

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, and they still are in the Hebrew Bible. Ezra has to do with the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Nehemiah follows with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Ezra is divided into two main sections (as the outline will show). The first six chapters tell us about the rebuilding of the Temple. The second part gives us an account of the ministry of Ezra. He probably compiled the first six chapters from records that had been kept of the rebuilding of the temple, and then the last four chapters are the record of Ezra's ministry which he undoubtedly wrote himself.

We have seen that Cyrus was mentioned in the prophecy of Isaiah, mentioned by name, even though he had not yet been born in Isaiah's day. See Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4. This is a clear evidence of the divine inspiration of the prophecy of Isaiah. It would have been impossible for Isaiah to know this if it has not been a special revelation from God to him.

Jeremiah is referred to in the very first verse of Ezra indicating that what is described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah was in fulfillment of a prophecy given in Jeremiah. This, too, is evidence of the divine inspiration of Scripture because Jeremiah could not have known this apart from a special revelation of God. See Jeremiah 25:8-14. (Read.)

So the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are woven together in the whole fabric of the Word of God.

Now it is important for us to know all that we can about every book of the Bible. We all believe that. But we are not just to know the details which God has been please reveal and to preserve for us, but we need to look for the lessons, the application of the truths of the Word of God to us today. I gave you a statement from Derek Kidner who has written a brief, but very helpful commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah. Here is the statement again just to impress it more and more on our minds. He said it about Nehemiah as well as Ezra. This is the statement:

Quite clearly these two books are more than a bare chronicle. *Here are events to learn from, not only to learn about* (p. 19 - italics mine).

We ought always to keep this in mind whenever we read the Word, or are hearing it taught. Paul made this very clear when he wrote 2 Timothy 3:16, 17,

(Comment on the outline.)

Now I have told you that I am not going to spend a lot of time of the lists of names that we find in Ezra. They are important or they would be in our Bibles. You can scan them for our purposes in the class, but I am not going through them verse by verse. I want to concentrate on the narrative.

In chapter 1 I have just given you one point in the outline stating that it has to do with Cyrus' proclamation for the children of Israel to leave their captivity, and to go back to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. But actually the chapter can be divided into three parts. The first four verses have to do with Cyrus' proclamation for the Jews to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Verse 5 tell us about the response of the Jewish people. And then the last verses tell us the people were showered with gifts by the people among whom they had been living. And what is most amazing of all is that Cyrus returned to the Jews all that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple many years before when he conquered Israel and took the Jews into captivity.

Now I have spent some time talking with you about this chapter, but I want to review some of the things that I have pointed out in this chapter during our first two sessions, and then make some other points which I hope

will be a blessing to all of us.

I have said many times to most of you that the Bible is not only a revelation *from* God, but it is also a revelation *of* God. We are introduced to God immediately in Genesis 1:1. We are told that before there was any creation at all, God was! And as we go through the Bible we learn that God is a Trinity. We learn about God the Father. And then we learn about God the Spirit. And third we learn about God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Member of the Godhead Who became a Man in order to redeem us from the penalty of our sins. The Bible is a book that God has given us through some forty writers, but the Holy Spirit guided them in the writing of all sixty-six books, with Christ as their dominant theme, but God in all the Bible has told us about Himself. Don't be deceived by anyone who tries to tell you that they have some information about God that is not given in the Bible. The Bible is the complete revelation of God. The Bible contains much more information also, but God is the main subject!

So, with all of the teaching we receive from the book of Ezra, let us learn as much about all that it teaches us as we can, but let's never forget that this is one out of sixty-six books which teach us about God.

Ezra 1

1:1 Well, what do we learn as we start reading the book of Ezra?

One point we might miss because it is so obvious, is that God is a living God. And if we have started reading the Bible from the beginning, as we ought to, we learn that God was living before creation. He had to be, or He could not have created the universe and all that is in it. God is eternal! He never had a beginning, and there will never be an end to God. He is just as much alive today as ever, and one thing that is very unique about God is that He never changes. The God Who at work in Ezra's day, is the very same God that He was when He created the heaven and the earth.

Let me point out another truth about God that stands out in Ezra 1:1. He is faithful to His Word. He had not forgotten what He had had Isaiah and Jeremiah write about the history of His people. I don't know how many Jews were remembering the promise of God to send them a deliverer, but God had not forgotten. And God remembers His Word and keeps His promises even though we forget. Not only was God faithful, but here is another point.

God is a powerful, sovereign God. Cyrus was no ordinary individual. He was the most powerful man on earth in his day. He was used to telling others what to do, not to be told what he should do. But God most upon his heart, or as we learn from verse 1, the Lord "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" to make the proclamation that he made. The Jews obviously were not all in one place. They had been scattered. What he did was really unheard of. His reaction was far different from Pharaoh's when the children of Israel were in Egypt. Maybe he knew what had happened to Pharaoh and Egypt, and didn't want to happen to him. There is no suggestion that he felt that way, but maybe he did. But whatever was the situation, he immediately did what God told him to do.

This all was evidence of the lovingkindness of the Lord. He is a good God, a kind God, a God of compassion. The Jews were in captivity because He is a holy God who judges sin. That is the reason the Jews were in captivity. But if you look down to verse 5 that the Lord did the same stirring up in the hearts of His people so that when Cyrus told them to go, they went! The people deserved all that they had gotten in captivity, but we see the grace of God in action here. We can all say as David said in Psalm 103,

10 He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

- 11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.
 12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.
 13 Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. (Verse 14 is on p. 3)
 14 For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust (Psa. 103:10-14).

If you and I want to know God, we only need to read the Bible. But when we read, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to show us God. What we learn will always humble us before the Lord, and draw out worship and praise from our hearts.

But let us move on to verse 2.

1:2 How many times do words like we find in this verse come out of the mouth of kings, especially kings who have a great list of conquests? Hardly ever! Most kings who had experienced the triumphs that Cyrus had experienced are so full of themselves that you would think that they were God.

We don't know if this statement is something that he had just learned, but it is clear that he was not taking the credit for the victories he had experienced, as great as they were. He looked upon his extensive kingdom as a gift from "the Lord God of heaven." I have reminded you before of Proverbs 21:1, but let me say it again: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will."

We don't know how Cyrus became aware of this *charge*, but there is no doubt but that Cyrus knew exactly what the Lord wants him to. Charges from kings in that day were not to be ignored, nor were they to be delayed. Some commentators are inclined to minimize the sincerity of Cyrus' proclamation and what it indicated about Cyrus' relationship with God. He may not have declared the God of Israel as the one true God, but he was deeply impressed, nevertheless, with "the Lord God of heaven," perhaps much in the same way that Darius was impressed with Daniel's faith.

1:3 Here Cyrus throws the door open to any and all of the Jewish people to leave Babylon where probably most of them still lived, to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple of the Lord.

Let me remind you again as to the likely reason that God wanted to start with the Temple first. It was like taking the first step for the people to see their fellowship with God restored. The people would have been safer to have the temple without the walls than to have the protection of the walls without fellowship with God having been restored. Notice Cyrus' statement about the Lord, put in parenthesis by the KJ translators, speaking of the God of Israel: "He is the God."

1:4 Next Cyrus called upon the people living in the holy land, to go all-out in giving the Jews the silver and gold, the material, the animals that they would need, besides a special offering for the Temple. It is not just a NT concept that God will meet the needs of His people. In this case, Babylon was like Egypt. When God wills for a work to be done, He always supplies the means. And the gifts would have been added confirmation that the Lord wanted the temple to be rebuilt.

1:5 However, the Spirit of God who was leading Ezra to relate this story, had Ezra give the glory to God that the Jews were responsive to the task that the Lord had stirred their hearts to go back to Jerusalem to build the temple.

1:6 Not only did the people give to the Jews, but they did it willingly. The wealth of all the nations belongs to the Lord. So this was not a case of the Jews soliciting funds from heathen people. That would have

been wrong. But it was God moving upon the hearts of a heathen people to give to the Jews that which in reality belonged to the Lord.

Then Cyrus did a most amazing thing.

1:7 He brought out the vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the original temple and put in the house of his gods. Cyrus gave the vessels to the Jews to put into the new temple. The Lord had preserved all of them. The Jews probably had no hope that they were ever be given back to be placed in the rebuilt temple of the Lord. Even then God was doing that which was “exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask of think” (Eph. 3:20).

1:8 Here the tremendous gift is present to Shash-bazar, which some expositors take to another name for Zerubbabel. We all are naturally inclined to lay up for ourselves treasures upon the earth. When such generosity is to be, especially among heathen people for the people of God, we can be sure that God is at work.

Verses 9 through 11 point out the abundance that was given to the Jews for their travel back to Jerusalem, and provision for the rebuilding of the temple. Could we have a better illustration that what God wants His people to do, He always provides the means?

Ezra 2

This was both a return and a restoration. One thing that a chapter like this teaches us that people are important to the point that He knows us by name. In Isaiah 43:1 we have these words:

But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.

In Isaiah 49:15-16 we find these words:

15 Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forger thee.

16 Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

And let me remind you of these words of our Lord Jesus Christ found in found in John 10:1-4:

1 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

2 But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.

4 And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice.

So, when you read a list like this, remember these verses. He knows the number of our families.

Let me just read the last verses of this chapter. (Read Ezra 2:64-70).

The numbers here are far less than the numbers who came out of Egypt. But the Lord knew how many there were: 42,360. There is no explanation as to why there were no more, but it teaches us to rejoice in the people we have, and not to wait until we have more. The Lord will not let His people in Israel die. Do these numbers give us the elect of Israel at that time? I do not know. But it does tell us that there was still a nation of Israel, even after their years of captivity, and there always will be. God is going to see to that. This record is especially important because it was from these people that the Lord Jesus Christ would come.

11/2/09

Ezra 3

In our outline this is the second division under

- I. The rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1-6). The first point under I. is:
 - A. The return of the exiles (Ezra 1-2). Now we come to the second point:
 - B. The work begun under Zerubbabel (Ezra 3). And the first point under B. is:
 - 1. The altar rebuilt and the sacrifices made (3:1-7).

Now we come one of the happiest chapters in the book of Ezra. And a situation developed which was similar to the plan to build the temple before building the walls of Jerusalem. Human wisdom would have directed the people to build the walls of the city first so that, when the temple was built, the walls would have been there to protect the temple from Israel's enemies. And we learn very clearly in Ezra 4 that Israel had enemies all around them who soon went to work to hinder the building of the temple. But it was clear that the mind of the Lord was such that He wanted the Temple built first to teach the people that their greatest security was in reestablishing fellowship with the Lord first, which was the basic significance of building the Temple first

We as Christians need to learn this as far as our situation in our country, and in the world, is concerned.. Fellowship with God always has the greatest priority. The restoration of the blessing of God upon us begins by repenting of our sins before God, forsaking them, and then doing all that is an expression of the sincerity of our desire to yield ourselves to God, to worship Him, and to obey His will as it is revealed in His Word.

When the people came back to Jerusalem, they brought with them all of the furniture that Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon when he took Judah into captivity. So the furniture was there (see 1:7ff.) and the people put the furniture to use before they had the Temple rebuilt in which to place the furniture.

Some expositors speak of the altar as though it was the golden altar where the presence of the Lord was manifested, but it had to be the brazen altar because that is where the sacrifices were burned. It is hard to understand that, according to verse 2 of chapter 3, we are told that the men "builded the altar," unless it means *repaired the altar* because it had not been used during all of the years of their captivity, and could have even been damaged.

But the significance of what the Jews did in the first seven verses of chapter 3 is that the people were in a hurry to reestablish fellowship with the Lord. This is not only the happiest place to be, but the safest. Perhaps you remember that Solomon said in Proverbs 16:7, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him."

There was a similar situation in the life of Abraham. In Genesis 12 where Abraham, or Abram as his name was then, got into the land that God had promised him, we are told in verse 8 that "there he builded and altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord." We don't have actual altars today, but Abram's example, as well as that of the exiles returning to Jerusalem, should teach us the great importance of recognizing the presence of the Lord in our lives, and worshipping Him wherever we live and wherever we go.

3:1 The seventh month marked the length of time from their departure from Babylon, but it also had the distinction of being very important in the calendar of the Jews. In Leviticus 16 and also in Leviticus 23 we learn that the day of atonement and the feast of tabernacles were observed on the seventh month. Derek Kidner said that "it was a worthy start to the new era" (p. 46), and he called our attention to the fact stated here in verse

1 that it had the backing of all the people: “The people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.” This was like the early days in the history of church, recorded for us in the early chapter of the book of Acts. And it reminds us of what the Psalmist recorded for us in Psalm 133:

1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

2 It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;

3 As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

3:2 Here we are told that the purpose that the Jews had in setting up the altar first (in fact, it was called the altar of burnt offering) was to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. It was the one offering that was offered completely to the Lord. Nothing was reserved for the priest, nor for the people. Many expositors of Scripture link it in its NT significance to Romans 12:1-2. (Quote.) See Leviticus 1 where you read the description of the burnt offering. But notice also that the priests and the people were very careful to make sure that it was all done in agreement with “as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.” It is interesting to note that the years in captivity had not caused them to forget what was “written in the the law of Moses the man of God.” There is important truth contained in this last statement of verse 2. And it has reference to the way the Lord works today. There is much that goes on in churches and so called “revival” meetings these days which has nothing to do with the Word of God. Emotions are often more important to people than Scripture. No return to the Lord really has validity unless it is in entire agreement with the Word of God.

3:3 Here we learn one of the main reasons that caused the people to give priority to the altar and the offering of burnt offerings. It was fear of the people of the land. There were many heathen, Gentile groups who

had moved into Israel’s land in those days, and the Jews knew that they were hostile toward anything that had to do with the worship of Israel’s God. But we can be thankful that they were not paralyzed with fear. Just the opposite was the case. Instead of offering their burnt offerings now and then, only occasionally, they offered them morning and evening. And they had Scriptural reasons for doing this also.

Please turn to Exodus 29, I want us to see what God had revealed to Moses, and which Moses passed on to the people, about the continual burnt offering. The verses are 38 to the end of the chapter, verse 46. (Read, explain and apply.)

These verses have had a greater effect on the people of God throughout even the church age than you might think. For example, years ago Dr. Harry Ironside wrote a daily devotional book which he called, *The Continual Burnt Offering*. And in it were readings for every morning during the calendar year, and every evening. And other men have done the same. In the Bible reading calendar which we use and distribute every year, there is an OT reading for every morning, and a NT reading for every evening. And I could cite other examples. Where did the idea for these come from? They came from Exodus 29. The people of Israel were legally obligated to begin each day by offering a burnt offering every morning, and another burnt offering every evening.

There were five main offerings that the people of God under the Law were responsible to offer to the Lord. You can read about them in the first seven chapters of Leviticus, the third book of the Bible. And you can read about them in the first seven chapters of Leviticus: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the trespass offering. But none were as important as the burnt offering. And that is one reason it was called the “continual burnt offering.”

But many offerings were required of the Jews throughout the year, on special days. But this continual burnt offering was never to be omitted regardless of how many offerings were offered on any special day. And you read about this in Numbers, chapters 28 and 29. Notice these references: 28:10, 15, 24, 31; 29:16, 19, 22, etc. So it is no wonder that the Jews who went back from captivity were anxious to restore the continual burnt offering.

If we consistently meet with the Lord in the morning and in the evening, it is going to have an effect on the way we spent the hours in between. Anyway, the Jews looked upon their relationship with the Lord as personal and daily. And while we don't offer the burnt offering like they did, yet the message ought to apply to us as to our relationship with the Lord. Never, never, never take a vacation from the Bible, nor from the Lord.

3:4 The seventh month was also the time set by the Lord in the law of Moses for the observance of the feast of tabernacles. Cf. Lev. 23:33-44. The offerings that they brought are described in Num. 29:12-38. It was in commemoration of their journey from Egypt to Canaan.

3:5 The continual burnt offering was offered on the occasion of new moons, sabbaths, and at certain feasts. Plus there were evidently times when the Jews could offer the continual burnt offering whenever they wanted to as free will offerings to the Lord. So it would very difficult to overemphasize the importance or the frequency when the continual burnt offering was offered by the people. It was always expressive of the devotion that the people felt in their hearts to the Lord. And it is a testimony of the gratitude that the people felt in their hearts toward the Lord for their deliverance from Babylon, and the reestablishment of the Jews in their own land. In those days the continual burnt offering was not a burden, but a delight. It is sad that it did not remain that way.

3:6 And all of this was taking place by the will of the people and for the glory of God when as yet the temple had not yet be rebuilt. How it must have delighted the heart of God for the people to be doing the will of God, not because it was required of them, but even before the temple had been rebuilt. Was this not a great example of worshiping God in spirit and in truth?

3:7 We have here both permission by Cyrus and the provision which was encouraged by him, as we saw in verses 3 and 4 of our chapter. The Jews, just coming out of captivity, would not have had the resources for such a project. But Cyrus had encouraged people to give. And he had even decreed, according to 6:4, that the project be financed from the king's house. And we know enough of the ways of God to know that behind all of Cyrus' kindness to the Jews, was the sovereign hand of an Almighty God Who had moved upon the heart of this heathen king to meet the needs of the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is an OT illustration of the truth expressed by Paul in Philippians 4:19.

Now in the latter part of chapter 3 we have:

- I. A. 1. The altar rebuilt and sacrifices made (3:1-7).
2. The foundation of the temple laid (3:8-13).

3:8 It is in this verse that the work of rebuilding actually began. And notice that a considerable amount of time had elapsed since the people had arrived in Jerusalem. We are now in the second month of the second year since the people had arrived in Jerusalem. So the Lord was exercising their need for both patience and faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews passed on this word to Hebrew believers in the NT, but the principle has always applied in God's dealings with His people. We read in Hebrews 10:35-36:

35 Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward.

36 For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

Also we read this earlier in Heb 6:11-15:

11 And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end:

12 That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself,

14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.

15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.

It might sound like things were working out quickly and smoothly for the Jews, but their faith and their patience were being put to the test, and chapter 4 tells us that other testings and other delays were still ahead of them.

But after a little more than a year's time, the work on the Temple was actually going to get started. Zerubbabel now moves into the leadership, followed by Jeshua, the priest. And all Levites, twenty years old and older, were appointed to begin the work.

3:9 This completes the list of the workers. Notice that the priests and Levites were heavily involved. They all gave themselves to the work, and soon the work was done. We can be sure that all of the workers spent long hours with a deep desire to see the foundation of the Temple completed as soon as possible.

3:10 The foundation was laid! The work had proceeded without a hitch. The people had worked together in complete harmony, and what was especially important to all of them was that there had been no opposition!. And with the first phase of the work completed, it was a time for celebration. But not to commend themselves. It was time to praise the Lord Who had blessed them in so many wonderful ways.

It must have been quite a sight to see. The priests were attired in their beautiful robes. Each one had a trumpet. The Levites were there with their cymbals. And there was absolute unity in their desire "to praise the Lord." They knew that they could not have done it by themselves. The Lord had done it. He had provided the materials, and the gifted workers, and the foundation of the Temple was laid. And so they praised the Lord "after the ordinance of David king of Israel."

It is interesting to compare this celebration with the celebration that was held when the original Temple was completed. We find the description in 2 Chronicles 5:11-14:

11 And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place: (for all the priests that were present were sanctified, and did not then wait by course:

12 Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets:)

13 It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord;

14 So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God.

Our friend, Derek Kidner, said, and this applies to Solomon's time as well as to Zerubbabel's time which we are considering here in the book of Ezra, that on both occasions the song was sung in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride, and called for a faith that had few earthly guarantees to bolster it" (p.47).

Notice that on both occasions they sang the same song, praising the Lord, “For He is good; for His mercy endureth for ever.” The original Temple, and the foundation for the second Temple, were both testimonies to the goodness of the Lord and for His mercy. I wonder if Ezra in recording the second, and saying that it was “after the ordinance of David,” was reminded not only of David’s music, but of David’s desire to build a Temple for the Lord, which he was not permitted to do. David would have been grieved at the destruction of the first Temple, but overjoyed to see even the foundation of the second completed.

3:11 Now this was a very emotional time for the Jews who had returned from exile. There probably never had been a shout in Israel like there was that day. And even the wordless shout was an expression of their praise for what the Lord had done for them.

3:12 But there were also tears. We are told that “many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted for joy.” They were seeing what most of them thought that they would never see again. To them it was the restoration of the blessing of God upon the nation. It meant new hope, undeserved hope! And these old men wept for joy!

3:13 No one was able to discern between the noise of shouting and the noise of weeping. The noise of both was so great that it was heard “afar off.” The people seemed to sense that the God Who had enabled them to make such progress, would not stop until the work is finished.

This foundation has a message for those who feel that they have sinned away any future blessing from the Lord. But the Apostle Paul would have all of us know that “He that hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). We all can be confident of that.

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Ezra 4

Up to this point everything had gone well with the Jews in their return to Judah and Jerusalem. Darius (we should think of him as Darius I because there were at least two Dariuses after him) had been visited by God telling him to release the Jewish captives from Babylon, send them back to Jerusalem (as many as were willing), and Cyrus was to support the Jews fully in rebuilding their temple which had been destroyed at the time of the Babylonian invasion. We have seen what an amazing evidence this was of the sovereignty of God, of the goodness of God, and the faithfulness of God. And from that point on to the present chapter everything had moved smoothly. The number of Jews who went back percentage wise was large, but the nation had been reduced to a small fraction of what the nation had been when they came out of Egypt. The altar of burnt offering had been restored, and the people had again been offering burnt offerings as prescribed in the Mosaic Law.

Then the foundation of the Temple had been laid, and this was a time of unspeakable joy with the people. Some expressed their joy with shouting, but many of the older people who had seen the original temple, expressed their joy with tears. It has been a long time since the Jewish people had had such a reason for praising and thanking God for His goodness to them.

But Ezra 4 introduces a change which persisted to the end of the book of Nehemiah. And that was opposition. The Jews were suddenly made to realize that there were those who did not want to see the Temple rebuilt. And they were intent on stopping the rebuilding, which they eventually did.

This was a solemn reminder to the Jews (and to us) that the work of the Lord has enemies, always has had, and will continue to have until the time of the new heaven and the new earth. Opposition to God, to His people, and to His purposes began in the Garden of Eden, and it was initiated by the Devil himself. That is when the whole human race was brought under the curse of sin. And then as to read through both the OT and the NT we see how that Satanic opposition has continued throughout the history of the world. It is something that every child of God has to learn from his own experience. We have an enemy. He is sly and strong. He is relentless in seeking to defeat us. He would destroy our salvation if he could, but we can thank God that he can't do that. We have the comfort of knowing that, as the Apostle John was led to write in 1 John 4:4:

4 Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

But we have all had our struggles, and our defeats. However, we have learned the wisdom of what the Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:8-9:

8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

9 Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.

We are promised also in Rom 8:35-37:

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

In Eph 6:10 we are exhorted to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." And then he followed this by saying in the next three verses:

11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

12 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 places.

13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God,

We live in a wicked, fallen world. Temptations of every kind are all around us. And the Devil uses them, appealing to the sin that is still in us as Christians, to keep us from living for God and experiencing the blessings which He gives when we seek to do His will.

So this passage in Ezra is a reminder that we have the same enemy who was busy making things as difficult as he could for the Lord's people in that day. Let's look at what he sought to do, and how he sought to do it.

4:1 Now in this case "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" were people, primarily Gentiles who were living in Israel and who did not want to see the Temple of God rebuilt. These two tribes had been the tribes which made up Judah, the southern kingdom, as distinguished from the northern kingdom of Israel. But we know that, behind those Gentiles, the Devil was at work.

Here in verse 1 we have the true character of these men. They were adversaries. But their first approach was to appear as friends. And they claimed that they had been serving the true God since the days of Esarhaddon, who was a son of Sennacherib, the king of Assyria. Esarhaddon succeeded his father when his father was killed by two of his brothers. See 2 Kings 19:35-37. So they claimed a relationship to God which went back many years. But it was all a lie, and the exiles knew it. The relationship that they had at this time made them conscious that these adversaries were not telling the truth.

4:2 Notice that these adversaries came to the leaders of the group: Zerubbabel and the chief of the fathers.

It is always encouraging when the leaders have discernment. When people are in idolatry, they are not discerning of what can cause real trouble, the work of the Enemy instead of a work of God. When people are in idolatry, the Lord takes away their discernment. They cannot see what a ridiculous thing it is to cut down a tree, use part of it to heat their homes, part to cook their food, and part to make an idol and worship it. Cf. Isa. 16-20. We have reason to believe that the Lord has done this to many in America. We don't worship graven images, but people worship money, pleasure, position, anything but God, and they do the most ridiculous things as a result.

It can be seen also in the church. We will join hands with the world, like many pastors are doing, to work with other mayors and other civic leaders, supposedly to serve the Lord. They give money to the world, and join with them in service, but are not allowed to speak of the Lord Jesus. This is nothing but judicial blindness, blindness caused by their alliance with the world.

4:3 Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the priest, "and the rest of the chief of the fathers" give their answer. What strength there was in their answer. To a man they said, "No!" They could see absolutely no reason why they should joined with these adversaries. Some expositors feel that they were probably Samaritans. The response of Zerubbabel and his men, "Ye have nothing to do with us," meant that it was really none of their adversaries business to have anything to do with the building of the Temple of the Lord. We can do nothing but weaken the work of the Lord by seeking to get the world involved with us. This is not the way of the Lord, and it can only lead to deep trouble in any generation if we do it.

But making the right decision does not mean that we can let down our guard. See verse 4.

4:4 Here the adversaries are called, "the people of the land," *i.e.*, those who lived there, and felt that they had the right to approve or disapprove what was going on. The word "troubled" means that they sought to make the Jews afraid, probably of the consequences, if they continued with the work of rebuilding the Temple.

4:5 Now we read of yet another step which the adversaries did to stop the work of the Lord. If one thing doesn't work for those who are the enemies of God, they will try something else until they find something that will work.

Now as we come to verse 6 we run into a problem, and I don't know that there is any positive solution to the problem. The question is, who is Ahasuerus? And after looking through several books that deal with the kings of Persia, my answer has to be, "I don't know." I have come across two different lists the names of the Persian kings, and the two are really different from each other, and neither one had Ahasuerus in the list. And yet we know that he was one of the kings of Persia from the book of Esther which follows Nehemiah in our Bibles.

Now one answer to the question that we run into here is that there is a time gap between verses 5 and 6 of chapter 4. Most expositors agree with that. But just how long it was, is not known. Another problem we have in naming the Persian kings is that often they went by more than one name. And still another problem in one list I found is that there was a Darius I, and a Darius II later, and still another, Darius III. There was also a Xerxes I and later a II. And there were three kings named Artaxerxes. Now the Bible does not list them that way, and so I think that we have to come to the conclusion that getting the kings and their dates straightened out is not necessary to understand the message of the book of Ezra. If some unknown period of time is passed over between verses 5 and 6, who was king at the time, and how long it was, is not the point. Ezra's main point was in showing us that once the opposition started, it just did not stop, but actually continued on throughout the

rest of Ezra and all the way to the end of the book of Nehemiah.

Ezra wants us to know that once the opposition started, it did not stop. It continued through the rebuilding of the Temple, and then continued on through the rebuilding of the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The Devil is tireless in his opposition to the work of God, wherever it is, and at whatever stage in history we may be looking at. The great events of history have always affected Israel, and usually in a bad way, and the same has been true since the beginning of the Church, the body of Christ. History is a story of the aggressive opposition of the forces of evil, headed up by Satan, who is for the present, “the God of this world,” against the work of God.

After consulting six reference works, I couldn't find any better statement about the nature of things as portrayed for us in Ezra and Nehemiah, than these words from Derek Kidner. Listen to what he had to say:

From this point onward right to the end of Nehemiah there is a conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now be unchallenged, and scarcely a tactic be unexplored by the opposition. This chapter describes the opening of hostilities and the first long set-back to the work, but before it tells of the immediate sequel, it pursues the theme of slander and intrigue well into the next century, up to the moment of disaster which was to bring Nehemiah hurrying to Jerusalem (p. 48),

And then Dr. Kidner added later:

Any idea that the Jews had overestimated their enemies is soon dispelled by this glimpse of things to come ... (in 4:6-23), ... however true it may have been that they had underestimated God (p. 50).

Therefore, although there is a time gap in the history which starts with verse 6 of chapter 4, and continues through verse 23, the story seems to pick up again in verse 24.

4:6 Beginning with this verse we have the first of three letters which were written at different times to the ruling sovereign of Persia.

The first was written to Ahasuerus, but there evidently was no response to this letter. We are not told what the letter said.

4:7 This was the second letter, written to a different king, Artaxerxes. There was a Mithredath mentioned in 1:8, but we have no way of knowing if it was the same person mentioned in both places. The one in 1:8 was a treasurer, so we can assume that probably Bishlam and Tabeel were also officials in the government.

4:8 But we are not told what was written in this letter either, and it seems that it brought no action from the king.

4:9 This third letter was high powered. The long list was meant to impress the king, and express to him that immediate action was to be taken to halt the rebuilding of the temple. We are told what this letter contained, and that it did bring action.

4:10 This verse seems to indicate that all of the people who had at different times been moved by the Persians into the area of Judah and Benjamin were deeply concerned and fearful about what was going on in the rebuilding of the Temple, and what it was going to mean to all of them. The impression given was that they all

were in total agreement that it ought to be stopped.

4:11 The reference to “this side (of) the river” was probably a reference to the Euphrates River, and so the claim was being made that a huge area with all of the people in it were strongly opposed to what the Jews were doing in rebuilding the temple.

The letter itself (vv. 11-16) was full of lies and exaggerations. And as we read this letter it is good to remember what the Lord Jesus said about the Devil which is recorded for us in John 8:44, and the same could be said with reference to the people who many years before were united in attacking the Jews and getting to stop in what they were doing to restore their fellowship with the Lord. This is what John 8:44 tells us:

44 Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

Man in his opposition to the Lord and to the people of God will do anything, and say anything to accomplish their purpose of destroying the work of God. So it is not surprising that we find lies and exaggeration in this letter.

4:12 Jerusalem did not have a record of being a “rebellious and bad city.” Jerusalem by no means had been a perfect city, but we have God’s evaluation of the city in the first three verses of Psalm 48:

1 Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness.

2 Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King (Psa. 48:1-2).

Their enemies said that they had “set up the walls” of the city, and joined the foundations – which was not true. They had not even started on the city walls.

4:13 And here are more lies, but money was a matter of great interest to the king, and so these liars played that tune loud and clear. The days of David and Solomon had been glorious days for the city of Jerusalem and the Jewish people, but there was no basis for the charges which these adversaries brought against them.

4:14 While these enemies of God’s people were condemning the Jews, they also boasted about their support of the king of Persia.

4:15 And they asked that a search be made into the records to prove that Jerusalem had been a rebellious city. Jerusalem had not been destroyed because of their treatment of other people, but because of their unfaithfulness to God.

4:16 Finally, they assured the king that if the Jews were to be allowed to continue rebuilding the Temple, and (probably implied) the whole area west of the Euphrates River would be taken from the Persian king.

The king’s response is given in **4:17-22**. The work on the Temple was to stop. But there was a ray of hope in the king’s response when he said at the end of verse 21 that the work was to be stopped “until another commandment shall be given from me” (v. 21).

4:23 When Rehum and Shimshai and their friends got the letter, they wasted no time in going “in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them cease by force and power.”

4:24 This had to be a very disappointing and discouraging time for the people of God. They had lost this battle, but not the war. And it would be good for the Lord's people to remember. But as one commentator has pointed out, the Lord's work has suffered more from the coldness of its people than from the heat of its enemies. Here the Jews were down, but not out!.

11/16/09

At this point we come to the time when the work on the Temple was resumed and completed. This includes chapters 5 and 6, the last two chapters which have to do with the rebuilding of the Temple. There have been various estimates of the time when the work on the Temple was stopped, and then started again. Expositors differ as to how long the work on the Temple was halted. Matthew Henry mentioned expositors who thought it was as long as nine years, but he thought that it could have been as long as fifteen years. So we have to realize that we don't really know how long it was. But this brings us back to the point I made earlier, that the dates were not the important issue; it is the work and the difficulties the Jews face, as well as how the hand of God was evident, and how the work was eventually completed, that is the main emphasis of the book of Ezra, as it is with all of the other books of the Bible, is what it tells us about God and His ways of dealing with people, both the unregenerate as well as the redeemed. It is rather easy to gather a lot of facts and details, but the point is, what do they mean, and how can we learn from Scripture that which will help us in our relationship with God. Some expositors don't even venture to guess how long it was, but I think that we are safe in assuming that it was a matter of years. It may have been that it was so long that most of the Jews had forgotten about the rebuilding of the Temple, and had gotten interested in other things. And yet there must have been those, as usually there would be, who wondered and hoped that that project would some day be completed.

Now we learned right at the beginning of this book that it was God Who was behind the whole project. God is the One Who moved on the heart of Cyrus to rebuild the Temple. God moved upon Cyrus' heart to let the Jews go back to Jerusalem, And it was God Who moved upon Cyrus' heart to cause Cyrus to support the rebuilding of the Temple in every way. The Jews could not have done it by themselves if they had wanted to. From Ezra chapter 1 we have this amazing record of what the Lord God did in the lives of His people whose numbers were far down from what they had been when they left Egypt, But God is not limited to the many or the few. (See Jonathan's words to his armorbearer in 1 Samuel 14:6.)

So it is very clear from the beginning of chapter 5 in Ezra that God is at work again.

5:1 The Lord wanted the Jews to get back to work rebuilding the Temple. He had not changed His purpose from the time He worked on the heart of Cyrus to get this work started. The enemies of God and the Jews had stopped the work, but God was ready for them to begin again. And so what did He do? He sent them not one, but two prophets. And their names are given right here in verse 1. They are two of the Old Testament prophets who have prophecies in our Old Testament: Haggai, and Zechariah. They, along with Malachi, are called the post-exile prophets because that is when they wrote.

Prophets did speak concerning future things, but always remember that prophets were primarily preachers. They were usually raised up to minister to the people of God in days of special need. And this period in the lives of the Jewish exiles who had returned from Babylon to the land of Israel, was a time of special need. They were spending time on their homes and things related to their daily lives, while the Temple remained unrestored. Now this verse tells us specifically that they were raised to to prophesy, to preach "unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem, but that they had come to preach "in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them." Now what lesson are we to learn from the facts given to us in verse 1 of chapter 5? We learn several

things.

We learn that God's way of stirring up His people to do His will, is through the ministry of the Word. I am sure that I can say that the Temple would never have been rebuilt if God had not sent His prophets to bring to the minds of His people what His will for them was. We make a big mistake when we stop reading the Word, or when we read it in such a routine way that we are not really paying attention to what it says. Many of us are praying for revival in our own country today. This first verse of chapter 5 tells us that a revival will never come about apart from the preaching of the Word, and a return on the part of the people of God to do the will of God.

Now God is not still raising up prophets like He did in OT times, and early NT times. We have His complete revelation in the books of the OT and the NT. And yet the Bible as it is is sufficient, when blessed by the Holy Spirit, to stir our hearts, to show us the importance of obedience, that once again the blessing of God might be upon our lives first, and then upon our work.

I want to remind you again of what is said about Ezra in the first chapter of the part of this book which tells us why he had returned to Israel, and what his ministry was. Of course I am speaking of Ezra 7:10. Let me remind you of what that verse says:

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

When I woke up yesterday morning, I began thinking about this verse. I am sure that there were many other things that we could have been told about Ezra, but this is what we are told, and why!. He went back for the same reason that Haggai and Zechariah were sent there. I am sure that the Lord brought this verse to my mind because that is what the Lord wanted me to do as I got up to read my Bible.

The Lord uses His Word to prepare our hearts to receive the Word. But we have a responsibility in this. There has to be a difference between mere reading the Bible, and seeking the Bible. Ezra really wants the Lord to minister to His heart, not just to His mind. I know that the Bible often uses mind and heart to convey the same meaning, but you and I know the difference between really concentrating on the Word as compared with just a superficial reading of Scripture. Have you ever noticed in reading the Word that all of a sudden you realize that you have been thinking about other things while you may have even been reading aloud? Ezra read the Word like you eat something that you really like. You want to enjoy every bite. And he was reading first of all for himself – “to do it.” But he in preparing his heart to receive and do the Word, this was the best way for him “to teach in Israel (where he was going and the people to whom he was being sent) “statutes and judgments.” The Jews needed to have their hearts stirred to do the will of God according to the Word of God. And if he was to do this, he needed to have his own heart stirred first. And this should not be just once in a while, but daily!

So the Lord was sending His prophets to stir the Jews in their hearts *by the Word!* There is a lot of emotionalism in church meetings in these days, but most of it is false fire. The Word cannot be just an addition to other things; *it has to be placed in first place, and kept there.* I hope we are all getting this.

Going back to verse 1 of Ezra 5, notice that Haggai, Zechariah, and later Ezra himself ministered “in the name of God.” They felt their main responsibility was to pass on to the people the very message that God wanted them to hear.

We all need to read Haggai and Zechariah, Haggai very short, Zechariah much longer. The two prophets were very different in the way they ministered to the people, but their message was the same

5:2 It is very important to see that the Jews' two main leaders were stirred by the preaching of the prophets. It took a little time for the preparations to be made, but in less than a month Zerubbabel and Jeshua (or Joshua) were back leading the people in the work, and the prophets were evidently working right along with them. But remember they were still under orders from the Persian government to stop building. But the Jews and their leaders were so convinced that building the Temple was what the Lord wanted them to do, that they went ahead without permission.

This situation can be compared with the ultimatum that was delivered to the apostle in the early days of the church, that they were not to teach or preach at all in the Name of the Jesus. The Apostles, Peter and John, did not go underground, but they spoke up immediately saying,

19 . . . Whether it be right in the sight of God to earken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish the, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done (Acts 4:19-21).

This all happened as a result of the healing of the man who was over forty years old, and had never walked before until Peter and John performed the miracle.

In the case that we are studying here in Ezra 5, the Jews were in violating the restriction that had been officially laid upon them, but they did it openly, and prepared to suffer the consequences. Why immediate action was taken against them, we cannot say. But evidently the move was so strong among the Jews that their opponents could do nothing immediately to stop them. The next few verses, especially verse 5, help us to understand why the Jews could go ahead.

5:3 The two men mentioned here were Persian officials. Some expositors feel that Tatnai could have been the title of the head Persian official who was in charge of the exiles and other people also who were living at that time in Israel. And they asked the question that they had every right to ask: "Who hath commaned you to build this house, and to make up this wall? Evidently they were talking, not about the wall that was built later under Nehemiah, but this was the wall of the temple.

But then these Persian leaders asked a second question:

5:4 There seems to be a problem in the translation of this verse. In the KJ it seems like the Jews were asking for the names of those who were taking part in the building of the Temple. But it was the Persian

leaders who needed to know. So it seems that the translation given in the NASB is to be preferred here. This is how it is translated in that translation. They did not make it a question, but a simple statement:

4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building (Ezra 5:4, NASB).

Obviously it was the Persians had asked, "What are the names of the men that make this building?" And this was confirmed in their letter to Darius as we learn in verse 10. This was a scary question which could have had ominous consequences. It looked like the leaders were preparing to take action against those who were responsible. This would have included not only Zerubbabel, but also Joshua, and even Haggai and Zechariah. But we see in verse 5 why it was that the Persians with all of their authority could not stop the Jews from continuing with the rebuilding of the Temple.

5:5 Ezra, in writing this, wanted to give the credit to the One Who really deserved it. Look closely at the words which we read here. It is all most amazing? The powerful officials of the mighty Persian govern-

ment were powerless under the sovereign power of the God of Israel. Here is our answer: “But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease . . .” Oftentimes our circumstances have such a strong influence upon our lives that we are kept from seeing the Unseen. God had sent His servants the prophets to strengthen the Jews by the Word, and He was not about to let mere men, and powerful as they might be, to frustrate His will. Solomon said that “the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3).

I can imagine that there was one passage in Zechariah that would have been an encouragement to the Jews at this time. It is found in Zechariah 4, where we read beginning with verse 1:

- 1 And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep,
- 2 And said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof:
- 3 And two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof.
- 4 So I answered and spake to the angel that talked with me, saying, What are these, my lord?
- 5 Then the angel that talked with me answered and said unto me, Knowest thou not what these be? And I said, No, my lord.
- 6 Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.
- 7 Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it.
- 8 Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
- 9 The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto you.
- 10 For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth (Zech. 4:1-10).

One thing I especially like about Matthew Henry’s commentary on the Bible is that he was always looking for something for the heart. And so he mentioned that while we rejoice in the truth that the Lord always has His eyes upon us, we need to make sure that our eyes are always on Him. A good example of this is when in the days of King Jehoshaphat in Judah he had a massive army come against him. And as he prayed to the Lord for help. As he expressed his helplessness to God, he concluded his prayer with these words found in 2 Chronicles 20:12:

- 12 O our God, wilt thou not judge them? for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee.

Perhaps you remember how the Lord sent confusion among the nations that had come against Jehoshaphat, and they turned their weapons on each other and destroyed themselves.

For the Jews to have their eyes upon the Lord, meant that they were trusting the Lord to help them, and only the Lord.

In the situation that the Jews faced in Ezra 5, they evidently had been told that a letter was going to be sent to King Darius to see if there was any the Jews had any authority for rebuilding their Temple in Jerusalem.

So the Persian leaders in Jerusalem got a letter off to King Darius to see if King Cyrus had ever issued a decree authorizing the Jews to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. Their letter takes up the rest of chapter 5 (from verse 6 to verse 17, and verse 17 tells what the Persian leaders requested of King Darius.

Ezra 6

The first 12 verses of this chapter tell us that King Darius received the letter from his men in Jerusalem, and that a search was made for any decree that King Cyrus had made. The search was made, and the decree was found which contained all that Cyrus had decreed should be done for the Jews to help them in rebuilding the Temple.

This goes down through verse 5.

Then beginning with verse 6 King Darius told his men in Jerusalem that they were not to hinder the work of the Jews on their Temple. He even issued a decree of his own that the Jews should be given from the resources of Persia to help the Jews so that nothing would stand in the way of the completion of the temple. In verse 12 of chapter 6 he concluded his decree with what is really a prayer to God that any people be destroyed who would put their hand to destroy the house of God which was to be built and finished as soon as possible in Jerusalem.

The work of rebuilding the Temple is finally finished. See 5:13-15. The dedication followed. How wonderful it would have been in the Jews had continued on the high spiritual condition that we see from verse 16 on to the end of chapter 6. Chapter 6 concludes with the restoration of the worship of God.

11/23/09

Before we go on to the last part of chapter 6 in Ezra, I want to make the application of the truth regarding the temple of the Lord as it is presented in the NT. Much of what we learn in the OT is typical of what we learn in the NT. First the Tabernacle, and then the Temple, were the place where God dwelt among His people. When we come to the NT we learn how the relationship of God to His people in OT times foreshadowed an even greater and much closer relationship to God in NT times. The two, the old and the new, were expressed by our Lord in John 14:17 when speaking of the Holy Spirit's relationship with them in coming day, He said that "He (the Holy Spirit) dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." And in the verse just before that, verse 16, the Lord had said this: "16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever."

In 1 Corinthians 6:16 and 17 Paul expressed amazement that the Christians in Corinth either did not know, or had forgotten, that the Holy Spirit had made the believer's body His temple. Listen to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 6:16:

16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Here the Lord may have been speaking of another NT truth, related to the fact that individually our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, you will notice that Paul said, "Ye [plural] are the temple [singular] of the living God."

Now there may be a point in comparing these two Scriptures, the first from 1 Corinthians, and the second in 2 Corinthians, that the first one has to do with the Holy Spirit, but the second has to do with God. But when we turn to the book of Ephesians we find another passage in which Paul spoke of us as "an holy temple in the Lord," there he mentioned all three Persons of the Godhead. Listen to this passage found in Ephesians 2:19-22. Here Paul was explaining to Jews and Gentiles, as believers, that we all have the same blessings in Christ.

Note what Paul said:

19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief

corner stone;

21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

22 In whom [Christ] ye also are builded together for an habitation of God [the Father] through the [Holy] Spirit.

So I believe that in the light of these passages we can say according to Scripture tht individually our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and secondly, as the Church, together we are the body of Christ. And on this basis I believe that when we gather as a church, a local church, as we are his morning, there is a very powerful way in which the presence of God is manifested through us all as the temple of God. Or, as the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2:21, we are “an holy temple in the Lord.”

The Church is the place where there really is no distinction between Jews who believe in Christ, and Gentiles who believe in Christ. And Paul said so in Gal 3:28

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

What the Jew has in Christ, the Gentile has. What the slave has, his master has, and what the name in Christ has, so does the woman. We really need to believe this, and act upon it in our fellowship with each other. The very presence of the Lord is to be constantly manifested in our lives, and in our churches.

I want to read to you a portion from a sermon by Charles Simeon on Ezra 6:14. Charles Simeon was an Englishman, educated at King’s College, Cambridge University, and then the Rector, or Pastor, of Trinity Church, which was on the campus of Cambridge University. What he said in the conclusion of his message on the completion of the Temple, is what I would think that Zerubbabel might have said in those days. It was what Charles Simeon said to his own congregation, and I believe it is good for all of us to hear this to make this book of Ezra more practical in our own lives. As you have been reading the book of Ezra, have you every pictured yourself in the same situation, coming back to Jerusalem with no place to stay, but to start all over? Have you thought how you would react to building a large temple when you had not had any experience in building buildings before, especially so ornate and glorious as that would be? How do you react to opposition in your life as a Christian? How often have you gone to the Word, or to church, to find encouragement for your own heart? Think about these questions as I read this to you. Here is what Charles Simeon said to his people over 300 years ago:

God has established an order of men *on purpose to carry on this spiritual building* in the world. Paul and the other apostles may be called “master-builders”; but every pastor and teacher is engaged in the same work, according to the peculiar office that has been assigned to him. “To impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end that ye may be established,” and “to perfect that which is lacking in your faith,” and in every way to be “helpers to your joy” is the great end of all our ministerial labours: and, if we would labor with effect, we must use the same means as Haggai and Zechariah did.

We call you then, Brethren, to “consider your ways”; consider what has hindered you hitherto; and what has been the consequence of intermitting your exertions in the service of your God. Have you not reason to blush and be confounded for the little progress that you have made in the divine life?

Consider too, as Zechariah so largely recommends, the promises of God. What assurances of success are given you by your gracious God, if only you will put your hands to the work in good earnest. “Up then, and be doing,” every one of you; and “your God will be with you.” Yield not to discouragements of any kind; for “greater is He that isin you than he that is in the world.” And beware how you give way to carnal ease and indolence; surely it ill becomes you to be so intent, as most of us are, on earthly things, whilst the spiritual edifice advances so slowly. Let all inquire, what yet remains to be done in their own hearts, and, what may be done for God in the world at large: and let us, by “coming daily and hourly to Christ as the living foundation-stone, seek, as living stones, to be build up a spiritual house,”

that shall be “the habitation of God, through the Spirit,” for ever and ever. (Simeon, Charles, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 4, pp. 249, 250).

May God enable us to profit spiritually from what we have already seen in the book of Ezra.

Now let us return to Ezra 6:16.

6:16 We are in that part of the book which tells us about the completion of the Temple, its dedication, and the

resumption of the priestly ministry, indicating restored fellowship with God, followed by the observance of the Passover. We cannot really appreciate what a high hour spiritually this was for the people of God in that day. And may what we learn from all of this mean much the same to us. After all, this was “written for our admonition” like all of Scripture. See 1 Corinthians 10:11-12:

11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Dr. Kidner says that the word “dedication” means that this Temple was made for God, and that now the people were expressing the hope that God would bless it with His presence. The “with joy” was doubtless a very mild expression of the happiness that filled the hearts of the people, knowing that the work that they had come to do was accomplished, or at least practically accomplished. Sin and disobedience to the Lord never bring joy, and yet it seems characteristic of many of us who know the Lord to seek our joy almost any place but in fellowship with the Lord. And yet we are exhorted that “in everything” we are to “give thanks, for this (specifically) is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning” us. There had been shouts of joy and tears of joy when the foundation of the Temple was laid. What must have been the joy that was in their hearts when the work was completed. Alexander Maclaren, who was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1826, and held several pastorates in England, known as “the prince of expository preachers,” said that many Christians, in spite of all that they have in Christ “do yet go through life creeping and sad, burdened and anxious, perplexed and at their wit’s end, just because they will not have the God Who yearns to come to them, or at least will not have Him in anything like the fullness and the completeness in which He desires to bestow Himself” (Maclaren, Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, p. 305). It is glorifying to God to rejoice in Him after twenty years spent in building the Temple, but it also an obligation laid upon us to “rejoice in the Lord” always, as Paul exhorted us to do in Philippians 4:4. To fail to this is a sin of omission, and we need to treat it as a sin.

6:17 The dedicatory offering made at the completion of this Temple was insignificant in comparison with the offering that was brought when the first Temple was dedicated. But the Lord accepts by what we have, and not by what we do not have. And so the Lord must have been just as pleased with this offering as He had been with the first offering. The first offering of bullocks, rams, and lambs probably were burnt offerings, expressing their complete devotion to the Lord. The sin offering of one goat for each tribe was a twofold expression first of failure, then of faith (Kidner, p. 60).

6:18 It seems that at the Dedication, the priests and the Levites were back exercising the full ministry for which God had set them apart in the days of Moses. And a point that we must not overlook it was all done “as it is written in the book of Moses.” Close to 1,000 years had gone by since God gave Moses the instructions that we find in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But nothing was changed, and nothing was to be changed. It seems that in our day, Christians are always looking for some new way to worship the Lord, and while the NT does not lay out exactly how our services are to be conducted, yet we know that in the days of the early church the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs was a part of the

worship. Then there was prayer. Believers prayed more privately and in their homes as families. And then there was the preaching of the Word. Today churches are looking frantically for some way in which to attract people to church by ways that will be pleasing to visitors. And so in singing, in praying, and in preaching the move has been away from the Scriptures. When the priests and Levites resumed their work after their captivity, they went back to what had been prescribed, “written” as a permanent record, and binding upon the people “in the book of Moses.” Here we have another way in which the restoration of the nation to God was according to the Word of God. We have already seen how the rebuilding of the Temple was completed largely through the benefit the people received through the prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. And we will learn in chapter 7 that Ezra came on the scene to be a teachers of the Word of God. Our worship has to be pleasing to God or it is not true worship. I doubt if there were any Jews in that day of dedication that accused the priests and the Levites of being too “old fashioned.” What got the Jews into trouble was that they quit doing things God’s ways and started doing the ways of the nations about them. God has given us in His Word “all things that pertain unto life and godliness” – “all things.” And when people really are walking in fellowship with the Lord, nothing is more important than the Bible.

6:19 Now in verse 19 we are told one ancient ordinance was one of the first things that the priests did. They led the people in the observance of the Passover. And it was done on the very day of the year that God had first told them to do it. It was to be observed every year, in the first month of the year, and on the fourteenth day of the month.

What did the Passover commemorate? As you all know, it was the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. And it gave to the children of Israel, the first complete picture of salvation. In the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, he wrote, “For even Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7b). The history of the Passover is given to us in Exodus, chapter 12.

The Jews were to select the lamb for the Passover on the tenth day of the month. It was to be kept and observed for four days. The purpose for this is not altogether stated in Scripture, but one purpose surely was so that the people could observe it to make sure that there was nothing wrong with it. It had to be “without blemish.” Of course this points to the fact that the only One Who could act for us as a Savior was One Who was without sin.

Since we are all sinners and in need of a Savior, God sent His Son, “made of a woman,” without a human father, but as we learn from Scripture He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was a perfect Man, but He was also the Son of God. We have four records of His life at the beginning of the NT, and every one of them testifies to our Lord’s true humanity and His absolute Deity.

Then the Passover Lamb was to be killed. It was not the live lamb that could deliver the firstborn son in each family, but a sacrificed Savior. The blood was to be applied to the two side posts of the door to the home, and to the bar across the top of the door. Then it was to be roasted with fire, and eaten by the members of each family. Then we read this in verses 12 and 13 of Exodus 12:

12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord.

13 And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.

There were not even two ways that the firstborn son in the family would escape the judgment of God that night – not two or three, or any other way – just one! But the deliverance of the firstborn son was absolutely guaranteed if the Lord’s orders were carefully followed.

All of this was, and still is, a perfect picture of our salvation today – only one way, only one Savior, only one

salvation! And you will remember, I hope, that the Lord observed the Passover with His disciples on the night before He died, and then He instituted the Lord's Supper which has now replaced the Passover because the Lord's Supper represents that which was anticipated by the Passover.

The sacredness of the Passover is now further emphasized in verse 20 by the fact that the priests who administered the Passover were purified, and then in verse 21 by the fact that those who observed the Passover had purified themselves. And this may have been one of the unusual times in which this was done.

6:20 The consecration of the priest's meant primarily two things: 1) they had to be clothed with their priestly garments, and 2) they had to make an offering for their own sins. On this latter part we are told in Hebrews 7 that Christ was different from the Levitical priests because He "needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself" (Heb 7:27).

And one wonderful thing about this purification of the priest is that we are told that they did it "together," which means *as one man*. This is an expression meaning that there was perfect unity among the priests and Levites. And what an example they would have been for the people. What is it that Psalm 133 tells us about unity among brethren?

1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

2 It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;

3 As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore (Psalm 133:1-3).

The numbers may have been great in Israel at that time, but the blessing was. This was upon the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ as He went to the Cross. You probably will remember that He prayed in the latter part of verse 11 in John 17: "Holy Father, keep through thine own Name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as we are."

But now, what about the children of Israel?

6:21 There has to be a connection between verse 20 and verse 21. There is always a connection between the leaders, and the people who follow them. I doubt very much if you will ever see oneness among the people of a congregation if there is not oneness among the leaders. The priests and Levites sought forgiveness and cleansing for the work that God had appointed for them to do. The people followed their leaders, and God was certainly pleased and glorified. We as the people of God need to be known as people who not only avoid sin, but as people who hate sin. We have responsibility in this. They "had separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen of the land," and this must mean *from their own land*. Wherever we are in this world, there is always the possibility of being defiled from the filthiness of the world. But they not only separated themselves from the sinners with their sin who were now living in Israel's land, but they did it "to seek the Lord God of Israel." What a pity that this did not continue. But we can rejoice that it was there for a time.

When it says that they "did eat," it ought to remind us of what the Apostle Paul said about believers in the Church who take the Lord's Supper: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" 1 Cor. 11:28). Sin is not to keep us away from the Lord's Table, but coming to the Lord's Table is to cause us to turn away from our sin.

6:22 The priests, Levites, and the people of Israel, not only observed the Passover, but they "kept the feast of unleavened bread" which followed the Passover immediately, a feast in which no leavened bread was

eaten. Since leaven in Scripture is a type of sin, the picture in the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread is that salvation not only delivers us from the penalty of sin, which is death, but it leads to a holy life of fellowship with the Lord.

Notice that joy is mentioned twice in this verse. We had it also back in verse 16. We all are inclined to feel that there is happiness in sin. And we all have to admit that there is pleasure in sin. But we need to remember what Hebrews 11 tells us how Moses felt about sin:

24 By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;

25 Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;

26 Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward (Heb. 11:24-26).

Moses knew that there were pleasures in sin “for a season,” but that the season was so short, and eternity is so long, that it wasn’t worth it.

This last chapter of the first part of Ezra end on a high note. It brought great joy to them. Unfortunately we learn in the second part of the book of Ezra that they did not maintain that ground. May that be warning to us. The joy of fellowship with the Lord today, can be lost tomorrow, if we do not continue to seek the Lord.

11/30/09

We now come to the second and last major division of the book of Ezra. Derek Kidner says that there are sixty years between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7. Actually there were two kings in Persia by this name. Historians differentiate the two by calling them Artaxerxes I and Artaxerxes II. The first reigned from 464-423 B.C. and the second from 404 to 359 B.C. Some place Ezra under the first Artaxerxes, others under the second. Dr. Kidner believes it was the first Artaxerxes, and that the date where we are now was 458 B.C. And I am satisfied to go along with him.

But let me point out that whatever is not included in our Bibles, is not necessary for us to be able to understand the Bible. Getting involved in a search for dates and so on, can make us miss the message of the Bible. Or it can cause us to doubt certain parts of the Bible. There have always been men we can call scholars, but they were mainly concerned in digging out the meaning of Scripture, by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Today, even men who claim to be biblical scholars devote much of their time to pointing out what has been added to parts of the Bible, and a person who accepts Scripture as it is, is often found to stand alone. So when I hear the word “scholar” today, it raises a red flag with me, or at least a yellow flag. Even in some of our so-called Christian universities you will find men who think that certain parts of different books were added after the original writing was completed, and this is a direct attack on the inspiration of Scripture. At the same time we can thank God for those “scholars” who devote their lives to the study of the Word of God so that they can help us to understand the Word, and, hopefully change our lives.

But let us get back to Ezra 7. The first ten verses are all about Ezra. In the outline that I have given you I simply called these last four chapters,

II. The Ministry of Ezra (Ezra 7-10).

By this I do not mean the complete ministry of Ezra because we meet him again in Nehemiah 8 and 12. But he is not mentioned elsewhere in all of Scripture. It would seem that he deserved a place with the people of faith in Hebrews 11, but he is not there. But even at that, it doesn’t seem that he has gotten the attention that he

deserves among the people of God. Probably most Christians would have very little to say about him because they don't know very much about him. And yet he played a unique role in the return of the exiles from Babylon.

7:1-5 In the first verses of chapter 7 we see that he was directly related to Aaron, the first high priest in Israel.

That is not a complete list of his ancestors, but it is enough to let us know that he was a man of great importance in Israel in his day. He is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, just in Ezra and Nehemiah. There is another Ezra mentioned in 1 Chronicles 4:17 but he was not this Ezra. So he is not given much space at all in the Bible. But he was a man of great godly character. Faithfulness was one of his chief characteristics. He was a man who was strong in the Lord. His humility caused him to give the glory for his successes to "the hand of the Lord upon him" (Ezra 7:6). We can't read the first ten verses of Ezra 7 without realizing that he was one whom we could choose to follow with great profit in the Lord for ourselves.

Charles Simeon had this to say about him:

The memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or the grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. . . . But the homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave, devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is (Vol. 2, pp. 309, 310).

Matthew Henry mentioned this about Ezra:

The Jews say that he collected and collated all the copies of the law he could find, and published an accurate edition of it, with all the prophetic books, historical and poetical, that were given by divine inspiration, and so made up the canon of the Old Testament, with the addition of the prophecies and histories of his own time.

Now this is not in the Bible. It is a part of Jewish tradition. But Matthew Henry went on to say, "If he was raised up of God, and inclined and qualified to do this, all generations have reason to call him blessed, and to bless God for him" (Vol. II, pp. 1050, 1051). In Chaldea where Ezra lived there was much interest in literature and in the study of the stars, but it says a lot for Ezra that in that environment he chose to devote himself to the study of the Word of God. This also tells us a great deal about Ezra.

But now let us see what our Bibles tell us about him.

7:6 Ezra was a scribe. He was very different from those who succeeded him in the days when the Lord was here upon the earth. They were classed with the with the Pharisees as hypocrites by our Lord, and denounced in the strongest possible language. The Lord called them children of hell, blind guides, fools, full of extortion and excess, like whited sepulchers, and so on. See Matthew 23:13-33.

But Ezra was not like that. He loved the Scriptures. Men like he was were called scribes, not only because they copied the Scriptures, but because they paid attention to the Word letter by letter in their desire to understand the truth. And Ezra was enabled by God to grasp the meaning of Scripture. This is what it means that he was "a ready scribe." He was a true scholar. He believed that although the Law was written by Moses, it was given by God. So he was a believer in the divine inspiration of the Word of God. He was not like many of our scholars today, trying to decide what was given by God and what was added later by man, but he believed in the Scriptures as they had been written out originally by men of God who, as we would say now in the words of the Apostle Peter, were men moved along by the Holy Spirit. Ezra would have been a strong supporter of what Paul said about the Scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Now the situation was different in the days of Artaxerxes from what they had been in the days of Cyrus which

we studied in Ezra 1. There Cyrus took the initiative because God spoke directly to him about sending the exiles back to Jerusalem. Here, Ezra knowing all of that, approached Artaxerxes himself, which would have taken great courage and equally strong leading from the Lord. And Artaxerxes “granted him all his request.” But to whom did Ezra give the credit? He said that it was “according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him” (Ezra 7:6b). If this were a Psalm, we would call this phrase the refrain. A refrain is that which is repeated for the sake of pointing out the theme of a song, or the main emphasis of a treatise. See 7:5, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31. We find it again in Nehemiah 2:8, 18.

“The hand of the Lord” is expressive of the Lord’s power, of His protection of His people, and His provision for them. It is mentioned in Psalm 20:6:

6 Now know I that the Lord saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand.

David said, and the Lord used the same words that we find in Psalm 31:5. “Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth.” And who among us has not rejoice in the words found in Psalm 37:23-24:

23 The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way.

24 Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.

In Psalm 98:1 we read these wonderful words:

O sing unto the Lord a new song; for he hath done marvelous things: his right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory.

My prayer for our country is found in Ps 109:26-27:

26 Help me [us], O Lord my God: O save me [us] according to thy mercy:

27 That they may know that this is thy hand; that thou, Lord, hast done it.

And what about Psalm 118:15-17:

16 The right hand of the Lord is exalted: the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly.

17 I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.

I don’t know how many times I recently have heard Proverbs 21:1: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”

Isaiah had a lot to say about the Lord’s hands. I am sure many of you remember Isaiah 40:12:

Who hath measures the waters in the hollow of His hand, and meted out heaven with a span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?

In Isaiah 49:16 the Lord told His people to show that He constantly remembered them,

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before Me.

And who does not remember Isaiah 59:1-2?

1 Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:

2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

One final passage which you all know, or should know: John 10:27-30:

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.

30 I and my Father are one.

Remember what I said a moment ago, the hand of the Lord speaks of the Lord's power, of His protection of His people, and His provision for them. The three p's make it easy to remember: power, protection, provision.

7:7-9 We are given here a brief account of the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. We get the details in chapter 8. There we learn about the problems in getting started, the fasting and prayer that Ezra called the people to do as they humbled themselves and sought further guidance from the Lord. They were going through land where there were wild marauding bands whose business it was to rob travelers of all that they had, and even kill them if they put up any resistance. So Ezra and all of the people were completely dependent upon the Lord. Ezra had not asked the Artaxerxes for soldiers to go with them to protect them on the way because he had told the King that the Lord would take care of them, and see them through to Jerusalem. And after they prayed, somehow they had the assurance that the Lord would take care of them, which He did! This was a giant step of faith for Ezra and the exiles. It is often easy for us to declare our faith in the Lord, but when it comes to putting our faith to the test, we stumble.

Charles Simeon said in his message on this portion of the book of Ezra this interesting sidelight:

Artaxerxes surname, "the long handed," may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach those wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. He took some strength of principle to abstain from asking *what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have* (italics mine) (Vol. 2, p. 310).

I like those three ways in which Pastor Simeon expressed what Ezra did not take, that which "would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, (and) so comfortable to have. I don't know if Ezra was criticized for not asking Artaxerxes for help, but it would not be unusual if he had not been charged with taking an unnecessary risk with the lives of those who were going with him to Jerusalem – especially since there were women and children in the group.

Ezra was a man of strong faith. He strongly resisted any tendency to compromise his obvious stand on faith, trusting God, with reliance of men when his faith was being put to the test. He firmly believed that the God whose hand had moved upon King Artaxerxes' heart to let the people go back to Jerusalem, was just as able to protect His people even when they were to go through a hot, rocky desert in order to carry out the will of God. And he was right! We must believe that Ezra's strong faith was the result of the long hours that he had spent pouring over the text of Scripture because "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Ezra probably knew Psalm 1:2-3 and Psalm 119:11. Remember we can sin against the Lord by not trusting Him when we should trust Him, just as we grieve him by sins of commission.

Let me give you another quotation from Charles Simeon because he really captured the message of this chapter in a very special way. He said:

But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate we may well learn the lesson of this story – to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion (or, our faith) a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what the expect of us. If "the Church" would oftener think of what "the world" looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its deeds (Vol. 2, pp. 312-313).

But let us go on to that very important verse, verse 10. Don't you like to hear, or to read, of how godly people carry on in their relationship with God. Verse 10 gives us some real insight into the nature of his daily relation-

ship with the Lord.

7:10 Here is a spiritual gold mine. If you don't get anything from our study of the book of Ezra, but this, then make sure that you get this!

Let me call your attention first to the fact that verse 10 begins with the word, "For." This means that Ezra was about to explain why he was the person that he was, a man who could trust God as he did. Notice that the word "for" is a word of explanation, and it looks back over all that we have learned up to this point about Ezra. If you want to be a man like Ezra was, a man who trusted God, a man whose life backed up his words, then do what Ezra did, live like he lived. Have the same priority that he had. This verse does not tell us what Ezra did just because he had a tremendous job ahead of him. He lived like this every day, and had lived like this every day, and consequently his life was above what you usually find in people who claim to be the people of God. There are four points here that Ezra made, and each one of us should do what He did and expect to experience inwardly and outwardly the results which he had.

The first point is that Ezra "prepared his heart." Now nobody could do that for Ezra but Ezra. Ezra believed that the first order of business for him was to prepare his heart to meet with God. Ezra undoubtedly knew those words of Solomon in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." Ezra also knew what Moses had told the children of Israel a thousand years before his time. I am referring to Deuteronomy 4:9. This is what Moses said:

Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons.

Notice that Moses spoke to the people about their souls, their hearts. He was talking about their inner selves. Ezra did not just prepare his heart once, and consider it finished. It was his daily task, and often many times a day. We often think about the wrong things. Our hearts get defiled by sin, and if they are not confessed and forsaken, they keep us from profiting from Step #2. A prayer we need to pray every day is the prayer with which David closed the nineteenth Psalm. The reference is Psalm 19:14, and this is the verse:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength, and my Redeemer.

And you can either precede that prayer or follow it with this prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psa. 139:23-24).

If we are going to prepare our hearts to meet with God, we are going to need His help to get us prepared. He sees everything that is wrong, and only He can cleanse it. And He cleanses us by the blood of His Son, that is, through what the Lord did for us when He died on the Cross.

Have you ever had anyone ask you, "What are you thinking about?" And maybe you said, "Oh, nothing!" But there was something that you didn't want to tell what it was. But God knows what it was. A prepared heart is a clean heart. We don't have to tell our sins to anyone else, but we need to talk about them to the Lord. Sin in our hearts is sin that is going to get us into trouble if it is not confessed to the Lord, and forsaken.

But why is it so important for us to prepare our hearts? And here is Step #2: It is because we need to seek the law of the Lord. Reading the Word will do for us what no other book will do. It is a living Word. It is God's Word. And the Word will tell us what it will do for us. But when we read the Word we need to remember that it is the Lord's Word, and that we can't seek the Word unless we are seeking the Lord in His Word. And to seek the Word is more than just reading the Word. It begins with reading, but we need to ask the Lord to show us what He wants us to see, and to teach us what He wants us to know. When you and I read the Word we need

to pray first, and then we need to give our undivided attention to what we are reading. Read until you get blessed.

But even that is not all. Step #3 is in the words, “and to do it.” We not only need to believe the Word, we need to behave it. The Lord Jesus said, “If ye love Me, keep My commandments.” This is often where we fail. And I am sure that Ezra failed at times. But we find that since the Word is a living Word, it is God’s Word, there is power that we get from the Word itself, ministered to us by the Holy Spirit, that gives us the strength to do what we are told in the Word that God wants us to do. What He commands, He enables to do.

And then we come to the fourth and last point, Step #4: “and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.” Now we are not in Israel; we are in the Church. And we need to be prepared to share with others what the Lord has been teaching us. And here let me give you a verse from the prophecy of Isaiah which may be of some help along this line. It is found in Isaiah 50:4, and this is what it says:

4 The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

There are some who believe that this verse should be translated like this:

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learner, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learner.

I noticed that the NASB uses the word *disciple*. A disciple is a learner. We are all learners. The NIV translates it this way:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary, He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

But if we have been careful to give the right attention to our hearts, we are going to find that whether it is in talking to just another individual, or to a group of some kind, we are going to find that whatever the Lord gives us, is just what some other believer needs whom we may meet, or talk to on the phone on a particular day.

What did Ezra mean by “statutes and judgments”? The word “statutes” is sometimes translated at commandments; the word “judgements” has to do with verdicts, that is, what is right and what is wrong in the eyes of the Lord.

Now the important thing about verse 10, after we know what it means, is to go and do, or live, like Ezra did. The Lord Jesus on another occasion with reference to other things, told His disciples, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” I leave you with that word, and apply it to myself as well.

12/7/09

Last week we considered the first ten verses of Ezra 7. This is where Ezra appeared for the first time in the history of God’s dealings with the exiles who had been taken originally to Babylon, and then when the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon, the Jews fell under the control of what eventually became Persia.

Ezra was a great influence both with the Persians and with the Jews. He was a scribe, “a ready scribe,” gifted, well-trained, a godly scholar, one who was especially prepared to minister the truth of God to the people of Israel in one of their most needy hours. This is what we learn from 7:6, and even more is added in verse 10. It seems that in the most difficult times that the people of God experience, God always has His men, in whose hearts He has been working. Ezra was what we might call *a man of the hour*, a servant of the Lord whom God

had trained to step into a place of spiritual leadership when he was especially needed. He was deeply devoted to the Lord, and as a result, a gifted teacher of the Word when such teachers were practically non-existent. It was a time when the people of God were in special need to be turned back to the Word of God. Ezra believed that the law of Moses, was given by God, a statement which teaches us that he believed in the divine origin of Scripture.

Now as we move on in chapter 7 we come to a second great example, or possibly we can say *a third great example in this book of Ezra of God working in the hearts of great heathen kings to meet the needs of His conquered people*. It teaches us that even when the people of God looked like they were in a hopeless situation, we see that God did to show them that there is always hope for those who belong to the Lord. And so we have another of many instances in the OT of the words of Solomon in Proverbs 21:1, a verse we all need to commit to memory, and review frequently: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; he turneth it whithersoever He will.” And this is just another way of expressing the sovereignty of God, as we read in Luke 18:27 where it is recorded that the Lord said, in referring to the salvation of the rich, that “the things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” Throughout history those who have dared to defy the living God, have been playing a losing game. We need that truth in our hearts today.

Now the amazing thing that we come to beginning with 7:11 is the decree of King Artaxerxes regarding Ezra. Remember that there was approximately sixty years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It is thought by godly scholars that at this point it had been approximately seventy years since the Babylonian captivity. We cannot be absolutely certain about the dates, but we need to know that chapter 7 did not immediately follow chapter 6.

In our outline I have called this next section under Ezra’s move from Babylon to Jerusalem:

2. The decree of King Artaxerxes on behalf of Ezra (7:11-26).

I say, “on behalf of Ezra” instead of “on behalf of the Jews,” because it was on behalf of Ezra. Somehow Ezra had been noticed by Artaxerxes, and Artaxerxes had been deeply impressed by Ezra and eager to do something for him. He evidently knew Ezra’s concern for the Jewish people. This also was of God. It was one of those days “of small things” that Zechariah, one of the prophets of the exile period had referred to in Zechariah 4:10. The Jews also could remember from their history the day that Joseph’s brothers sold him into Egyptian slavery. It looked like a major tragedy. And in some respects it was. But later Joseph was able to tell His brothers, “Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good” (Gen. 50:20). Often God’s ways baffle us, and cause our faith to falter. But God is never wrong. God can never be removed from any situation. It sometimes look like He is paying attention to what is going on in our lives, or in our country. But again our faith can be strengthened by that verse in Proverbs 15:3, “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” We see just a part of the picture; the Lord sees it all, and He sees it all at one time. No wonder that Solomon told his son the words we all know from Proverbs 3:5-6.

Now what did Artaxerxes’ decree for Ezra contain?

Note again in verse 11 the kind of a man Ezra was. Ezra would tell us that if we try to influence the world by being like the world, that we are on the wrong track. King Artaxerxes saw Ezra as a priest, not by his genealogy, but by his life. He saw him as a man of the Word of God. He saw Ezra as not just another scribe (because there probably were scribes of various writing in those days). With Ezra it was “of the words of the commandments of the Lord of His statutes.” The word that Ezra used here for “commandments” means commandments as we use the word, but “statutes” are commandments that help us to know how to live in particular circumstances and at special times. Ezra got his guidance as to how to live in captivity from the

Word of God, and that is what he did. So it must have been that Artaxerxes notice Ezra, not because he was like all of the other Jews, *but because he was different!*

Obviously King Artaxerxes knew that while his body was in Babylon, his heart was in Jerusalem. But he lived in Babylon like one who was well acquainted with “the God of heaven.” And have you noticed that this is the way that God is referred to throughout this chapter. See Ezra 7:21 and 23 (2x). But you will see it also in Ezra 5:11 and 12 and 6:9 and 10. This expression for God is first and only used previously in Genesis 24:3 and 7 by Abraham when he was sending his servant to get a bride for Isaac. In Daniel’s prophecy we also find this name for God used. See Daniel 2:28, 19, 37, 44. God is not only the God of heaven, but the God of the earth also. The names of the three Persons of the Trinity as used in Scripture are very, very important.

So what did Artaxerxes decree for Ezra? See 7:13.

Evidently it had previously been decided that Ezra could go to Jerusalem. Here he decreed that anyone among the Jews who wanted to go with him, could go. And Artaxerxes mention in particular the priests and the Levites. They would have been the men who would play a very important role in getting the people reestablished in their land.

Verse 14 tells us that not only was Artaxerxes in favor of this, but also “his seven councillors,” evidently the men who were the closest to him in his rule of the Persian Empire.

In verse 15 Artaxerxes and his counsellors had also agreed had made a great financial gift in support of this move of the Jews to Jerusalem. They evidently not only felt that giving to the Jews who would go with Ezra would not only be a threat to the Empire, but that it would lead to special blessing from God in the Empire.

There was more to follow in verse 16. The Jews who would go with Ezra, and Ezra too, were free to solicit funds from anyone in Babylon who wished to give in support of this move back to Jerusalem.

Verse 17 contains a most unusual part of the decree. It is clear that King Artaxerxes knew that Israel had a special relationship to God, and that there were special sacrifices ordained by God for the people to give to God as a primary part of the their relationship with God. And so he gave the Jews his unconditional permission to buy whatever animals they needed to have in order to maintain their relationship with God. This shows how impressed Artaxerxes had been with the devotion of the Jews to God. In Babylon they had no temple, no way of offering to God their sacrifices, but this Persian ruler had been moved to see what probably had been a growing devotion to their God as a result that their captivity had had upon them. Artaxerxes knew that this is what the people wanted to be able to do when they got back to Jerusalem. At that time the Temple had been rebuilt, but they needed the priests and the Levites to lead them, and they needed sacrifices to offer to the Lord. The Bible does not say this specifically, but the very mention of what Artaxerxes mentioned in his decree indicates that he knew what the Jews desired the most, and he knew that it would be no threat to the Empire to make sure that they could do all of these things.

I am not going to say that Artaxerxes had become a believer in Israel’s God, but I do say that he had been tremendously impressed and influenced by them. And so here in verse 18 he said that whatever money might be left over, they were to feel free to use it, as he said, “after the will of your God.” We certainly can say that the belief of the Jews in their God, was a belief in a God Who really existed. He could not account for the way that they lived except for the reality of their faith.

In verses 19 and 20 we see the same pattern repeated. Evidently not all of the vessels that the Jews had taken

away from Jerusalem when the Babylonians captured, had not been returned under Zerubbabel, and so Artaxerxes wanted to send the rest with them. And then verse 20 is almost identical with verse 18. He knew that it was going to take money to get their relationship with God reestablished, and he was willing to pay as much as he needed to in order that everything might be completed, as he said, “for the house of thy God.: When you stop to think of all that the King did, and that it did amount to a lot of money, and the freedom of more Jews. I can see that his heart had been greatly moved by Ezra and the Jewish people as well. What an illustration all of this is of what our Lord taught as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:16:

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

When you find a man who does not claim to be in the family of God, speaking and doing what Artaxerxes said and did, and especially when he had so much to say about the Lord in an understanding way, you can be sure that God has been at work in the lives of His people.

But there is still another important part of all that Artaxerxes had to say in his decree. Babylon did not extend all the way to Jerusalem. There were other peoples in between, and there were even Gentiles in the Holy Land. So the ruler of the Empire decreed that the treasurers of all of the occupied territory between Babylon and Judah, including Jerusalem, were to be responsive and generous for whatever Ezra required to get the worship of the true God in full operation again. As you go with me through these verses, and perhaps you have noticed all of this for yourself, aren't you amazed at what God did, basically through the influence of one man, a Jew, in order that his every need, and the needs of all of the Jewish exiles would be met. In an even greater way, we see in the life of Joseph what God did for possibly two million Jews because of the faithfulness in the life of Joseph. From his own home, and then as a slave in Potiphar's home, then in an Egyptian prison, and ultimately to a position second only to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, it was through the faithfulness of one man that God not only blessed Egypt, but saved Egypt and the surrounding nations from all those years of famine.

Taking this story about Artaxerxes, where do you think that God may be doing a special work today? Be sure that God is at work. Pastor Will has been bringing out that in all of those chapters in the book of the Revelation that have to do with what will take place in the Great Tribulation, that God is in full control, directing all of those events that will take place, carefully carrying out every detail of His sovereign will. Americans are going on in their sinful, God-dishonoring ways, and politicians seem to be able to do all that they want to do, completely disregarding anything that has to do with God, *but God is working, and He is in charge. So let us keep our eyes on Him.*

Verse 22 tells us that the provision that was made not only in money but also in materials. It is a waste of time to try to determine that value of all that was given according to this verse, but we can be sure that it was tremendous, even with the limitations that were put on part of it.

Verse 23 gives us another illustration of how greatly King Artaxerxes was influenced by Ezra and the Jews. He had started to think like them and to talk like them. This is the third time that we have the word “whatsoever” in the decree. See verses 18, 20, and now in 23. He was thinking about what God had commanded the Jews to do, and that it was done (he did not say for the Temple) – but “for the house of the God of heaven.” And then he asked a question which showed that he believed that all he was ordering in his decree, would result in blessing for “the realm,” that is his Empire, and for himself, and for his sons.” Do you suppose that Artaxerxes was thinking of the Abrahamic covenant, especially the part that says in Genesis 12:3,

3 And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

From Genesis 12 on through the rest of the OT we see many, many times that the children of Israel failed to do the will of God. If you were to list the good and the bad, there probably were more bad times than their were

good. There may have been more days of disobedience than there were days of obedience. But the covenant of God has never been revised to say less, and it never will be. Nations that have blessed Israel have been blessed themselves. I believe that that has been one of the major reasons for the blessing of God upon our country. And it ought to give us great concern that that seems to be changing. Of course, the greatest blessing that God pro-mised to Abraham was the blessing of salvation that would come through his greatest son (many generations later), the blessing of eternal salvation through the son of Abraham who was also the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. In this present age, which began when the Lord ascended back to heaven, the door of salvation has been thrown wide open to the Gentile nations of the earth. We can see that even in the OT God was reaching out to Gentiles as was the case when they were bond slaves of Gentile world empires.

But the blessings which Artaxerxes decree for the Jews was not over. We read of more in verse 24. Concerning the priests, the Levites, the singers, the porters, the Nethinim, and other ministers in the house of God, they were never to be taxed. Artaxerxes had very high regard for anyone connected with the service of the Tabernacle. The “porters” were door keepers, but we don’t know exactly what they meant. They assisted the priests who would have been overloaded with work just ministering with the people. So they needed help which the porters gave to them. There is a long history connected with the Nethinim, but in Ezra’s day they were assistants to the Levites. But Artaxerxes had the all in mind.

In verses 25 and 26 we see the priority that Artaxerxes attached to what he called “the Law of thy God.” He looked upon the Scriptures as the Word of God. And he learned this from Ezra, and from other devout Jews. He wisely advised Ezra specifically to appoint magistrates and judges who would judge the people in accordance with the Law, and they were to teach the Law to those who did not know it. It would be wonderful to see this same emphasis today in our churches about the preeminence of the Word of God for the people of God. Anyone who knew Ezra would see that this was how Ezra intended to lead the people of God.

But the Jews also needed to know that departure from the Word of God carried its punishments with it. In fact, that was really why the nation had gone into captivity under the hand of God. The judgments are not as severe today as they were under the Law, but the Apostle John writing toward the end of the first century reminded the Church that there is such a thing as “sin unto death.” And the Church was not to pray for those who were guilty of such sins. See 1 John 5.

The decree of Artaxerxes ends with verse 26. What a decree it was! And Ezra realized that it was the Lord God of their fathers who had put such a thing (the decree) in the King’s heart “to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.” Now the wording of this verse and verse 28 indicates that Ezra knew what the decree said before he left Jerusalem. I hope you remember that I told you last week that verses 7, 8, and 9 of this chapter were an abbreviated form of what we have in the decree in the verses we have been considering today. And Ezra attributed it all “to the good hand of his God upon him” (Ezra 7:9b). Here at the end of chapter 7 Ezra told about the effect that the decree had upon himself. I am referring to the last words of the chapter to Ezra wrote,

And I was strengthened as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me (Ezra 7:28b).

Ezra had access to the prophecy of Isaiah. It must have been one of the books he taught to the people of God in that day. I like to think that as he read the decree of Artaxerxes, and realized how unworthy he and his people were of such a blessing brought upon them, not by the King, but by the hand of the Lord, that his mind went to many OT passages of Scripture, and maybe this one at the end of Isaiah 40 was one of them, possibly the main one. Let me read it for you although you may have these verses tucked away in your memory, knowing that it applies to you too. Here it is:

28 Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.
 29 He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.
 30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall:
 31 But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint (Isa. 40:28-31).

For what Ezra wanted to do, and what he needed to do it, was strength. And he found it where you and I can find it, *in the Lord!* And it is only in the Lord, and comes to us where Ezra got it: in the Word.

What a chapter this is, from start to finish! And it came to Ezra through Artaxerxes from God. I trust that it really comes to us from the same source – through the Word by way of Artaxerxes and Ezra – from God!

12/14/09

Review Ezra 7, Artaxerxes decree, and Ezra's response in chapter 7:27-28.

0000000Ezra 8:1-20

As we go on to chapters 8 and 9, Ezra is the leading spokesman, but his name does not appear in either of these two chapters. Instead we find what has been called *the perpendicular personal pronoun*, "I," over and over again. So it is evident that Ezra was writing about himself. His name does appear six times in chapter 10: vv. 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 16. In Nehemiah he is mentioned seven times in chapter 8, and five times in chapter 12. Beyond this he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. He is not mentioned in Hebrews 11 as a person of faith, but he certainly could be because he stands out as a man of tremendous faith. And we will see that in Ezra 8.

In chapter 8 we are told about his going to Jerusalem from Babylon, and the people who went with him. According to 8:1-14 and 15-20, we are told that there were 1,824 men who are mentioned, but we must assume that many of these men, possibly all of them, were married, and some of them would have had children. But if we count the families, it still would not compare with the over 42,000 exiles who went back under Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple. See Ezra 2:64 ff.

We don't know what brought on the decree from Artaxerxes that we studied last week in chapter 7 to send as many exiles to go with Ezra as wanted to go to beautify the temple, but Ezra said that it was what the Lord had put in the heart of Artaxerxes to do. See Ezra 7:27-28. The original group who went back under Ezra are mentioned in the first 14 verses, but when Ezra discovered that there were no Levites in that group, he took steps to make sure that some Levites did go. And that is what we read about in verses 15 to 20 of chapter 8. But even that Ezra attributed to "the good hand of our God upon us" (Ezra 8:18). So the Lord was behind all of this.

8:21-23 As we come to verse 21, we come to three verses where we need to spend some time. They evidently were on their way and had gotten to Ahava, or Ahava was close to Babylon. That part is not clear. But Ezra called for a fast, which also means prayer that they might "afflict themselves," which means that they humbled themselves before the Lord, "to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance" (v. 21). Ezra was evidently very familiar with the country. And he knew about the marauding bands who would have loved to lay their hands on the valuables that the Jews had with them. Plus the people would not have been safe. Anything could have happened to the men, and then anything could have happened to the women and children. It was a very, very dangerous trip that they were starting out on.

But Ezra was a man of faith. And being a man of faith, he was a humble man. And being a humble man, he was a man of prayer. He wasn't about to depend upon his own wisdom, nor upon any previous experience that he might have had. And he had declared his faith to King Artaxerxes. Read again verse 22. He didn't claim any superior faith on his part, but he simply told what he believed. And what he believed was what he understood about God. He could see that this was true from the history of the nation of Israel. Ezra knew that this was the way God works.

Now he had told Artaxerxes that. And when he came to the moment when he was going to leave for Jerusalem, he knew that he had an opportunity to show Artaxerxes that God could take care of them, and that He would take care of them to get them to Jerusalem. Enough had gone on for Ezra to know that what they were about to do, they could not have done if the hand of the Lord had not been leading them to that point step by step. We can be sure that the King would have given him full support from the Persian army, but Ezra saw this as an opportunity for the Lord to be glorified by taking care of his people.

This tells us a lot about Ezra, doesn't it? We can be sure that Artaxerxes knew the story about Daniel in the lions' den, and that Ezra knew it too! And there probably were a lot of other stories that King Artaxerxes had heard about the people of God.

So what did Ezra do along with the people of Israel? Notice the three points that Ezra wrote down in Ezra 8:23:

- 1) "So we fasted" – which means that they humbled themselves beforehand
- 2) "and besought our God for this,
- 3) "and He was intreated of us."

We know what fasted means. They skipped a meal or two to have more time to seek the Lord. And Ezra said that they specifically sought the Lord "for this." And God answered them. Ezra said that God "was intreated of us." Notice "we fasted," "and He was intreated of us." That must have been a very large prayer meeting. What does it mean that "He was intreated of us." It means that God listened to them. He heard their prayer. And do you remember what the Apostle John said about God *hearing* prayer? Cf. 1 John 5:14-15: "And this is the confidence that we have in Him . . ."

This was primarily God's plan. He moved upon Artaxerxes' heart, and then on Ezra's heart, and then on the hearts of the people that they were willing to go.

There surely are great lessons for us here. We don't always know the will of God as clearly as Ezra did, and yet the more we know of what God has done in the past, and of His works in so many different situations, we know that He is still able to do "exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think." I have notice in reading the Psalms how often the people of Israel were exhorted to talk about God's wondrous works. Just a few days ago the Psalm that I had as my Psalm for the day was Psalm. Listen as I read to you the first six verses of that Psalm.

- 1 O give thanks unto the Lord; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.
- 2 Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.
- 3 Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord.
- 4 Seek the Lord, and his strength: seek his face evermore.
- 5 Remember his marvellous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth;
- 6 O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen (Psa. 105:1-6).

A good way to open a conversation with anyone is by just speaking of one, or more, of the amazing things that God has done, works recorded in the Word of God.

8:24-30 In this section we see that the great treasure which the exiles were carrying to Jerusalem was committed to “twelve of the chief of the priests.” Only two of them are named: Sherebiah and Hashabiah. In verses 25-27 we are told what the treasure was. Derek Kidner says that it was “enormous,” not so much in size, but in value. And it was to be used for the adornment of the House of God, the Temple in Jerusalem. So it was a sacred trust. From verse 30 we learn that the other priests and the Levites were to assist the ten chief priests whose main responsibility it was to see that the treasure got to its destination.

In verse 28 Ezra told the main priests, “Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy also.” Probably the word “holy” is used here means *to be set apart*. God had set apart the vessels and all of the sacred materials to be used in the Temple. And the ten priests were set apart by God to see that they got there. Thus, great responsibility was placed upon the priests. The other priests and Levites would have been tremendously impressed by these words of Ezra. They had been given as a freewill offering by the people to the Lord. Consequently they were told by Ezra in verse 29 that they were to watch them, and to keep them, until their journey’s end when they would be weighed “before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel in Jerusalem.”

The word “watch” means that they were to stay alert, even if it meant losing sleep, and to be on the lookout for anyone or anything that could keep the treasure from reaching its destination in Jerusalem.

The word “keep” to guard it, to keep their eyes on it, to save it. These two verbs are very close to meaning the same thing, and so Ezra’s exhortation to the priests was intensified.

I want you to see that in answer to prayer they were assured that the Lord would protect them and their treasure, but Ezra, speaking on God’s behalf, was exhorting them to do everything in their power, even to laying their lives down for it, to do everything in their power to make sure that nothing would happen to their precious treasure, but that they would use every means to protect the treasure just like it all depended upon them.

That has its application to us as Christians today, doesn’t it? We love to talk about the Lord keeping us, and keeping our salvation for us. Take for example, Jude 24 and 25:

24 Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,
25 To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.
Amen.

And what about Psalm 121?

1 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
2 My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.
3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
4 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.
6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.
7 The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.
8 The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

John 10:27–30 are verses we love to read, and repeat, and think about:

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:
28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.
29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.

30 I and my Father are one.

There many others I could mention, but let me give you one more. These are the words of Paul, but we can make the our words too:

12 . . . for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day (2 Tim. 1:12b).

It is amazing to me that, with all of these wonderful verses which talk about the Lord keeping us, that anyone could ever believe that we could lose our salvation.

But do you know that right after this last verse that I read to you, the Apostle Paul said this to Timothy:

13 Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

14 That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

What was the Apostle Paul talking about? He was talking about how every generation is to guard “the form of sound words,” that is, we are to guard the precious treasure that God has given to us, and that is the purity of the teaching of the Word of God, doctrinal purity. That is what is “the form of sound words.” This is one example of our treasure which we are to keep, to guard, to keep our eyes upon it and not let anyone take it away from us. We keep it also by making sure that our teaching is exactly what God has given us in His Word – all of the Word!

We ourselves are a part of the treasure we are carrying with us on the way, not to Jerusalem, but to heaven. The Apostle John has given it to us in the very last words of 1 John 5 – verse 21: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” An idol is anything that takes the place that only God should have in our lives. How are you doing with that one. That is a part of the treasure we are carrying. We are precious and holy to God, and He wants us to guard ourselves from idols – pleasures, money, positions, pride, and on and on.

Jude tells us not only that the Lord is able to keep us from falling, but he tells us to “keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 21). How do we keep ourselves in the love of God? Jude was not saying that we can get so far away from the Lord that He will quit loving us, but he probably had in mind one thing that the Lord told His disciples when He was with them in the Upper Room. This tells you how to keep yourself in the love of God: John 14:21:

21 He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.

If you and I want to enjoy the sweetness of fellowship with the Lord, we need to do His will which He has revealed for us in the hundreds of commandments that He has given us in His Word.

So we are like those priests and Levites who were carrying the treasure to Jerusalem. The Lord keeps us, but we also are responsible to obey Him, to keep His commandments, to keep ourselves from sin.

Well, how did the Jews do under the leadership of Ezra? The answer is found in Ezra 8:31-32. (Read.) If Ezra was happy after reading the decree of Artaxerxes (and he was), think how much happier he was when they all got safely to Jerusalem. The Lord kept them and their treasure, and they carefully guarded their people and their treasure.

8:33-36 The task was finished – not the completed work on the Temple, but the delivery of the treasure to the spiritual leaders of the temple, then the exiles offered a burnt offering to the Lord to worship Him for enabling them to complete their task. Finally in verse 36 they delivered the king’s commissions to the king’s

representatives, apparently showing the royal authority which confirmed the place of leadership that Artaxerxes had given to Ezra. Everything seemed to be pleasing to the Lord and to the King of the Empire. But Ezra was suddenly taken by surprise when he learned what was going on with the people. The Devil never lets us, and the people of God are continually showing that things can be right with outward details, but deeply displeasing to God as far as the lives of the people were concerned.