

EZRA - A MAN OF "THE BOOK"

Thoughts come from a wide variety of sources. Some from messages I have heard from individuals, some from assemblies Bible studies, some from home life and some from books I have read. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher who makes them real to me.

- "What the Bible Teaches, M.K. Hall, John Ritchie Ltd.
- "The Life Application Bible." Tyndale House and Zondervan

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the closing books of the historical account of Israel's history in the Old Testament. 1st and 2nd Chronicles are likely written by Ezra, "the scribe," for the benefit, instruction and motivation of those who returned to the land of Israel from their captivity in Babylon. The lessons from their national history hopefully would be learned and practiced by the returnees. Ezra writes about the religious aspect of the return and Nehemiah's message is about the civil part of that return.

Ezra was a priest by birthright but as a captive in Babylon would not have functioned as a priest while there. What he did was "Ezra prepared his heart to seek the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." This man became an exponent of the word of God, and through his ministry the word of God for the first time was taught, promoted and practiced as it should have been. It came across to the people with the power of a new revelation and changed the life of the nation. He was the first real student of the scriptures and how they should be taught and applied as we read the two books of Chronicles and Psalm 119 which he likely wrote.

Bible study was revived and the commitment to obey the word of the Lord revealed in the scriptures continues today. Originally Ezra and Nehemiah were thought of as one book until several hundred years after Christ was here. Ezra refers to the scriptures as the word of the Lord, the law, the commandments of the God of Israel, the book of Moses, the law of Moses, the law of God, the words of the God of Israel and the commandments of our God. With all of the descriptions given, there is no question that the preeminent place of the word of God is expected in the religious, social and civic life of God's people. There will be the needed power to practice the word of God and apply its principles if we know it.

The authority of the scripture has not diminished in any way even though very few people today read it personally. People avoid the truth because if it is believed and practiced, they will live, work and act differently than the majority of the population around us. The truth of the Bible is not just given as a source of information but is what Ezra wrote in Psalm 119:24: "Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors (the men of my counsel)." Those who read and apply the truth of the scriptures will find a treasure of information, instruction, delight and comfort as it becomes the core guide of our lives. God-given wisdom becomes obvious to others by its stabilizing effects on a person's life. With such a storehouse of unchanging truth, we have much to offer those around us who have no unchanging standard of truth. Consequently, they live in uncertainty and confusion.

Ezra knew, believed and practiced God's word. He wrote the Chronicles well aware of the historical account of the nation of Israel in the books of the Kings. His point was to instruct and motivate the new generation of returned exiles to seek the God of their fathers, and to obey Him. Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah all knew of Cyrus king of Persia, and either prophesied about him and what he would do for Israel as did Isaiah, or had personal contact with him like Daniel, and likely Jeremiah who prophesied concerning the return to Judah.

"The times of the Gentiles" started when Judah, the last of the children of Israel, was finally carried away captive to Babylon and will continue until they "are fulfilled" at the return of "The Son of Man in a cloud with power and great glory." The Jews who were taken captive by the Assyrians, most of the northern tribes, were so dispersed among the nations that there was no way to identify them. Those taken captive from Judah to Babylon retained their identity and those who returned to Jerusalem were identifiable as Jews even after seventy years away.

However, many of the Jews in Babylon became rich and stayed there and were assimilated into that society. It is possible for the people of God to become successful and satisfied to just be saved and want to go no further in their spiritual life. They remain spiritually immature, wanting to mainly enjoy life, not bother anyone else or have anyone bother them. They are likely Christians, but don't have the motivation to "live godly in Christ Jesus" nor seek out lost souls and give them the Gospel. They want the results of salvation, but not the costs of sharing in "the sufferings of Christ." The truth of the poem...

"Only one life "twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last"

does not resonate with them and so they remain blended with the world.

50,000 or so people followed Zerubbabel on the first return to Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding program. They wisely rebuilt the altar first to be able to offer sacrifices on it to the Lord. Then they began to rebuild the temple. Around fifty years later a second group of around 2,000 went back with Ezra to Judah. At that return they found that some of the people of God had already started to adapt to the society around them by intermarriage.

The book of Ezra is an account written by a humble, godly, obedient "man of the book" who committed himself to the service of God and did so with his whole heart for all of his life. He didn't give God just the last years of his life at his own convenience, but demonstrated God's faithfulness and promises to His people by being faithful and consistent himself. This book is a challenge to us to remember who we are and why we are here. Even though this is a spiritually dark time and there is a decline of moral and spiritual life in the nation, it is in times like this that the light of truth is more easily seen as the background become darker. We have an opportunity now to stand firm in the faith even though it may become much more costly socially, economically, religiously and personally.

Ezra 1

"HE IS MY SHEPHERD"

As the account of God's dealing with His people in the Old Testament starts the concluding events, it is well for us to learn that God has a purpose for His people and that will be fulfilled. 175 years before the events in Ezra chapter one happened, Isaiah had foretold these things including Cyrus' name and the fact that God was going to use him to bring about the return of His people. "He is My shepherd" lets us know that God can use anyone He chooses to fulfill His purposes. God's interest in His people can take a long time to be accomplished, or brought about quickly, in an unusual way initiated by those we least expect. We don't want to limit God in our thinking by insisting His purposes before will be done only as we think it should be.

Jeremiah had prophesied before the captivity that it would last seventy years and then the people of God would return to Jerusalem. The seventy years would have been the years between the carrying away of the people of Judah when the "times of the Gentiles" began, unto the finishing of the temple in Ezra's day. When the Babylonian empire was defeated by the Persians there was a different policy toward those in captivity from foreign countries. Instead of keeping them in one place, they wanted those of various tribes in their own geographical location to be subservient to the Persians. In that way they would provide income and also a safe zone around Persia. If opposition came it would affect those tribes before reaching the center of the empire. At that time the empire extended from India all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

Daniel was an old man by the time of Cyrus' reign but "this Daniel prospered" under Cyrus' leadership and prophesied concerning the end times and the future of Israel. We are made very conscious of the value of the true prophets whose word comes to pass. Preparations can be made in regard to what is yet to come and we can be kept from undue anxiety over what is happening presently.

"The word of the Lord" is not ever to be considered lightly. It will be fulfilled. When the same words are repeated at different times, what is said is very important. The first words spoken in Ezra 1:1-2 were not only said by Cyrus, but were written. Those same words conclude the historical account of the Old Testament in 2nd Chronicles 36:23. Restoration of Israel to the place God intended will actually happen. The "golden age" of Israel is yet in the future when under the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, there will be "peace on earth and good will to men." God will fulfill His word.

We may find it unexpected that the Lord God will use ungodly leaders to bring about divine purposes. But it was the Lord who "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus," and it was "the Lord God of heaven" who "charged" Cyrus to build the temple. When an ungodly leader obeys the word of the Lord, how much more should we who are children of God obey the word of our heavenly Father without hesitation or equivocation. Much of prophecy yet to be fulfilled relates to the Tribulation and following events in which Israel plays an important part. Israel does have a future, even though so often they have been very close to annihilation. Ungodly leaders in the future will be used to bring God's purposes to pass even though they may be unaware of it.

Recovery, revival and restoration begins with God working in the hearts of people. It is a fact that Cyrus wanted this restoration to happen but likely for political reasons and for the safety of his kingdom. It would be advantageous to him but also there was a respectful fear of the Lord about the man. His description of God as the Lord is significant. He recognized an authority higher and greater than his. Also, he did not hesitate to obey the word of the Lord. Some have likened this to scenes relating to the millennium and the restoring of the kingdom of Israel when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.

Not everyone was able to go to Jerusalem. It was around a 900-mile journey through difficult territory, so that would make it hard for aged people or those who had infant children to travel that distance. However, there are those who are tuned in to the mind of God and are not turned aside by obstacles. Some Jews in Babylon had become successful and wealthy. Daniel prospered and because of age could not make the journey. But it is expected that he would have supported those who could go. Fellowship and a united purpose are not expressed in one particular way. Some give time and talent. Others give financial support and encouragement to the workers who go forth to labor in the harvest. People who "use the sword" and those who "stand by the stuff" are both sharers in the work of God. "We are workers together with Him."

It is our privilege to support the work of the Lord being done by others by effective and specific prayer. We can learn the specifics of a need through communicating with the Lord's servants by letters, emails and telephone calls. Also, a journey to the place where a work is being done by others opens our eyes, minds and hearts to the workers and the people as well as the place where they are laboring. Financial support is an on-going need in any outreach, and is a good expression of fellowship and interest.

The house of God is important to the Lord. It is the gathering center of His people. Each local assembly represents the "house of God" in which God dwells. Each person in an assembly has a role to fill either to remain in one place and fulfill a work in whatever way possible, or to go to "the regions beyond" and build something new for God where "His name has not been known." Each gift and each unique place, is to be coordinated as part of reaching the common objective. Our goal is to see the "vast building" completed and our Lord Jesus Christ given His proper honor world wide.

There was an immediate response from some of the people. When we know something is right and needs to be done, don't wait. The actions of a leader set the precedent for those who follow. The chief leaders were ready and willing to take responsibility for the enterprise. Sheshbazar (also known as Zerubbabel) stepped up to his place of leadership in this new venture. There were priests ready to go as representatives of the people to God, and to lead them in scriptural worship. Levites were there to fill roles of service as designated by God, and to be accountable for all the gifts that came in to finance the work. There was real commitment on the part of all whose heart God moved to go forth following the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua.

Even the vessels of the Lord that were in the temple and had been carried to Babylon were brought out of the idols temple and sent back to Jerusalem where they belonged. Because the Jews had no idols that conquerors could carry away, the vessels and tools used in spiritual service had been taken - and now were returned. The vessels for the house of God were all that remained of temple worship. Believers today are vessels in the house of God to be used in whatever service God appoints for them. We are to be vessels in the house of God "sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work."

Ezra 1:1. *"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,"*

THE LORD STIRRED.

They were there in his city, though from a different land.
Each one seemed quite busy; some good with their hands.
Others able in business and good at turning a profit -
But it wasn't hard to see; they didn't really fit.
These are God's people, far away from their home -
That's why the Lord stirred up the king so they would return.

When God starts to work, there are no limitations.
He creates a stir in the spirit making situations
To arise that produce from some unusual source;
An action in one person can change the whole course
Of a nation of people that to most is hidden from view.
But when the Lord stirs them up there are quite a few.

God has a purpose today, similar to that one of old.
He wants His people to be willing to do what they're told.
When it comes to making changes in the daily affairs of life,
God wants willing people to go up and do what is right
By building up again what has been torn down,
And restoring His house where once His name had been crowned.

To build up again what was once a place of glory;
Is probably not going to happen, like at the first of the story.

But God is not limited, He can use whoever He will,
Beginning with a pagan king who has a conscience still;
And through him calling on others - the people of God,
To leave what they are doing and go up to build.

Build again the place where God dwells with the people He chose.
Build again in the same place with leadership and all of those
Whose spirit God raised up to see far beyond here;
And give themselves to a work that God's name will bear.
Build again so the people of God will worship again
In Spirit and in Truth - the ways that please Him.

Are there those willing to go back and really start over?
By giving up what pleases them and seek and recover
The truths that distinguish those who gather in His name alone?
Are there those who will answer the call of their conscience and come
To rebuild again based on the scriptures that guide -
And the Holy Spirit's direction that in each believer abides?

“Gracious God, our eyes are often in the wrong place looking for the wrong thing. If there is a “Cyrus” somewhere near by Thou art stirring up, please send him to us to challenge our hearts and spirits to build again. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 2

CAME AGAIN

There was a new foreign policy in effect when Persia became the ruling empire of the Middle East under the leadership of Cyrus. People who had been captured by the Babylonians were allowed to return to where they came from in order to create a buffer around Persia itself. It was because of this policy that Cyrus was moved by God to have Jews who were living in Babylon as captives, go back to Judah and Israel. Even though Cyrus was not a believer in the sense of being born again, we can see evidence of one who acknowledged the fact of God as the Supreme Being, and did not want the judgment of God to fall on him like it did on Belshazzar who died after a night of careless, licentious revelry in which he had used the vessels of the Lord as drinking cups.

Like Egypt represents the world (cosmos) system of society and government, Babylon represents the religious world of popular opinion and human ideas as the way spiritual life is to be practiced. When men put their opinions into the mix of "spiritual" life, there is nothing but a mixture of confusion and controversy. Each person or group of people who promote their own convictions becomes a sect that divides it from other sects. When the people of God are committed to the scriptures of truth and the only source of information as to belief and conduct of life, there is a sense of submission to divine authority instead of human authority, and a willingness to stay within the parameters of the word of God, even though that is despised by religionists.

The children of Israel had been in bondage to Egypt, the world, hundreds of years before. Now they had spent seventy years in bondage to the religious world of Babylon. This edict of Cyrus opened the way for those with a desire for God in their hearts to go "up to Jerusalem," to the "house of God" even house they had to start from a scratch. The temple had to be rebuilt. But God had His people there ready to go forward in spite of weakness and difficulties. God has had His people all down through the centuries who have had no man-made name to identify them except the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the same today. People ask, "Who are you? What name is your religion? Why can't you be like others so we can identify you?" For some reason they cannot see that the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ whose name is above every name, is the name of the Person to whom we gather. It is not a religion, but a living organism gathered to a living Person who "is the same yesterday, and today, and forever." When we gather to that name alone, we have the Holy Spirit of God to guide us and preside over the gathering of God's people under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ.

During the years since the church was born at the day of Pentecost, there have been times of revival and rebuilding among the people of God that has had a positive impact on the whole body of Christ. One of those revival times that affected the English-speaking world, has resulted in a return to the Bible only, as our source of guidance and instruction. Assemblies of God's people who have returned to the simplicity of practicing what the scriptures say, have been gathered throughout the world. These groups are committed to the word of God in the scriptures as their only source of information and truth for Gospel activity and teaching relating to church gathering. Revival can, and does happen when the time and condition for it takes

place in the lives of God's people. "If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and heal their land."

it is incumbent on us to leave that which of the world of Egyptian bondage, and that which is worldly religion, the Babylonian bondage, and turn to God and to "the place" where the Lord has put His name. The important thing is to whom we have gathered, and the place where we are, not what we might have left or even what other people might say. The names of those who make the journey to where our Lord has put His name, are known to Him. "We are not our own. We have been bought with a price." The lists of names in this chapter include leaders, families and their cities, priests, Levites and servants. All are important, and each and every one has a role to fill in the rebuilding process. No one is insignificant in the family of God or to the work of the Lord.

The first list is names of leaders whose leadership is important in any enterprise or group of people including families, assemblies and businesses as well as nations. In this list there are two leaders who shared the main leadership responsibility. Zerubbabel was the leader from the line of royalty, and Jeshua from the line of the priests. There is safety when leaders take counsel together and come to a consensus even though each is from a different viewpoint. There are practical matters to be considered, and as a "kingdom of priests" there are spiritual matters to be discussed together. God's people need the kind of guidance that meets the needs of all aspects of divine service, so we have a plurality of leadership in God's assemblies.

It is quite likely that many in this first list who were recognized leaders in some way among the people of God. There are a number of ways one's reputation is established. Perhaps some were from families who had been taken captive in Judah years earlier, and it was obvious they had learned what was right and wrong by the time spent in captivity. Others were probably born in captivity but in the new generation some had arisen among them who appreciated the uniqueness of God's people and had a sincere desire to serve God where they were. These could be trusted to serve by leading in the rebuilding project.

Judah had failed, but purging had taken place, and some of God's people at least recognized the faith of their fathers in the Lord God of Israel. These not only returned to the faith of their fathers, but when the opportunity arose, they wanted to return to the place of their fathers. Those in leadership included leaders among the priests who knew what had to be done in restoring scriptural practices and scriptural worship. There were Levites who could lead, who knew what to do in the service of the Lord including the care and maintenance of the temple to be built, and the way to prepare the sacrifices for the priests to offer. Temple servants from the tribe of Levi knew personally, or had been told by their aged fathers what had to be done and how it was to be done in order to satisfy the teaching of the word of God.

Others in the list had served the kings, and knew what was appropriate to be consistent with divine authority. Some wanted to serve but were not qualified, so had other work to do that would be useful and needed in other places. The reason for genealogies was to know why each person fit in the overall scheme of things and what part of the work in which they were to participate. Those who were not qualified to fill a position were not free to do whatever they wanted. Just because we want to do a certain thing doesn't give us the right to do it. God has an order. That order is essential to keep those who are not in the family of God from being deceived or from deceiving others.

Not everyone who wants to be a part of the work of the Lord can participate in it. It is not uncommon in a new outreach work for some people who profess to be saved to want to take a leading role and have a voice in decisions that are made. Such people who push themselves forward are either motivated by a fleshly desire to lead, if they are Christians, or they may not be saved at all. That kind of attitude is not the humility that is associated with spiritual leadership. The evidence of spiritual life is seen in the consistent walk with the Lord and a willingness to do simple and menial things with the heart and without recognition. When someone comes among us with an obvious desire to lead and advance themselves, we owe it to that person to let them know why we question the reality of their profession. They may have been misled by someone or something into thinking they are saved when they are not.

Some people are known by their own history and/ or family reputation. Others are known by the reputation of the place from which they came and where their forbearers came. That knowledge can be discerned by a person who is known locally, knowing the stranger who is coming among the saints and can be recommended personally. Another scriptural way of discerning reality of faith and practice is when a letter of recommendation identifies the person and names of responsible people are put to the letter. A question or two can usually settle any doubts there may be about the reality of a person's faith and commitment to the word of God.

God has His own people for the time and place in which they are found. Even though they may be faithful to Him and His word, not all who follow them are people of true faith in Christ. Their children may do the same things and their forbearers for a time, but when there are pressures or temptations to change, they may be revealed as to who they are in truth. Applying ourselves to the role we have been given by divine Persons and the ability to fill that role, keeps us from meddling in another person's line of work and/or criticizing their work for God because it is not like ours. We may think another person isn't doing what we think they should, but it is to "his own Master" he is responsible. He has his work in the kingdom and I have mine. Rebuilding that which has been lost takes all of us to work in harmony together.

There are difficulties that arise among assemblies when true believers come and want to participate in the breaking of bread, and feel they have this right because they say so. They expect the assembly to let them do what they want. One's manner of life, commitment to the word of the Lord, commitment to His people and to His work, their belief as to what the scriptures teach - all need to be investigated. Sometimes what we must do is wait on God in prayer to reveal His will to us. When we ask a person to wait, and watch the proceedings of an assembly meeting, often their real attitude is exposed. Some will walk out angry. Others will appreciate the careful concern and will gladly take the observers seat.

The free-will offerings of the people to support the people making the journey to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, follows the same pattern as the New Testament church is given. These were not tithes of ten percent. Whether it was animals, goods or money, it was up to the giver what they were willing to give to further the work ahead. This principle of giving to God is the scriptural practice of the New Testament church. This is different and separate because this is a response to God's grace, rather than keeping the law. The proportionate giving maintains that for which we are responsible. The free-will giving is to further the work in which others are engaged. We are to give from the heart to God from that which He has given to us. The "ability" to give is up to us.

The great number of burden-bearing animals included in this great group would have been loaded with material brought from Babylon to be used in the work ahead. The 900-mile journey would have been arduous and a lot of food was needed for around 50,000 people beside the animals. The sacrificial giving of the leaders who gave what they could, was a good example to all the others to give of goods, labor or whatever they had. The physical destruction of Jerusalem and the temple site likely grown over with weeds, would have moved the hearts of the godly to take action.

Ezra 2:69. *"They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priest's garments."*

BY THEIR ABILITY.

What really are we able to do? What are we able to give?
Is there a measure that fits everybody no matter where they live?
How is responsibility measured anyway? From where is the point we start?
We need to remember this universal fact, "Man looks on the outward - God looks on the heart."

Our calling in life is different from others based on several facts.
Leaders are placed into their position when the Holy Spirit acts.
Leadership has certain obligations attached that not everyone can meet.
To step ahead of God's people and lead them is not some simple feat.

The geographical location of one's home has a certain kind of culture.
If one is from Bethlehem and another from France, we have different cultural natures.
But God expects each one to give to Him from the best of his ability.
And He will use in the way that is best according to its suitability.

There are those who are able to attend to the things of God fulltime.
It is not that they are more important people, but in the course of life they did find -
They had placed by God inside of them, a desire to reach out to others.
So, God uses their ability to reach to sinners, and the saints to recover.

Others have talents given by genetics; others have gifts given by God,
To join with the gifts of other believers to use in the service of the Lord.
When these all are put together and are working right, there is a beauty to behold.
The work of God goes forward; God is glorified and lost sheep are brought into the fold.

To rebuild what has been lost takes a lot of time and sometimes seems in vain.
The removal of rubble to get to the foundation usually causes some pain.

When finally, we have reached the solid rock upon which the church is built
We find it is sound and unchanging, though debris over it has spilt.

The ability God has given to each to use has to be attended to and be used.
That ability can be a reason for condemnation if for some reason it is refused.
The challenge of faith is linked with ability; one needs to go forward with God.
Trusting Him to use what is yours out of appreciation for the Lord.

“O God of all grace: Thy people have been given much. May we all commit ourselves to use for Thy purpose and glory, what has been dispensed to us. May the needs that we are able to fill, truly be filled by us. Stir our hearts to express our gratitude to Thee in practical ways. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 3

AT LAST!

How thankful we are that God is not unaware of our human needs. The returned exiles needed a place to live and it was probably not without difficulty that they "dwelt in their cities." Other people had settled in the area, some by the Assyrians who wanted to keep the population mixed so they would not unit against them, and likely others who saw empty houses and just moved in. The Lord God gave them time to get their accommodations in order, but "when the seventh month was come" here they all came from all parts to Jerusalem. The time had come to begin doing what they were sent to accomplish - rebuild the temple. We do have legitimate needs in life and are thankful for our gracious heavenly Father who knows what we need better than we do ourselves. But when the time comes to apply ourselves to the work of the Lord, we must not let personal ambitions for ourselves take the place of our calling and obligation to Him. We will never be fully satisfied with what we have, so those considerations are less than urgent. A casual attitude toward the things of God is never acceptable.

There were a number of things the returned exiles did together at that time when they came together as "one man" in unity of purpose. They gathered together as one man; they set the altar on his bases; they offered burnt offerings; they kept the feast; they gave money; they sang together; they praised the Lord together. That did not mean they could do, or even had the right to do, everything but they were solidly behind the actions of the priests and leaders so the work of God could go forward without arguments or controversy. A unified people, is a strong people. Strong people can do great things for God even when there is opposition and fear.

It is important to get first things first in the work of the Lord. To set the altar where it belonged was of greatest importance. God isn't limited to a building but after seventy years of private worship in the ungodly religious world, it was important that public testimony be established even out in the open where there was no building. The altar emphasized the consciousness of the people toward the presence and protection of God, and the on-lookers who had moved there saw an attitude and testimony of faith even though they didn't understand it. The altar also emphasized the purpose and commitment of the Lord's people and demonstrated that they were seeking God's power and were dedicating themselves to living for God in a public way. They had sinned as a people and the altar fire had been out for seventy years. Now they had experienced forgiveness and wanted that to be seen. When a person has been saved by God's grace, the public testimony of baptism in view of living a new life for God, and the gathering with the Lord's people to worship, is probably one of the best ways the truth of the Gospel can be seen even without words.

Resettlement under the Assyrians of the northern areas had brought strangers into the area who didn't know anything about the Lord God of Israel. There was a fear of them that could have been intimidating if the Lord's people were only saying words of faith. When the remnant gathered together as one man, and the burnt offering began on the altar that was set in the right place, and the smoke of acceptance could be seen even from a distance - then the unity of purpose and action was able to be seen out in the open for all opposition to see. That would have made it plain to onlookers that these people had a God they trusted and who would preserve them from those who opposed. Worship reveals our respect and reverence for God, and testifies to all that we have faith in Him. Our praises and offerings of gratitude from the hearts of redeemed people shows that we believe worship is foremost in our hearts - it comes first. Obedience to God from the heart and fellowship with our Lord takes precedence over any personal activities in which we might be engaged.

The burnt offerings that ascended to God from that place of ruin was a testimony of faith, thanksgiving, worship and praise. The work of the priest, Jeshua, was to build the altar. Ours is to seek first the kingdom of God. The spiritual things come before the temporal things. A building does not reflect the heart of God's people toward Him. We worship privately daily when we give thanks, worship and praise to God in our

hearts as we pray, read the scriptures and perhaps sing a hymn. When I listen to God speaking through His word, I am listening to Him communicating His will to me. In family life we have times when we read the scriptures with our children, listening to what God has to say to us. Then we pray and maybe sing a hymn of praise as we respond as a family to God's grace to us. That practice sets a tone for the day and in the evening is a reason and way for us all to express our thanksgiving. Assembly gatherings for remembrance, prayer, praise, hearing the voice of God through His word, and proclaiming the Gospel, are significant times of worship. When there is unity in our fellowship with God, then there is unity of purpose and unity of worship.

There is an order in the things of God that we find in the pattern written in the word of God. The spiritual life of God's people is seen in the offerings we bring to the altar. Christ is the altar; Christ is the sacrifice; Christ is the center of everything. Instead of fear of opposition there is trust and confidence when we see "Jesus only." There is a desire in the hearts of true believers to express their faith in God and demonstrate their motive for living. We recognize Christ in our worship as the "sweet savor" for God as in the burnt offering in which everything was for God. In Jerusalem the priests kept the order of daily burnt offerings; the feasts of Jehovah; the monthly "new moon" offerings and the freewill offerings in the way it was written "in the law of Moses." Leadership responsibility today involves keeping the will and word of God before the people now that we have "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" that has made us free from the "law of sin and death."

In making preparations for the work of building the house of the Lord, both Zerubbabel and Jeshua realized the need of planning and prayer before taking action. The instructions for those builders had to be understood and also the reason God wanted the house rebuilt. In the process of rebuilding not everything can be done at once. But they knew why they were there and the importance of building the altar and building the temple. The burnt offering was the starting point. Then the foundation must be prepared. Likely the temple was built on the foundation of Solomon's temple. A solid foundation is essential for any work of God. The unseen work is as important as that which is visible. The law of Moses was the guide for those in the ancient day. What was done had to be scripturally correct with the word of God followed in every way. We have the same obligation to follow the scriptures, not do things our way.

The returnees had the order right as far as what they were doing so far, but the temple work had not started. They had come to build the house of the Lord. The leaders had to coordinate the work and maintain a sense of oneness in the work. Once a work is begun, they need to "set forward" the incentive to keep the momentum of the work moving toward completion. The materials began to come together as the logs came from Lebanon. The foundation site was cleared by removing the broken parts of the old. A new start isn't just a patch-up job of the old. In any work for God a unified leadership is needed. Unity between those who lead and those who labor is needed. A sense of commitment to the work on the part of all is needed. Foundation work is not glamorous nor obvious, but is fundamental and absolutely necessary for a settled work.

Those who returned from Babylon were conscious of their need of God, so they worked for God. They used what they had for God and gave all praise and thanks to God and worshipped Him. When our attitude is right toward God, we are motivated to serve Him with all our heart. There are principles that we have learned to go by and the phrase "as it is written" is not a casual statement but is the basis of authority on which our practices are based. When the work was begun on the foundation, there was joy on the part of those who saw evidence of a long-delayed hope now becoming real to them. There would be joy for the glory of God being first seen visibly in their labors. There would have been joy for the establishing of a place for His name. There would have been joy for God's goodness and mercy in the recovery and restoration of His people to Him, and now to His work.

The sorrow and weeping may have been on the part of older people who remembered the glory of the temple Solomon built. Likely there was sadness for what had been lost because of sin. There would have been sadness because of what could have been for many years, but those were wasted years. There was likely sadness as they faced the guilt for what they had done, and what they had not done. There was likely sadness because of their past failures and for the departed glory that had once been in that place. We can't avoid times of sadness as we think of past failures and losses, but we are not doing right if we dwell on that which we cannot change. We begin where we are with what God has given us and move forward in faith and confidence in Him alone. When we "do with our might" that which we can, we can have joy instead of sorrow; peace instead of pain; trust in the trials of labor and life.

Ezra 3:1. *"And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem."*

TOGETHER AS ONE.

Even though they had been captives and now were back home;
Those from other countries were resentful that they had come.
But fear is a legitimate emotion that can have good effect.
It can draw people together as one to protect
Not only themselves but the work to which they are called.
Those who oppose God's people are often appalled
By the thought there is a God to which they are accountable.
And they fear such a One whose person is redoubtable.

The tension prompted by fear also makes God's people consider
The importance to carefully carry out all God wants us to render.
When we gather as one our offerings and worship to give;
We help each other fulfill God's purpose with spiritual gifts.
Those complete the full spectrum God has always intended
To bring out the beauty of holiness when these gifts are blended.
In this way the work of God goes steadily forward
Bring a completed work for God as the final reward.

Laying a good foundation is reason for great rejoicing.
There will be no doubt older people who will be voicing
Their remembrances of wonderful days in the past,
And hoped time would stop and those good times would last.
There is a certain realism we have to face, and then bring
What we have in our hands, and then we can sing
Along with the young and old as to our God we praise
What we see at the present and in faith His house we raise.

“Thou didst hear the sound of joy from Thy people in the past. Even then there was sadness at what was lost. Some of us who are older recall times in the past when there was great rejoicing in places where the house of God was being built. However, I know many of the younger believers who don't remember that, find rejoicing in the present as Thou dost save one here and there. Help me to have, and share, genuine joy with them. I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 3:13. *“So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud voice, and the noise was heard afar off.”*

HOLY NOISE.

What is all this noise about? The sound of shouting is going all over the area and the folks around are wondering what is going on? What is so important as to make such a fuss? What is the big deal about a few stones being laid down as the foundation of a new building? Why are the old people crying and the younger ones shouting for joy?

Finally, there is some activity that counts. The Lord spoke to the pagan king by the prophet Jeremiah and told him to get the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. When God speaks, even kings are wise to obey His word. The people rallied and by the tens, hundreds and thousands, they began to collect all that was needed for the work of rebuilding. First things first: the priests built the altar of God, set it on its base, offered the burnt offerings and kept the feast of tabernacles. Then the Levites got at their work of rebuilding the temple. Material started coming in from various places. Finally, the big day came when the building was to start. The priest-trumpeters got dressed in the right apparel; the singers got in their places and the people shouted for joy. They were praising the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was finally laid.

But what is this? There is crying here among the older people. They are loudly weeping so that onlookers cannot tell the difference between the joy and weeping. The older folks had seen Solomon's temple and all its overwhelming glory. The difference between what was, and what is, was great. What caused joy to one group caused grief to another.

We can spend a lot of wasted time looking into the past at what was the greatness of a work done for God or a work of God done through others in the past. We are where we are and who we are; there is nothing we can do to change that. So, we begin where we are now and move on with God's help even though it may not seem too great to those from another time or place. Begin where you are and look ahead to the goal. The temple was rebuilt even though the glory of it wasn't the same as the one Solomon built. Even the later temple built by Herod over a period of 46 years wasn't the same as this one. Yet, the Lord Jesus Christ still referred to it as “My Father's House.”

“Keep me, Father, with a genuine and deep respect for the house of God. May I never be sidetracked with the backward look. I know things are different now and they will never be the same as yesterday or today. Perhaps the days and the work ahead could be better than ever before if I keep my eyes and heart on the right objective - the Person and Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Ezra 4

THOSE LETTERS!

The start of a new work is an exciting time. People are looking forward to a new beginning and the project that is beginning is a good one. To those returned from exile it was the house of God which would have been something most of them had never seen before. The old people there remembered the past with sorrow, but enthusiasm on the part of the younger people seemed to be real. However, we need to remember that when Satan has control of an area or a people, he wants to maintain that. When the Gospel of God comes and inroads are made with the truth of God into the hearts and lives of people who have become used to sin, then he is bound to oppose. When God is working, Satan will use whatever means possible to stop that work.

Samaritans were people who had settled into the area and intermingled with those who had been left to till the land and provide the taxes the conquerors wanted. People had become used to a certain lifestyle and didn't want any changes. That is a continuing problem throughout human history. It is rampant today. The only changes people want is more freedom to sin. Anti-Christian comments and mockery is often used by the media as well as those who teach our children in public schools. Many university professors make a point of seeking to undermine the faith of young believers, and will take unfair advantage of their position to make Christians a laughingstock before impressionable young students.

The enemies of the Jews who were rebuilding the temple began their assault by false friendship and compromise as a means of undermining the work of God's people. Their profession of sincerity was apparently easily discerned by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and their offer of participation was rejected. Unity can only be allowed if it is based on that which God allows. The fellowship of light and darkness produces a false twilight that is partly true and partly false. When those two are mixed, it is all false. Opposition may begin with compromise, but when compromise is rejected, alliances are formed against the truth by those who do not want the work of God to go forward. Alliances then use intimidation and accusations to hinder and stop that which is of God.

To mix the worship of God with the "worship" that is common to Christendom is sin. True worship is to God alone in spirit and in truth. Many people claim to be Christians for their own interests. "Christian" is only a word to them, not "one of Christ's." That is one reason discernment is so necessary when deception and confrontation arises. False friendship, undermining a work by creating weakness, and planned interference, falsehood and deceit are all ways in which the world, the flesh and the devil use to stop that which is of God.

Discouragement can become hopelessness. Hopelessness creates a, "Too bad. There's nothing we can do," attitude. Discouragement and fear can paralyze the people of God and stop that which is right. Opposition doesn't mean a work is wrong. Usually it means just the opposite. The devil won't oppose that which is already under his control. We must face the fact that there will be unified opposition as the Gospel spreads world wide to those places and people Satan claims as belonging to him.

Zerubbabel was a good leader as long as things were going ahead, but seemed to be intimidated when the opposition got strong from those higher in positions than he. The three letters written at different times to different kings were really distortions of the facts and some lies. The first letter was a misrepresentation of the present work by linking it with the past failures of God's people. There were also assumptions and false impressions created that implied bad consequences would be the result of the house of God being finished. That likely included the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem which was on the way to being a city of importance again. Haggai and Zechariah came to encourage Zerubbabel to start again. A discouraged leader is a defeated leader. Circumstances in life or in some particular endeavor can cause discouragement when we get our eyes off of our Lord. God's work, Zechariah said, "Is not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord."

One of those letters was written when Esther was queen, and ten years later there was another letter of attack. The animosity in the letter to Artaxerxes that is copied in this chapter was a serious challenge that he felt he could not ignore. We have to face the fact that there will be times of unified opposition as inroads into Satan's domain are made by the preaching of the Gospel. That can adversely affect the people of God, and cause a lack of interest and a loss of faith unless we are committed to the commission we have received

and remember that our call to the work comes from the highest possible source in the Universe - the Almighty God. When letters are written to try to deal with differences of opinion or to correct what is perceived as wrong, they are open to misrepresentation. Our Lord indicated that when I have "ought against my brother," I am to go to him personally, not write him a letter. Usually the issue between two people is settled in that way. However, if the matter isn't settled, then we are to take one or two more who know the situation and go together to have a face to face conversation and deal with the problem in a way that not a lot of people know about. If it still is creating a problem, then we are to tell it to the church. Letters usually are biased and/ or a distortion of the facts written to create a certain impression. It is important we do God's things in God's way.

Ezra 4:8. *"Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:"*

WROTE A LETTER.

It doesn't seem right to make accusations without speaking face to face.
Or if after a reasonable dialogue, to spread rumors to those in another place.
The damage that is done by doing things this way may last a very long time.
It may be irreparable when there is no resolution to find.

The reasons behind opposition may at first be very small.
And if after discussion is made, you may find there is nothing to it at all.
One person may do things a little different from the way you choose to do.
But by a conversation with each other, the problem will soon be through.

However, when complaints are written against another, they are hard to reverse.
Explanations may be tried to make, but usually it makes things worse.
To stop the tide of opinion that comes from an accusing letter -
Will take the death of one side or the other before things can be made better.

Accusations written down to read can stop a work for God in its tracks.
The fallout from such statements of opinion can never be taken back.
A work begun may falter and die and never be started again;
Because those making the written accusations weren't involved when the work began.

If something is obviously evil about a work that another person does;
It is right to address the problem before further problems are caused.
The mode of correction is clear: go to that person or persons alone.
If they will hear your concerns and correct them; the work is already done.

If for some reason they will not listen, take another person along -
Who knows for himself there is a serious problem, and wants to right the wrong.
Almost always that solves the problem and there is nothing written to accuse
At some later date an issue that a righteous dialogue did diffuse.

Words spoken carelessly; one wrote; are like caged birds that are let loose.
There is no bringing back what is written when to send that letter one did choose.
A letter can be a very good thing if its purpose is to help and inform.
When an accusing letter has left your hand, what you said cannot be undone.

"O God who knows all: I pray of Thee today to give me the common sense and understanding to do things Thy way. If a correction is in order, help me to give it with grace, or receive it in the same way. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Ezra 5

TWO MEN

Sometimes in a work for the Lord or even some long-term project we do for ourselves, we become weary in the work and decide to take a rest from it for awhile, fully intending to get back to it soon. But for some reason other things come in and crowd out the time and if the truth is told, give us an excuse to avoid going back at such a big job. That happened to those who had returned to build the house of God at Jerusalem. The pressures against them and the tensions that arose apparently got the best of them, and for quite a number of years the work of building the temple stopped. That is when leaders of God's people need to be aware of their own personal need of close fellowship with God. If the leadership gets cooled off and sidetracked, that will happen to the other people who follow them.

God had His men for the need of that time. Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets sent by God, came to get the work moving again. They prophesied in the name of God and spoke God's mind and will to the people. A prophet is a person who speaks to God for men, and to men for God. He is responsible to give God's

assessment of a work and often give predictions of the consequences that will follow. They both minister the word of God to the people and work with their hands to meet needs where they see them. Personal involvement in a work in a physical way lends substance to the messages they give.

Preachers and teachers are not above other people in the sense of being excused from taking responsibility to act in fellowship with God and men in all aspects of a work. Often, we are the answer to our own prayer for laborers to go forth into the harvest. The separation of people into clergy and laity is not a biblical practice in a scripturally gathered New Testament assembly. One who works for the Lord in spreading the Gospel may be self-supporting some, or all, of the time. It is true that "they who preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel" but that does not mean we are doing wrong when we must labor with our hands to meet our needs and the needs of others. Paul is an example of one who preached the Gospel and taught the believers at Corinth. and at the same time made tents to pay expenses.

Haggai and Zechariah connected with Zerubbabel and Jeshua to strengthen, encourage and comfort them and others. That is the work of the prophet as far as speaking to the people for God. On the other hand, we who have been helped by their efforts for us, need to encourage those who speak the truth of God to us. It is not always an easy thing to preach and teach, and find little interest and/or results. The two books in the Bible bearing their names fills in a lot of background information about the people and their state of mind, and the work of the Lord that was happening in Jerusalem at that time. "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

Both Haggai and Zechariah were used of God at the same time in Judah, and they were used together, and yet they were each different. Haggai seemed blunter, and so made it plain that the work on the temple didn't stop because of the opposition of the enemies. It stopped because of lack of interest on the part of the Jews. There will always be opposition to an active work of God of one sort or another. We can perceive a hindrance to the work to be the reason to stop what we are doing for God. Really though, the problem of self-interest and lack of spiritual desire is what is behind the complacency and apathy that stops the work. It is not to be expected that doing God's work in a godly way, and with a godly manner of life will happen. That is in opposition to all the world stands for. Pressure against divine things is to be expected.

Haggai's message was in relation to the work itself and the outward failure of the Lord's people to put their shoulder to the reason they were there in the first place. They were sent there to build a house for the Lord. That is what we are to be doing in our day. The Lord is building the church, and has commissioned us to carry on that work in His name, and by His power working in us and through us. Zechariah spoke to the hearts of the people. He wanted to awaken their consciences in order to make the work of God progress. Their inward need of holiness and fellowship with the Lord was the heart of his message. He was reaching to the hearts of the people to motivate them to devotion to the Lord. He spoke to Zerubbabel and said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit saith the Lord."

Both messages are needed in our day. Two different brethren, with two different styles of preaching, and two different areas of focus can be used by God to produce a revival of interest in the Lord's people. We need to be challenged inwardly to get right with God in our devotion to Him, in our thought life, in our personal fellowship with our Lord. We need to be on good speaking terms with Him so that we know His will through His word and are prepared to act upon it. We also need to be consistent in our outward lives, earnestly seeking to represent our Lord Jesus Christ in both our words and deeds. An impression is created that affects other people as they listen to the words of our vocabulary. "Let your 'Yes' be Yes, and you 'No' be No." Slang expressions that are suggestive or inappropriate must not be used. Even the kind of clothes we wear demonstrates either modesty or immodesty. The way we do our work is an evidence of what is important to us. "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to man."

A work for God can be stopped when we allow ourselves to be intimidated by perceived obstacles. "The time is not right yet," or "There will be too much offense in the community if we are too aggressive," are common phrases used to excuse ourselves. When we find no interest in the Gospel and the word of God in a community after years of labor for the Lord, instead of moving on to another place, we excuse ourselves by saying, "This is our home now. We can't leave this. I intend to stay here until I die." That may be okay for one who is aged and infirm, but for those with youthful ambition, that is not okay. People will gladly move if there is a promotion to a better job. They will move even if they want better weather. But to move for the sake of the Lord? No, they want "to be faithful" even if no one listens to them or pays any attention to the word of the Lord. There is a tendency to do our own thing and provide for ourselves. We will get to the Lord's work when we have a good income and good retirement benefits.

However, because for fifteen years the work was stopped at Jerusalem, didn't mean they weren't in the right place. That was where the Lord had placed His name. That was where the people were supposed to build. The work had already been started but stopped because of indifference. But in a short time, probably within a month from the time of Haggai's message, the work of building recommenced. Zerubbabel and Jeshua who had been as discouraged and slack as any of the other people, faced themselves before the Lord and reasserted their leadership. They became examples again for others to follow. With Haggai and Zechariah working along with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, there was a certain impetus to the work again, and their enthusiasm for the work of building God's house spread to others, and the work began again.

Weariness and slowness in a work, especially at the beginning when there is not a whole lot to see as the foundation is laid, can bring lethargy towards a work. Lethargy in turn brings absence and lack of interest. Lack of interest slows down the work until it comes to a standstill. In order for a revival of a work to take place, we need a return to the word of God, not just for study purposes and information, but for heart searching and the awakening of one's conscience. Then new interest in divine things begins to happen in a real way. The Bible has been given to us to live by, not just to read for interest as in reading a literature book. Apathy and procrastination will go away when our consciences are awakened and we admit our lethargy is sin that needs to be confessed and forsaken. The sin of omission is as sinful as the sin of commission.

When we listen to the word of God as the voice of God, not just a book to be studied, then the Spirit of God has fertile soil to produce new life and growth in His people. Years earlier in Babylon the Lord had "stirred up the spirit" of Cyrus, an unbeliever, to take action in the building of the house of God. Then the spirits of the people of God were "raised" to go to Jerusalem and rebuild that which was lost. That is involved in the principle of revival. Revival begins when I draw a circle around myself and pray that revival will begin in this circle. When that happens to me then it can spread to others. I need to look at unsaved people who "are wanting more" but don't know what it is they want nor how to get it. I need to be able to clearly tell what happened to me and what it means now, even after many years, to be a child of God, a "Christian."

It is important to us not to allow opposition to stop us when they question our right to further the Gospel. It is not uncommon to be faced with angry people who oppose God and who try to intimidate us in order to make us stop evangelizing. Intimidation only works if we let it. Proceed with confidence in the work to which we have been called. When there is a legal reason to stop a work, then we need to find a way to continue in a legal way unless the law of man is in conflict with the law of God. Then it is clear, "We ought to obey God rather than man." Don't get bothered by threats, slander or intrigue because "the eye of God" is upon the work of God and will not be turned away by mere, puny, mortal men. The work is the Lord's and He will lead and protect it.

The new activity at the temple site created a stir among those around who had become used to a half-built structure sitting there abandoned. The appointed governor of the area may have thought this project was under his jurisdiction and so inquired as to who gave them the right to do what they were doing in conquered territory. The letter to Darius did state the facts more or less correctly, but it seems that Tattenai was uncertain as to whether his authority included Jerusalem. He wrote what the Jews had told him and then added, "From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished." The implication was that the failure to complete the work was not his responsibility.

God has His plans which He will see accomplished. When we fail in our responsibility there are consequences we have to accept, but we need to know that God's work will be done through whatever means is needed according to His will. Finally, the Jews who had been inactive in the work for so long were back at the work have been prompted by the prophets to act as God intended. There are times when we must speak up plainly and give reasons for what we do in spite of criticism, hostility and intimidation. But it is important that we be honest. In the reply to those who "ask the reason of the hope that lieth in you," we need to state plainly the motivation behind our actions.

The whole story was clearly presented as to what led up to the captivity in the first place, and then the authority given to come again and build the house of God. The fifteen years of inactivity in the work was noteworthy to those around. There are certain expectations people have of us that are reasonable and legitimate. If we fail to speak up for what we believe and do what we should be doing, then people have a right to doubt our changed attitude. By stating clearly, the faith we have in God and our failure to carry out His commission to us, we have to swallow our pride and admit our failure to them - and then start again and do what is right.

We will not please everyone, but it is important that we please God. What He wants, is what we must do. If we have let go what should have been done, admit it as sin, confess and forsake it, and start again. Actions and words go together. It was true in the time of the Jews rebuilding, and it is true in the days in which we live. We thank God for those who come among us and stir our hearts and our actions to start again in the work to which we have been called with enthusiasm and vigor.

Ezra 5:2. *“Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jesusha the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.”*

PROPHETS AND BUILDERS.

There is a time to preach, a time to pray and a time to build.
Not all messages that reach the hearts of hearers
Come from the words of those who, to preach the Gospel, are called.
There are occasions when actions really do speak louder than words.
The weight of labor, of financial need, of health
Call out silently for the help of another person or more to bear the load.
The prophets have an urgent message for the people it is true.
But sometimes the ears of hearers must be opened.
They will give more attention to what you say if you work with them too.
Some great stones have to be moved into their proper places.
Every hand and strong muscle that share the burden
Is needed - when the prophets help; the builders are very glad to see their faces.
There is a certain kind of credibility added to an urgent work,
That can be seen by those around who are looking on.
When they see, and tell others too, the prophets aren't afraid of dirt -
The builders can expect other laborers to come and help.
Sharing of a work is more than just applying the use of gifts.
It will involve identifying and helping others to understand -
The proper functioning of gifts together enables all as one, to lift
Loads far too great for one or two to move, but when all together stand
The house of God can move in forward steps at a faster pace.
And prophets with their gifts - and straining muscles -
Will see the joy on the strong builders and laborers' faces
As they are brought to a clearer understanding of the ways of God.
We are laborers together in God's building project - laborers for Him.
And as we do what we are called to - and help others in their work of the Lord -
There is a special kind of unity that goes beyond a message - or the singing of a hymn.

“Father God, the joining together of Thy people to hear Thy voice and to share in labor, does bring a special joy to each of us. Help us all to consider each other and the blessings associated with unified labor. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 6

FINALLY - FINISHED!

Haggai had encouraged Zerubbabel and Joshua to continue the work of rebuilding the temple and challenged (rebuked) the careless worship of the Lord's people. God does not grant a great spiritual blessing when there is half-hearted obedience or outright disobedience to God's will and word. Zechariah also prophesied during the time of rebuilding and took a different approach to the same matter. He emphasized the fact that it was God who wanted this work to be completed. He pointed out that God has a plan for Israel's future when Messiah will come and He will reign. Our responsibility is to do what God wants today with the best of our ability. For us to be half-hearted about spiritual things, or careless in the way we approach the work of God is an indication of what is important to us. It is not what we have or want in the present that is important, but how does each day's activities affect our future when we live and reign with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Tatnai the governor did listen to Zerubbabel and Joshua so that when he laid his complaint to Darius, he must have realized there would have been a record of the returnees to the area he governed. It seems like he did not think the rebuilding of the temple was really done by official sanction. His suggestion in his letter to Darius suggested that there would be a written decree if what the Jews said was true. When the decree of Cyrus was found in the original capital city of the Medes, there was no question in Darius' mind that the work in Jerusalem was legitimate. The temple was to be rebuilt by the command of the "God of heaven" and of the earthly leader. God can use anyone He chooses to work His will. The written word is the best way to put a stop to speculation and arguments when conflicts arise between individuals and/or groups. This put to rest the "he said, she said" kind of dialogue that makes a conclusion of a matter difficult.

God arranged, through the decree of Darius, that all opposition be stopped in no uncertain terms, and that cooperation be given until the work was finished. We do not always know how God will bring about the desired result to a work in which we are involved, but we can trust Him to bring to pass His divine will, and in faith, we can continue with confidence in that work until it is finished. It is our responsibility to be in the place God wants us doing the things He wants in the way He wants, and doing that work for His glory.

The written words of Cyrus made it clear that "the house of God at Jerusalem" was to be built on the same site as Solomon's temple for the purpose of offering sacrifices. Cyrus had been acting under the authority of the Lord when he described the building, the size of it and the materials to be used. When Darius made his decree, he worded it strongly and direct so there could be no misunderstanding on the part of those who complained. Likely the influence of Daniel and his testimony before Darius as to who "the God of heaven" is, gave the king a certain reverential fear of God. The testimony of a believer from day to day, as well as in crisis times like in a lions' den, has a power associated with it that is more than mere natural human experience.

The "do not interfere" with the temple building was not a suggestion but a dogmatic statement to which was attached a serious "or else" statement. Six times "the house of God" was referred to in the king's decree. "The God of heaven" was referred to twice, and "the God that has caused His name to dwell there" phrase, indicated the king knew he was a lesser authority than the Lord God of Israel. The "powers that be" often seek to usurp the authority God reserves for Himself and so consequently there are ways that God makes Himself known that are beyond human ability to control. When as a nation, we took the keys of life into our hand to make sin convenient as in abortion, euthanasia, same sex marriage etc, our nation made an awful mistake.

Now natural disasters, uncontrollable weather, floods and fires should be wake-up calls to us as a nation, that God is not pleased at all with what we are allowing. Almost every time these things happen, we hear leaders and commentators say, "Our prayers are with you," but they only use them as a sanctimonious form of speech rather than a call to sincere repentance. It is almost like a complaint to God such as "Why did you let this happen to us? You are supposed to be nice to us. We are all good people and you are being mean to us."

The source of provision for the building of the temple and of those who were engaged in the work came from an unexpected source. Darius made it plain to the governor and those local leaders that they should provide the supplies for the work to go ahead in earnest and without any shortages. Darius even realized the importance of sacrifices even though he would know the meaning of them only in a general way. To know and admit one's need of God and the intercession of others for one's family by those who rule is uncommon. Darius knew his limitations and that of his sons even though he was not one of God's people. Often in times of crisis we hear people say, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you" even though they do not pray. We as believers are called upon to pray "for kings and those in authority," and as intercessors we can change the way God works in our country.

To ignore a king's decree meant ignoring the king himself, and that would mean death to the careless or self-opinionated person. Without the interference of those in opposition, the building was successfully advanced until it was completed without hindrance or stop. The words of Haggai and Zechariah kept the work on track and the laborers involved without turning to their own personal interests. It would have greatly encouraged the people of God to hear the king's decree, but it did not excuse them for their inactivity and lack of commitment to the building of the house of God for those wasted years. The prophets, the kings, the leaders and the laborers were under the authority of God, and His word and will were obeyed. The work of God prospered and came to a successful completion.

When a work of God is set before us, we need to go ahead in that work with confidence even though we may not know how all the needs will be met when we start the work. Acting in faith in God is enough assurance to us that God will provide what is needed. "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." To many people "the place of the name" is unimportant, but even unbelievers recognize the uniqueness of a local assembly when we all take heed and commit ourselves to walk in the ways of the Lord and "not forsake the assembling of [ourselves] together, as the manner of some is..." We need to take care that we never do anything to undermine the work of God, the assembly of God, and the people of God. It is incumbent on us to do what God wants without grumbling or complaining about it. There is no reason for us to alter what the word of God says in any way, or to choose what parts we want to obey and ignore or reject other parts.

"The dedication of this house of God with joy" would not soon be forgotten. All the people were there for the "feast of dedication" and the renewal of all that had been written in the "book of Moses." There was joy at the beginning of the building years before and there was joy at its completion. It was sad that there were so many years of failure, indifference and sadness in between. This time of dedication was different and less glorious than that of Solomon's temple, but it did not limit nor diminish in any way the presence of God with His people.

Not every work of God is the same in every place. Some are very dramatic and others are quiet and hardly noticed. But whatever the outward appearance to people is like, God is honored and blesses His people when they carry out His word. Ceremonies mark important events and are valuable in maintaining an interest in spiritual things. Ordinances such as baptism and the Lord's Supper are not mere ceremonies but are commands of God. True they remind us of important events, but are different in that we have not been given the option of refusing them. Ceremonies bring joy to people. Obeying ordinances brings joy to God.

The order of the priest and Levites were established according to the word of God. The Lord's people were separated from the sinful activities of the people living around them. The returnees had come from captivity to freedom in the Lord. Their unique identity had been recovered to them. Their worship was now in the right place at the right time. No more "hanging harps on willows." It seems like there were even converts to the truth of God by those who had been living there for seventy years. Their families would have grown up without a clear understanding of who they were and why they were a unique people.

Separation from the world, its ways, its religions and its sins are only part of what separation is. We are also separated unto the Lord, His truth and His church. There should be no empty space between what we leave and where we go in which we make up our own minds as to what we want. Our responsibility is to be where God wants us doing what He wants. We can't mix the world and the kingdom of God. Recovery, restoration and revival brings joy to the Lord's people. The Lord worked on the heart of an unbelieving king to make His will known, and then on another to bring to pass that which was His will.

We are still involved in this building process of the church today. It is not right for us to dwell on our failures and faults nor on the failures and faults of others. The work is the Lord's and the objective of the work is the glory of God. We may feel the need of recovery and restoration but that is no excuse for inactivity in the things of God. "Let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

2

Ezra 6:2. "And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel."

LET GOD DO IT.

It may seem like we have to just stop and wait,
When the forces of evil oppose.
But if we take time to carefully state
In prayer the problem and the name of those
Who are trying to keep from happening
What God intends to be done -
He can change the heart and attitude of a king,
So that all the opposition will soon be gone.

A change of attitude is not a bad thing,
I know at times God did it for me.
When I was critical about what others did bring,
I didn't take the time to see -
That God was in control, my attitude was wrong
Because He has His own plan to follow.
The way God does things often makes faith strong -
He has reasons for what He does allow.

There are areas of work God intends for me
To take control of, and with vigor do.
The building of the house of God must be done carefully
So that it is like what God wants when it is through.
Worship and rejoicing can come from in our hearts,
Springing forth and bringing honor to God.
But when Satan challenges and opposition starts,
We must rely on the strength of the Lord.

When I have no answer to a dilemma -
Then I must let God do it.

When the ways of the world seek to enter -
I can trust God to guide us through it.
When the heart of the king seems to turn against us,
And we have done all we can;
Then we turn it all over to the God we trust -
He is not limited by the strength of a man.

“O Righteous God; Thy cause is such that it can bring blessing to all who are willing to submit to Thee. Thy saving grace changes the attitude of hard-hearted people. Righteous judgment of a matter, can bring changes that last. Thy Word, when people will read it, gives faith and light. Thy love moves people to respond to Thee in gratitude and thanks. Let Thy light and Thy truth bring a strengthening to the work of Thy servant. May the hearts of many be turned to submit to Thee, Gracious Father. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 6:22. *“And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”*

JOYFUL SATISFACTION.

When the Lord makes His people joyful, it is joy indeed. It lasts! For seven days, a whole week, the people of God were on a real high. They were doing what God wanted and they were doing it in God's way. This is a guarantee of joyful satisfaction because, as a people, they were engaged in holy things. It is in those situations the Lord makes us joyful. Not only had the Lord given them joy but he had turned the heart of the king from the direction of opposition to that of favor towards His people.

The heart of a king is able to be directed by the Lord as “rivers of water.” How is a river moved? When the floods rise and the results of bad weather are seen, the river is moved out of its normal course. It follows the course of the Lord of the flood. When an earthquake occurs, the direction of flow of a river can be changed by the fall of earth into the river. To men, rivers are not easy to direct or move. To God, there is no problem to change it to run wherever He wants it to go.

For the believer who is held secure in the hand of the Father and of the Son, there can be no need to fear the edicts of the king. There may be a time of waiting, but ultimately the will of the Lord will be made plain and we will look back with amazement and joy at what God has done. Doing His will and experiencing Him in removing obstacles from our life results in joy.

“Father, I know the Lord gave His peace to His own disciples before He left. I am thankful for that. I know He gave the Holy Spirit to live within me, and I am thankful for that. I know He gave me eternal life and I am thankful for that. I am also thankful that He gives us joy. Amen.”

Ezra 7

THE HAND OF GOD

The temple had been rebuilt and the people who had returned from Babylon had settled back into their own country and become assimilated to the society around them. The older folks had passed away and the younger people had become used to life the way it was to the extent they were forgetting their own unique position in the world. They had temple worship which became a rather routine thing to them, and had become like others to the extent of marrying those who were not God's chosen people. The power of separation was lost in the desire of personal gratification. This is an on-going problem with the Lord's people today the same as it was then. We may not realize it at first, but soon it happens that God cannot deal with us as “sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty.”

Thankfully the Lord our God has plans and purposes for His people and does not give up on us easily. He is able to reach us when we get away from Him, in ways that we would never had expected. Sixty years after the temple was completed in Jerusalem, there was a man of God who had devoted himself to the study of the scriptures, was committed to practicing what he learned and taught others in the land of captivity. There had been some very trying times when the Jews had even been scheduled to be totally eliminated if it hadn't been for Mordecai and Esther willing to stand up and be counted. Another king, Artaxerxes, came to leadership in Babylon and the godly man, Ezra had his ear.

The written accounts in the Bible of historical events are not there just to give us interesting information, but there are spiritual reasons behind them. Not everything is written about, so we know those that are written are to put in context in the lives of God's people, a knowledge of the times and people for our learning and to

enable us to learn from the mistakes and positive things that happened to those before us. There are also moral reasons that affect our actions and attitudes by learning of the times and lives those people. Upon reflection on those people and events we learn life lessons to apply now.

A rebuilt temple did not produce a committed people. "Things," no matter how inspiring and beautiful do not change the will of a person. We can have emotional experiences that create a rush of feelings and short-term commitment, but it is the heart of a person that is drawn to our Lord that changes a person and a life. It is a real concern that in spite of outward change, there is often a lack of genuine commitment to God and His will. Whenever there is a work of God going on, it is to be expected that there will be opposition of some kind. Some is open and antagonistic. Some is subtle, suggestive and attractive. The latter is often the most effective in stopping Christian testimony. The first is usually open and attacks the physical and public parts of the work of the Lord. The second is appealing, tolerant and pleasing to the flesh.

It was into this situation and condition of the people of Israel that Ezra enters the account he wrote about and includes himself in the narrative of the rest of the book. He is the leader of another group of people who sixty years after the finishing of the temple, went to Jerusalem. This group of returnees were able to go up from Babylon to Jerusalem because the hand of God was first on Ezra, then on the king and then on those people who wanted to go to Jerusalem with Ezra. If they wanted to go, they could go, so there were priests and Levites, there were singers, gatekeepers and servants who wanted to retain their national identity and the testimony to the Lord who were willing to go.

To do a work for God takes leadership that has an understanding of the word of God and who are willing to take the responsibility and pay the cost necessary to make a work happen. Ezra's genealogy in the priestly line is traced back to Aaron so this would not only give him credibility as a leader, but as a man and spiritual leader who would speak for God. It would have been his initiative generated by "the hand of the Lord his God upon him," that moved the king to write a decree of permission that opened the way for 2000 people to go to Jerusalem with Ezra. God again used a pagan king to fulfill His will.

Likely Ezra was a man of prominence in Babylon and had achieved a measure of success that he was willing to give up for the higher purpose of divine service. Even his name, Ezra (help), indicates the nature of this godly man. He had taken the time to "prepare his heart" before going forward with the work before him. There are principles in this passage of scripture that teach us that preparation is needed before progress in the will and work of God. Ezra was a "ready scribe," a teacher who was well versed "in the law of Moses." In other words, he knew what he was talking about when he passed on to the people instruction. His words were not light-weight or subtle suggestions. He was well able to respond to the guidance of the Lord as each opportunity for divine service opened up before him. This same principle of spiritual and scriptural preparation is needed today.

When a person is conscious of "the hand of God" on him, the normal obstacles that occur in a work are not too daunting. The hand of God would have given him the courage and wisdom to approach the king for permission to go to Jerusalem. The hand of God would have been on him as other who wanted to go with him were granted that request. The hand of God through him would have been on the seven advisers of the king. A consciousness of the presence of God gives power and confidence in any service for God. When major changes come in our lives that include a change of location, occupation and the people with whom we will be associated, we need the confidence of the hand of "the Lord our God" upon us.

Principles to apply to major changes in life are: can I see God is behind this move. Is the objective before me consistent with my commitment as a Christian to God's people, God's assembly, the work of the Gospel, the word of God and my family? When a believer sets his or her "heart" on the things of God, that means the whole person - body, soul and spirit, is occupied with pleasing the Lord and walking in His ways. When one has prepared the heart and has taken the word of God into the heart, they will obey the word of God from the heart. When that is true, that person is in a condition and position to teach the word of God to others.

We need to seek it out, "seek the law of the Lord." this does not happen by chance or a casual interest in the things of God. We need to "search the scriptures" and then apply what we learn - first to ourselves and then to the work before us. Second, we "live it out," and "do it." It is one thing to know what God wants and be able to teach it. It is quite another thing to live out from our heart that which we know to be true and right according to God's divine will. Third, like Ezra, we need to "tell it out," and then "to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" that come right from God. Godly leadership is not based on personality, natural ability or even learned skills. It comes from God to the learner by the word of God and the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Such a leader, like Ezra, is not hard to follow because of their attitude toward, and consistency toward, and practice of, the word of God themselves.

The decree of Artaxerxes gave permission to any of God's people who wanted to go to Jerusalem, to go with Ezra. Spiritual leaders and laborers alike were able to go and support the work of God in the way to which they were most suited. There is room in divine service for any person who is willing to obey the word of God from the heart. Even though Ezra was a man in captivity, he had a responsible role to fill and was recognized by civil authorities as a representative of the God of heaven. As such he was addressed with respect even by the king. Our reputation in the public sphere of service in which we are found is not just based on skill, but also on our character.

Willing people are a wonderful asset to the work of God. There are many different roles to fill, some very public and obvious and others unseen and unrecognized. Such people who "do the will of God from the heart" can be counted on to do what they have been assigned or called upon to if they will, as doing that work "unto the Lord." Some may be more capable in certain areas than others. Some will labor with more enthusiasm than others. But there is room in the work of God for "laborers in the harvest." "Go up" and "go with thee" indicates a higher calling for Ezra and those with him, and a work more significant than that in which they were previously engaged.

The work of God is not without cost. The costs are met in our day in a different way than they were in Ezra's day. The earthly king supported the earthly people of God in an earthly way. The work of God in our day is supported by us demonstrating our gratitude to a heavenly king who has "given us all things." He has entrusted us as stewards to use His largesse that He has placed in our hands, in ways most suitable to do the work He has given us. We do not accept earthly government funds in order to fund projects and work done for His heavenly kingdom. The objectives the two are very different so we accept and use funds from those who are in the kingdom of heaven, but not from those who serve the "god of this world." We are involved in furthering a heavenly kingdom and supporting those working for the kingdom of God.

It seems like Artaxerxes and those who advised him recognized the God of the Israelis as the God of heaven, and for their own desire to make sure the God of the Jews would show them favor, sent along gold and silver. The king's decree made sure that the king's representative in the Trans-Euphrates province of the kingdom made available to Ezra all that was needed tax free. Artaxerxes recognized God as "your God," and as a personage quite distinct from the gods of his nation and others around. He knew that in some special way, the "house of God" in Jerusalem was the only place Jews were supposed to worship as a people. He knew "your God" had a unique "house of God," and that Ezra taught "the law of God" to the people of God. He also recognized Ezra had in a special way, the wisdom of God.

The testimony of believers has many facets by which God is revealed to those around when the Lord's people are living for God and serve Him heartily. The work of Ezra was to bring order and a sense of responsibility to the decree of the king with thanksgiving for moving the heart of the king to allow the exiles to return to Israel. They had settled into a comfortable accommodation to those around them and by intermarriage with pagan worshippers were reverting to the ways of the world which led to the captivity of their forbearers.

Ezra identified himself with the Lord's people in from this time on in the book as one who was with them in all of their failures as well as the work at hand. He responded to the decree of the king with thanksgiving to God for moving the heart of the king to allow them to go up to Jerusalem. The Lord can work in the hearts of unsaved leaders in a way they likely don't even know and which we could not predict. Years earlier Cyrus was moved by God to allow the first exiles to return. Then Darius a number of years later after searching for and finding the decree of Cyrus, supported that decree in no uncertain terms. Fifty or sixty years later Artaxerxes then made another decree supporting the work of Ezra. Ezra acknowledged God's "mercy" was extended to him and the king was moved by God. In turn God moved the king and "the hand of God was on him" [Ezra].

Surely it is important for us to recognized and acknowledge the hand of God in our work, even when a city council, or some government officials give us permits to do a work in the Gospel or grant permission to reach beyond what is normal to them. When "the hand of our God" is upon us and "it is God who worketh in us (and for us) to will and to do His good pleasure," we need to acknowledge that it is "The Lord working with us" and allowing us to do His work in fellowship with Him.

Ezra 7:10. *"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."*

PREPARED HIS HEART.

Years had passed; a young man has matured; he has been educated.

He has learned from the words of God's book.
For years God's truth has accumulated in his head.
But during the process, what he has learned has reached his heart -
Has prepared his heart!

Following the first urges of a heart-work in progress,
Came the desire to understand and to earnestly seek the law of the Lord
That he might know what was right - the mind of God.
As he turned the pages of the words of the law - he wanted -
To seek it out!

What do you know when the light has dawned on your soul?
You know it is not enough to be enlightened; to know what is right.
The prepared heart is stirred, after seeking out God's truth -
To act on what God has revealed - to fulfill the commission -
To live it out!

The more one reads and learns, and heeds and acts -
The more one realizes to know this is not enough.
The work God has defined needs many to be involved.
How can this be done? Others must know - I must be willing -
To tell it out!

The preparing of the heart takes time and thought;
And the urging of the soul to seek out truth and act on it;
To tell out the statutes, laws and judgments is an honor -
And a responsibility to prepare my heart; to seek out God's truth; live it
Tell it out!

"I trust Father, that these morning times with Thee have been of some interest to Thee. I know they have challenged me to prepare my heart. I can easily see the necessity of preparation before progress. Amen."

Ezra 8

THE RIGHT WAY

From time to time in life we are called to special service for God that is above and beyond that which have ever thought about. A journey on foot across 900 miles of desert through enemy territory even though one knows it is God's will does give pause, and cause for concern. It is important that the right people are involved in such a task even though there is true faith in God to bring the people to the desire objective. Careful consideration of the dangers, needed supplies, diligent preparation - these are all part of getting ready for a work for the Lord. We do what we can to the best of our ability and trust God without reservation.

Ezra had all the characteristics of a good leader. He assembled volunteers in a significant location. He checked to make sure he had the right people there. There were priests and leaders but no Levites to do the work of assisting priests in their priestly ministry. He knew who was needed and took steps to get them. He made sure that everyone who would participate in the journey and work ahead knew their need of God with them and the right attitude toward God. Fasting, prayer and humility set a tone to the work that was unmistakable.

A successful leader needs to know his limitations and he also needs to know those who can help him. Ezra needed trustworthy companions for the journey, and the work ahead after they arrived at their destination. He had heads of families who could guide their kin. He had priests for the spiritual work and then got some Levites who would do the service necessary for the priests. He did not take nor wish to have the military protection of the king's army because of his testimony to the pagan king that "the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and wrath is against all them that forsake Him." This is evidence of a leader who knows his God, his people and himself. He knew God's strength and affirmed his own weakness. He put God first in this new venture and claimed God's promises personally. What an exemplary leader when one uses what he has, uses what God gives, admits his dependence on and is grateful. Such people understand the value of sincere prayer, fasting and obedience from the heart.

The stewardship entrusted to Ezra included around twenty-five tons of precious metals and well as the welfare of likely around 7000 people. He could be trusted to do what was necessary and respond to emergency situations conscious of the presence of God with him. When we are making changes or a move, we must take the time necessary to prepare our minds with wisdom and our hearts with commitment to that which will happen - seen or unseen. Governments, assemblies and families need wise, committed

leadership. Prayer and fasting indicate a serious consideration of that which is ahead. It is in this way we acknowledge our need of God's guidance, protection and strength for the work He gives us.

Prayer and fasting eliminates any preoccupation with superficial things, and focuses our understanding on what God wants and our perception of our responsibility, and the assets we have. Priests needed Levites to do their work. To lead is one thing. To have those who faithfully support leaders is another thing that does not happen too often and when it does, it is seldom recognized or applauded. Godliness and wisdom go well together. "A prudent man foreseeth the evil..." When we are aware of potential danger, we can take steps to avoid those dangers.

Chief men have authority to do what is needed and to delegate to others areas of responsibility. Men of understanding can see beyond that which is obvious and/or only exterior, to that which is real. They know how to reach the heart of people so that the commands of chief men are responded to in the right way. It is one thing to know what is right and grudgingly obey, and quite another thing to be able to show people why it is in their best interest to do a work or make a change gladly. In the demographics of a work the spiritual needs are of primary importance. When we do things God's way, we can expect the "good hand of our God to be upon us."

The call to serve God today is as important now as it was in Ezra's day. God uses men sent to explain the truth and urge God's people to act on what God says quickly and with enthusiasm. Insight and discretion come from learning and practicing the word of God on our own volition or being taught it by trustworthy, caring and faithful men. Ezra had leadership qualities and he knew he was responsible to take the initiative in the work. He also knew how to delegate responsibility to others. He also knew the three days by the river and perhaps the symbolism was there that when they crossed it there would be no coming back helped them to go forward into new territory and burn their bridges behind them. He did not pretend the journey and the tasks ahead would be easy, but he did convey the fact that it was right. He was realistic in that he could look ahead to potential dangers and how to deal with them, and at the same time convey to those who followed him the confidence he had in God to take them all the way to the journey's end.

Fasting is not a public demonstration of one's piety, but rather a personal response to God as we focus our minds, hearts and lives on that which we know to be His will, or in order to have certainty regarding God's will. Fasting not to be condemned nor is it to be impressed on us by others or vice versa. It heightens the awareness of being in the presence of God for a specific purpose. It is linked with true humility, submission and obedience.

Ezra had testified to the king of his confidence in "the hand of our God" and so did not want to compromise his faith in God before the king. Trust in God is reasonable and often is a strong testimony to the power of the Gospel in the life of a Christian. It is likely for that reason Ezra did not want an armed escort to protect them from dangers on the way. He was able to testify, "The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way." Confidence in God is real and evident when we rest in Him. After fasting and praying by the river, in faith they all went forward with confidence in God. Ezra's leadership was a testimony to his faith and it produced faith in those who followed him> God does answer prayer.

The worship and service of the priests and Levites on behalf of the people was a priority when they safely arrived at Jerusalem. The worship of God's people is our first act before service for God. It is God who works in and through us, and we must be in fellowship with Him before sanctified service. Holy people with holy things to give to our holy God, produces holy service in the holy house of God today. Carefulness in the trust of holy things is expected of those who have been entrusted with divine service.

There is not a lot of description given regarding the journey. Rather, glory is given to God for His protection and guidance during those four months. Ezra and those with him were responsible for bringing with them holy things worth million of dollars. They were careful to make sure that what arrived in Jerusalem was the same amount as was there when they started the journey. Care is always needed when dealing with the finances God allows to be used through His people. The sacrifices and offerings they made were expressions of thankfulness, gratitude and joy at being brought to the place God wanted them. Even the "powers that be," the government officials were made aware of the fact that the people of God were people under authority. They were not there to change the government nor interfere with the political system that was in place. We can learn a lot of lessons from those who have gone before us in their service for the Lord.

Ezra 8:18. *"And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren eighteen;"*

A MAN OF UNDERSTANDING.

I wonder who that was, that man of understanding,
Who God arranged to come out of obscurity, capable of handling
A work that seemed beyond the skill and ability of most,
But was needed to guide and organize all that gathering host?

Behind that action was the good hand of our God,
Who knew the need of the hour was a man to bear a load;
Of responsibility and lead people in a work of faith,
So that testimony for God would begin in that place.

Wherever and whenever a work for God wants to be done,
We look to God Himself to find a special one
To rise to the challenge of defining the need,
And with understanding, for us who follow, to take the lead.

Sometimes we look around, sometimes behind,
Wondering is there someone we can find
Who has the imprint of God's divine hand on his shoulder,
That we can look to for leadership and will make us bolder.

Perhaps we should look ahead to see if there is one who is young,
Who with God-given understanding is being raised up to help us be strong,
That we may once again have the strength to overcome
All opposition and make this work a lasting one.

When people know that for some reason a work has stopped;
Then it is important we turn to God who all believers have besought
At times to intervene and help us to once more begin
The work that was once strong and needs strengthening again.

“O God of recovery, I pray today that a man of understanding might be found to meet the need we have of rebuilding here. The believers have warm hearts but little physical strength. We have the desire but our age is against us. We know Thee better than ever before but we don't seem to be able to cross the age and cultural barriers that surround us. Help us, O Lord God, I pray, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 9

WE CANNOT STAND BEFORE THEE

The belittling of sin that is happening today is nothing new. All around us is the world system, including governments of nations, deal with the declining morals and departure from righteousness by changing the laws instead of facing and dealing with the problem. This happened in Israel and was accepted as normal among the general population. But when it happens to the people of God, there are steps that need to be taken. The problem then and now, is a spiritual one, not one of prejudice. The intermarriages led the Lord's people into idolatry, and that rejection of God and His word is why this affected Ezra so greatly. It does the same today to those who understand the dangers associated with unequal yokes.

The people of Israel had become used to the sinful lifestyle of those who shared the land with them. The list of tribes indicates the driving out of the pagan idolaters had never been completely done. When Israel was taken captive, other people were moved into the northern part of Israel by the Assyrians, and 150 years later when the people of Judah were taken to Babylon, some were left behind to keep the land. Sixty or so years before Ezra came the temple was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerrubbabel and Jeshua. However, it wasn't long until even the returnees got used to temple worship and were attracted to pagan women.

When two people of different religions marry, it is not long before a man will follow his wife's persuasion in order to live in peace. That happened in the past and it happens now. Promising young Christians who in their teen years had a desire for the things of God, when they meet attractive people in college, university or the work-place, fall under the subtlety of temptation and turn away from the Lord.

It was likely that Ezra's commitment to, and understanding of, the word of God became well known. He would have taught the people for about four months before the awakened consciences of the leaders of the people moved them to tell Ezra about this very serious problem. Priests and Levites as well as the rank and file of people were intermarrying with idolaters. This sinful practice had become common-place and accepted. The people they were marrying were enemies of the people of God. We may fall into the trap of

tolerance of evil and hardly realize the consequences of that attitude until it is too late to change the inevitable outcome.

This same problem has plagued the people of God all down through the ages. Solomon, in spite of his God-given wisdom, fell into the trap of loving "strange women," and even marrying the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt and building a place for her to practice idolatry. There is a strange notion among many who profess to be saved, that we should not "come out from among them, and ye separate," but rather a spirit of tolerance and kindness to accept any person who says they believe in God. Some will even say Allah of the Muslims is the same as the God of the Bible.

Those who teach that we can earn our own salvation by "doing the best we can," or other human efforts, do not understand who God is. Others will demean the Holy Spirit and say He is merely an influence. The counterfeit Christianity of our day is a form of idolatry in that it reduces God in their mind to a personage of their own definition. They accept their own definition of God, "I believe that God is ..." has made him out to be a god of their own imagination.

Such people would have considered Ezra a fanatic to take such a serious view of a common practice. He was stunned and appalled to the extent that he sat down where he was, tore open his priestly garment and the outer clothes he was wearing, and pulled hair from his face and head as a testimony of his broken heart and humility. This display of remorse, guilt and humiliation would have affected others who saw him and they likely would have said, "What's wrong with him? Who died? Why is he so shook up?"

It is possible for people to get so used to sin that they don't even recognize it as sin. The wide-spread practice of abortion, the increasing acceptance of euthanasia, the fact that nearly half of the population has been divorced or are living with people to whom they are not married, or cohabiting with a person of the same sex is now accepted social practice. To speak against those sins leaves one open to attacks by the ungodly who reject the standards of the Bible as being relevant to us in this day.

The prayer of Ezra, and the obvious anxiety he showed, would have been something even the returned exiles had not seen. There was sorrow for sin and open confession of the seriousness of sin. Sin had a bad effect on other people, and obviously affected Ezra even though he was not involved in the same practice. The open sin of others causes sadness and humiliation in those who live godly righteous lives. Mockery and charges of intolerance are heaped upon those who will not be involved in or acceptant of, the sins of others. It is quite easy for some to think that sin has no consequences, but a true believer understands the seriousness of sin and our need as a people of the mercy of God to spare us.

When Ezra prayed openly it was at the same time as the evening sacrifice was offered. This would have had some significance to those who understood the value of a sinless innocent substitute for the guilty. On his knees with outstretched arms, those watching Ezra became conscious of the evil to which they had become accustomed. Those who gathered around and were watching him and listening to the words of his prayer, were awakened in their consciences. True confession of sin involves understanding the holiness of God and a real view of the awfulness of sin. This intercessor identified himself with the nation as one of citizens who had sinned in a corporate sense. He recognized their only hope for survival as the people of God lay in God's heart of love, grace and mercy.

Confession involves facing up to what caused the sin in the first place. It involves being willing to state the actual sin, the consequences of sin, and the need to forsake it. It includes the acknowledgement that God has the right to punish sin and is doing the right when He does. An appeal to God's mercy and the assurance of His word of forgiveness when the sin has been dealt with and forsaken by the offender, gives rest to the soul. There are often residual effects that will stay with us and keep us from the joy we long for. Some things we have done cannot be undone because it has affected other people negatively and permanently.

To trace the ways of God with us in the past, often helps us to seek the confidence and peace that was lost as a result of sin. Looking back, we are made to remember all the way by which God has led us. The evidence of divine love toward us and the grace that has provided for us is a way to begin recovery to fellowship with God. By our knowledge of the scripture and awareness of both the dealings of God with us and the consequences of sin, we align ourselves with the righteous acts of God. It is a sensible thing to stop and "take stock" of who we are, what we have done, and "what doth God require of thee."

A burden on the part of an intercessor will soon lead that person to understand the solution to the problem sin causes. "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." To correct what is wrong

and that which is right can be costly and painful. But forgiveness and forsaking of sin go together. Obedience to God and blessing from God go together. Blessings from God and godliness on the part of a believer go together. Prayer and responsive action go together.

Ezra knew God personally and had learned from Him that which was needed for God to act as a righteous God when people sin. He knew God had the right to cast them off because of His righteous justice. But because of His mercy, when there is repentance for sin and faith in His divine provision by grace that becomes real to us by faith, then we can be restored to fellowship and communion with God.

Ezra 9:8. *“And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.”*

LIGHT TO OUR EYES.

How strange that even after the years of learning what God says,
His people still listen to the voices from the world and turn to worldly ways.
For some reason darkness seems to overcome God's light,
And things we learned from the scripture, fade and we think that sin's alright.

Oh, we wouldn't think of robbing a bank, or murdering an innocent man,
But if a thing brings pleasure to me, I will do it if I can.
So, sin unjudged becomes the norm and we think if others do it,
It is okay for me to do the same and really, there's nothing to it.

Great grace has been shown by our patient Lord allowing us to live.
He never agrees to what is sin but a little space to repent He gives.
With temptations He always makes a way to escape its consequences.
But there will come a time and way of correction when we break down spiritual defenses.

God has allowed us to have a part in His work to reach this generation.
We have a part in the Gospel efforts that others may be blessed with salvation.
When we start to let sin's darkness seem right, and follow the path of least resistance.
Our fellowship with God is broken and His divine presence seems at a distance.

The bondage sin brings is stronger than we think; its bands are hard to break.
Reviving is needed; it is like new life turning us from the path we take.
God in His grace gives us a little space to turn from sin and seek the Lord.
Recovery to God begins with recovery to His Word; to wait we cannot afford.

There are those around who have not responded to grace but are always ready to fault
Those who testify that they are God's children and through the Bible they are taught.
When onlookers see inconsistency, they have legitimate reason to complain
That one time you were separate but now you're together, you are just like one of them.

When it comes to our attention that something is wrong, it is right for us to confess
To God right away that sin had its way and repentance we ask Him to bless
His Word to our souls and help us to return to Him and the way we should go -
So that we and our children behind us will grasp we are responsible to do what we know.

To repair what is wrong will take time and strong wills to stop and return
To God and His ways, because either God or those around we will spurn.
Face the sin squarely and be sure to deal fairly with those affected by our wrong.
Trust God wholly to do what He can do only, and for our part we must be strong.

“Failure is still common, O God, not only among others, but also in me. Restore in me a genuine fear of sin and a sincere commitment to Thee and Thy Word, to do what is right no matter what others do or whatever the cost. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Ezra 10

THERE IS HOPE

When there is repentance and reform in a nation, an assembly or an individual through the impact of the word of God, it is real and the result is good in spite of the pain and cost. The whole book of Ezra gives a clear message on the place and power of the word of God in the religious, social and civil life of His people. The revival under Ezra was a revival of Bible study and obedience to the revealed will of God. We are still experiencing the results of that movement as we meet to study the Bible together or apply ourselves to private study seeking the proper interpretation and how to apply what we learn. The word of God worked in

the lives of God's people when taught by a God-sent man. It produced genuine repentance that led to true separation that was obvious and effective. There was separation from Babylon in chapter one. There was separation from worldly help in chapter four when "the adversaries" said, "Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do..."

There was also separation from leaning on the flesh in chapter eight when the second group of exiles, chose to trust God for safety on the way from Babylon to Jerusalem rather than a "band of soldiers." Lastly in chapter ten there is separation from sinful alliances of the most intimate kind that would have undermined the whole character, and ultimately, the very existence of a nation of people who had been called by God to be His people. Idolatry in any form, from the household to the throne, if allowed to continue, brings an end to the testimony of faith in God alone.

Remorse for sinful activity is not repentance for sin. Ezra's attitude and actions were real and obvious to others. His sincere sorrow for sin sets an example for us when we understand the seriousness of sin. Many believers do not realize the awfulness of sin and the serious consequences that can follow if the practice is continued. Those of spiritual maturity need to realize the impact on others when we face the reality of the problems we face because of sin.

The attitude and actions of Ezra who identified himself with the sins of the nation motivated another leader to clearly articulate the problem they faced as a people. The example of one godly man resonated in another who was willing to follow his example and do what he said needed to be done. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of, but the sorrow of this world worketh death." When sin has been indulged in and allowed to control our lives, there will be pain and suffering in ourselves, and criticism and even hate from others when the wrong has been made right; such is the reality of sin indulged in.

The responsibility for knowing, understanding clearly, and dealing with the problems caused by sin, is on those who are spiritually mature and who know and are committed to the word of God. Ezra knew what God said in Deuteronomy 7. It was his consciousness of the will and presence of God that awakened Shechaniah first, then the priests and Levites, and ultimately the people that there was a major problem among them. True shepherds know when there is a latent danger, but they also know the state of the flock and what has to be done to preserve the testimony of God's people.

It would have been heartening to Ezra to hear Shechaniah's words of personal identification with the sin, his clear confession of the sin, and then his confidence that "there is hope." Men of faith can see the problem and results of sin, but they also know God well enough to be able to define the solution. "A covenant with God" puts the whole matter on the right footing. Such covenants are clear and decisive. There can be no compromising with sin. Shechaniah knew the word of God well enough to know what had to be done "at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law." A good example has a good impact for good results.

Unfaithfulness to God is not a light matter to be treated casually or simply confessed as sin with a promise not to do it again. In this case there was needed genuine repentance it is true, but like assemblies today, they needed to "repent, and do the first works." There was the necessity of making right that which was wrong, getting rid of the cause of the wrong, and starting over. For a Christian to marry a Satan worshipper (similar to the idolaters of Ezra's day) would be a similar comparison as to the problem Ezra and God's people were facing. Not only were some of the common folks involved in this practice, but also some of the connections in the families of the priests and Levites. Those whose work was guarding the temple, singing the psalms and spiritual songs were in a position to undermine the whole work, worship and service of God.

Some sins call for drastic action and it needs to be done quickly. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." The Lord's people in Corinth had become used to blatant and open sin. If it had been allowed to continue without discipline, the whole assembly would have suffered and perhaps died as a testimony to the result of mixing saved and unsaved people in church testimony. That practice is now common even in so-called Christian churches that have decided to accommodate to the desire of the people rather than to the will and word of God. The word of many leaders is "We want to make everyone happy," and the result is the confusion of denominations that claim to be "Christian" but leave non-Christians wondering what is Christian and what is right. All of this leaves people to attend "the church of your choice," rather than the house of God.

Correction and a changed attitude are needed as evidence of sorrow for sin and repentance. When sin is dealt with in a biblical way, confession of sin is real and forgiveness is assured and we accept the grace and mercy of God with grateful thanks. Without a changed attitude, corrected behavior is generally ineffective as

far as restoring true fellowship with God and His people. In the situation Ezra was facing, the marriages had to end and the idol worshipping women and their children sent away. The women would not only have turned their believing husbands away from God, but the children and grandchildren would have continued the licentious practices of idolatry and influenced those around them to practice the immoral ways of idol worship.

The standards of marriage revealed to us in scripture are first of all, one man and one woman for life. A believer in Christ is not to marry an unbeliever because that is an "unequal yoke." If a person is saved after marriage, they are to remain in the marriage. However, if the unbeliever in the marriage wants to leave and divorce the believer, the marriage bond is broken. Before God saved us, we were "not a people. After God saved us we are "now the people of God [1Pe.2:10]." As a result of our present position in Christ, our practical conduct should be that of separated people [2Cor.6:16]. God's people have a peculiar designation [Titus 2:14; 2Pe.2:9] as a "peculiar people, zealous of good works and a "people for His possession." A propitiating atonement [Heb.2:17] has been made, and a promised rest [Heb.4:9] is ahead for the people of God. In a state of eternal blessing [Rev.21:3] "they shall be His people."

Shechaniah knew what needed to be done according to the law of God, and he also knew Ezra to be a man of "the book," so was willing to submit to Ezra's leadership even though he had recently come from Babylon. His promised support of Ezra would have been a great encouragement and had a good effect on Ezra's resolve. Ezra maintained his position of a supplicant in private the same as in public. His concern and commitment were not really affected. When "all the people" are affected by the actions of some, then all the people need to be informed and the corrective actions need to be carefully gone over so there is no question as to the reason for the action and the results expected.

Even though the intermarriages were a bit over one hundred in number, this issue was known by many and needed to be publicly dealt with by the people of God so "that others may fear." Immorality and idolatry are serious matters both personally and spiritually. This special gathering was to deal with the sin and initiate the corrective actions to be taken. Those who chose not to attend, either out of sympathy for the offenders or as a statement of their disagreement, would be under an even more severe and lasting punishment.

The correction and forsaking of sin permanently was very explicitly spoken by Ezra so there was no mistaking the problem and the action to be taken to bring the correction and conclusion expected. Open confession of guilt and a willingness to act is evidence of reality in bringing about recovery. There was no ambiguity in the statement of the sin, and there was none in the confession of guilt and the action to be taken to rectify the problem. It was a reasonable request that a period of time be given to judge each case and bring finality to the matter. Those in positions of responsibility knew what was expected of them and did it.

Sincerity and commitment to do the will of God are essential in being recovered to fellowship with Him. Separation from "the people of the land" was needed to solve the problem. There is a difference between isolation and separation. Isolation leaves no testimony of the grace of God and the intention of God to have a people for His name. Separation means we are "in the world but not of the world." Our very presence among the nations of people is evidence of the interest of God in having human beings who live godly lives being in harmony with His will and ways. When that is true, there are happy citizens who can live without shame and guilt. Social connections do not bring about spiritual life in unbelievers. Instead of us being like them, they should want to be like the people of God.

There were four men who were opposed to the command to put away the idolatrous women and their children. Meshallum was one of the four and is named as one who had married a "strange" woman. He did not want this decision to be carried out, so stood against the edict and thus against the nation. Whatever happened to him and the other three men is not stated in the account, but if they did not comply to the command, at the least they would have forfeited their inheritance and would have been separated and put away from the "congregation."

After the review of all the cases over a period of three months, this difficult task was completed. Each person found guilty offered "a ram for their trespass." They had broken the law of God and the confession and forsaking of their sin was accepted, on the basis of an innocent, sinless substitute being offered in their place. Failure confessed, forsaken and abandoned completely opens the way for recovery for some service for the Lord. God is willing to allow service for him after restoration. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

Recovery after failure is a blessing. Sin brings serious and tragic consequences, but when sin is dealt with and repentance is real, order can be restored and effective service for God can continue. Obedience to the word of God may be costly and painful, but the result is the clearing of guilt, peace of mind, the joy of forgiveness and acceptance by God. The man of the book had many trials and heartaches, but the integrity of his spirit he was able to maintain his testimony and bring about change and recovery to others. That principle remains the same today.

Ezra 10: 4. *“Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.”*

DO IT.

The evidence is there to be seen; something must be done.
What is a Christian to do when he realizes the one;
He is married to is a worshiper of demons?
Should he ignore the fact that Satan has come between them?
What about the children you love as life itself?
Can you expect them to follow God, when you've done wrong yourself?
There comes a time when sin must be faced, there must be true repentance.
Righteousness insists that you must pass upon yourself the sentence,
That you have done wrong and instead of being covered, sin has found you out.
It is time to face the consequences and do what you can about
This deep, fundamental barrier that has kept you, and others, from God.
Stop! And for the sake of all concerned, bow to the chastening rod.

You made the mistake at the beginning by compromising what you believe.
The one you married, you know worshipped idols, so really you deceived
Her into thinking it made no difference, you each could do your own thing.
But what about the children that soon into the world you bring?
Will they follow one who has compromised for the sake of personal attraction?
Or will they listen more attentively to the parent who is committed to action?
They will follow the one who follows the way of the world, the flesh and the devil.
And they will find the attractions around so appealing, not realizing the evil
That comes hard on the back of those who want to be like the ones they hang around,
Because a parent who has done wrong himself is living on shaky ground -
With nothing really to offer a child who is impressionable at a young age.
Act now! Do what you can so the damage you have done may be assuaged.

“O Lord God, the damage done by poor choices seems to escape the attention of many until it is too late. May we Thy children be made aware again of the dangers of unequal yokes of any kind. May our consciences be awakened. May we be willing to do what is necessary to right wrongs that have negative consequences if it is at all possible. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”