves righteousness; He hates sin of all kinds. The closer we live in fellowship with Him, the more conscious we will be of things in our lives that need to be made right.

A GREAT ANSWER TO PRAYER

Ezra 10:1-44

Intro: Ezra's prayer in chapter 9 of this book must stand with David's prayer in Psalm 51 as the great examples in Scripture of what it means to confess sin. The difference is that David was confessing personal sins; Ezra was confessing the national sin of Israel. The people were guilty of doing the very thing which was one of the major causes of their exile into Assyria, and then into Babylon. They had married heathen women who worshipped heathen gods, and it would only be a matter of time until their Jewish husbands and their children would be doing the same thing. That grim fact could be abundantly illustrated by the experience of King Solomon. It did not usually mean that the people ceased worshipping the true God, but their heathen practices were added to what they were obligated to do under the Law.

The whole situation came to a head when Ezra, providentially sent to Jerusalem by and with an edict from King Artaxerxes, discovered what was taking place in Jerusalem, and throughout the land of Israel. This is what broke his heart, and caused him to seek the mercy of God upon his people in the prayer which is recorded for us in chapter 9.

He did not have to wait long for an answer! And this brings us to chapter 10.

I. THE GATHERING OF MANY PEOPLE (Ezra 10:1).

This is the first thing that made the events of chapter 10 such a great answer to prayer.

Anyone who has prayed regarding a problem, whether it involves one person or many people, knows how discouraging it is when perhaps no one else is concerned about the problem. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, used to say that we need to learn to move man through God by prayer alone! But it is not very often that we see people moved immediately. However, in Ezra's case, we read in verse 1 that he had just finished his prayer of confession when the people started to come. They came--men, women, and children. And they came weeping just like Ezra had been weeping. The NASB translates the words, "the people wept very sore," as "the people wept bitterly."

This cannot be explained in any other way than as a work of God. Only God could move the hearts of people like this. It is especially moving to think of the children as weeping, not

because the adults were weeping, but weeping because their own hearts were broken with repentance.

In our first Tuesday class this past week I had occasion to remind those who were there of Paul's statement regarding the work of the servant of the Lord, that he must teach, and how he must teach, not argumentatively, but gently, patiently, meekly, in the hope that God would give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. Here Ezra was not even teaching; he was praying. But quite certainly the people, even the children, were made to remember what they had been taught previously, and through the Word God was bringing them to repentance.

But Ezra was in store for even more encouragement.

II. SHECHANIAH, THE SPOKESMAN (Ezra 10:2-5).

We do not know much about this man. He was of the family of Elam. There had been members of his family in the first group of exiles, as mentioned in 2:7. And there was another group from the family of Elam in the second group of exiles, as we read in 8:7. We can assume that Shechaniah came with Ezra in the second group, but that is only an assumption. He probably would have been born after the first exiles returned to Jerusalem. That would have meant, if his parents were in the first group, that he had been born in the land of Israel.

However it was, Shechaniah was the spokesman.

He readily agreed that the people had sinned. They had taken foreign wives. In doing so, they had "trespassed against... God." They had been faithless. And Paul would write to the Romans many years later that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). They had tried to deal with it as though it were not a sin. Although Shechaniah probably was not guilty, yet he spoke of the sin of the nation as though it were his sin.

It is important to see from what he said at the end of verse 2 that he believed that even yet there was hope for the nation, but only if they would confess and forsake their sin. He probably knew what Solomon had written years before:

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper:
but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them
shall have mercy (Prov. 28:13).

How important it is for us to remember when dealing with our sins, or the sins of others, that with the Lord there is always hope—hope for forgiveness, and hope that things can be different. All sin is against God, and forgiveness can only be obtained from Him.

Shechaniah felt, and rightly so, that something should be done immediately! And he was right. But he wanted to do it all in the way that would be pleasing to God. Sin is against God, and whatever can be done to correct our sins must also be pleasing to God. In Ezra's day this meant doing it according to the Law of God. Since Ezra was skilled in his understanding of the Law, Shechaniah was willing to follow the counsel that Ezra would give them. But he wanted the people to enter into a covenant with God which would be binding upon all of them.

And having said this, we see in verse 4 that Shechaniah called upon Ezra to get up from his knees because what needed to be done was his responsibility, assuring Ezra that they were all behind him in what needed to be done.

Verse 5 gives us the covenant.

At this point we must remember that this would have been a very, very difficult thing for the men of Israel to do. Without doubt most of them loved their wives, and the children that they had had with their wives. It would have been like cutting their hearts out to have to give them up. But they were more concerned about pleasing the Lord than they were about pleasing themselves, or their families, and so they entered into the covenant to do as Ezra told them to do.

Perhaps at this point in the chapter it would be good for us to remind ourselves of two things in making the application of this chapter to our own lives today.

First, we see from this that the Lord wants His people to be a holy people, separated from the world. This means that Christians should not marry those who are not Christians, not even hoping that the non-Christian will be saved afterwards. It means that a Christian should not enter into a business partnership with a non-Christian. But it means more than this. It means that those who belong to the Lord should separate themselves from sin in any and every form. Our main purpose should be to please the Lord! We are to love Him more than we love any one else or any other thing. Pleasing Him must have the greatest priority in our lives.

We have been learning in the study of Deuteronomy in our Sunday School lessons that Moses told the Israelites that they were "an holy people unto the Lord thy God," and that the Lord their God had chosen them "to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6).

Earlier in the book of Leviticus (11:44a) Moses had given them this word from the Lord:

For I am the Lord your God:
ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves,
and ye shall be holy; for I am holy....

The second lesson is this: We need to recognize that it is not easy for us to be separated from the world. Our Lord, in His high-priestly prayer in John 17 said that we are in the world, but we are not of the world. The world is not concerned about pleasing God, and it does not like anyone who is! It is always easier to "go with the crowd." We all want to be accepted and to have friends. It is not easy to be faithful to the Lord. But that is where the blessing is! And Paul sounded the same note with the Corinthian church that Moses sounded in his day, and that Ezra and Shechaniah sounded in their day.

(Read 2 Cor. 6:11-7:1.)

Add to this Paul's words in Rom. 12:1, 2 and John's words in 1 John 2:15-17. And James wrote these words:

Ye adulterers and adulteresses,
know ye not that the friendship of the world
is enmity with God?
whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world
is the enemy of God (Jas. 4:4).

This does not mean that we isolate ourselves from the world, but it means that we live in this world as the children of God, seeking to please the Lord through obedience to His Word.

But let us go on.

III. THE PROCLAMATION (Ezra 10:6-8).

Notice that Ezra did not go about this with a light heart. He fasted and mourned because of the sin of the people. But the proclamation was made that the people should come in three days, and that whoever would not come would forfeit their possessions and no longer be a part of the nation.

Again, we have to remember that we are dealing with people under the Law. And this is what we could and should do today IF we were under the Law. But we are not under the Law! And so we appeal to each other to live lives of separation from the world, trusting the Lord to work in our hearts to be obedient to the Word. The Lord had to work in their hearts in those days, but the leaders had the Law to enforce their obedience. We pray and teach, and then trust the Lord to

make His people submissive to the Word of God.

IV. THE GATHERING OF THE PEOPLE (Ezra 10:9-14).

The fear of the Lord had come upon the people. The weather was inclement (rainy and stormy). This seemed like an indication of the displeasure of the Lord, and so the people trembled!

In verses 10 and 11 we have Ezra's words to them, charging them with sin, exhorting them to make their own confession to the Lord, and then to separate themselves from the people of the land and from their foreign wives.

Because of the enormity of the problem, the people asked for time, and that appointments be made with elders and judges in each city to clear up the problem. Ezra and the other leaders agreed to this plan.

V. THE OBEDIENCE OF THE PEOPLE (Ezra 10:15-17).

So the confessions began on the first day of the tenth month, and they were not completed until the first day of the first month of the following year. So it took three full months to take care of the problem.

But the important thing to note is that they fulfilled their covenant, and did not stop until the sin was removed.

Do we feel convicted by their action? How often have we said that we wanted to make things right with the Lord, but have failed to do it? The NT calls for complete obedience just as the OT does. It is important for us to be obedient to all of the Word of God, and to lose no time in getting things straightened out with the Lord.

The chapter and book close with:

VI. A PARTIAL LIST OF THE GUILTY ONES (Ezra 10:18-44).

This was not to expose some, but not others, but it was to show how widespread the sin had become. Priests were guilty. Levites were guilty. Some of the temple singers were guilty. So were some of the porters, who were gatekeepers responsible not only to open the gates, but to guard them. And, finally, there were many of the families in Israel who were guilty.

Concl: How this should encourage us to pray for the work of the Lord in our day! The Lord does not always answer as quickly and as thoroughly as He did with Ezra, but the very fact that He did answer speedily on that occasion is

evidence for all of us that sometimes He does answer that quickly. This was A GREAT ANSWER TO PRAYER, a tremendous answer! Ezra touched the heart of God as he pled for the people of God in their sin.

This should cause us also to take stock of our own lives. The people of Israel thought they were getting away with what they were doing, probably because so many were doing it. But they were not going to get away with it. And the Lord brought Ezra to Jerusalem to see what was going on, burdened him to pray about the problem, confessing the sins of the people before they were ready to confess them, and then to see the Lord work in a most amazing way in bringing the people low before Him.

Sanctification was the issue in Ezra 9 and 10, holiness of character and holiness of life. Paul told the Thessalonian church that the will of God was their sanctification (see 1 Thess. 4:3), and that we as the Lord's people have not been called to uncleanness, but to holiness (1 Thess. 4:7). They could not walk in sin and walk with the Lord, and neither can we. As Paul told the Corinthians,

...let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness
of the flesh and spirit,
perfecting holiness in the fear of God
(2 Cor. 7:1b).