

EVANGELICAL BIBLE COLLEGE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



EZRA

**(The Man who stood up to
Religious and Moral
Compromise)**

BY

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WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

Professor Simon Greenleaf was one of the most eminent lawyers of all time. His "Laws of Evidence" for many years were accepted by all States in the United States as the standard methodology for evaluating cases. He was teaching law at a university in the United States when one of his students asked Professor Greenleaf if he would apply his "Laws of Evidence" to evaluate an historical figure. When Greenleaf agreed to the project he asked the student who was to be the subject of the review. The student replied that the person to be examined would be Jesus Christ. Professor Greenleaf agreed to undertake the examination of Jesus Christ and as a result, when he had finished the review, Simon Greenleaf personally accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour.

Professor Greenleaf then sent an open letter to all jurists in the United States saying in part "I personally have investigated one called Jesus Christ. I have found the evidence concerning him to be historically accurate. I have also discovered that Jesus Christ is more than a human being, he is either God or nothing and having examined the evidence it is impossible to conclude other than he is God. Having concluded that he is God I have accepted him as my personal Saviour. I urge all members of the legal profession to use the "Laws of Evidence" to investigate the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and if you find that he is wrong expose him as a faker but if not consider him as your Saviour and Lord"

HOW CAN I BE SAVED?

Salvation is available for all members of the human race.

Salvation is the most important undertaking in all of God's universe. The salvation of sinners is never on the basis of God's merely passing over or closing His eyes to sin. God saves sinners on a completely righteous basis consistent with the divine holiness of His character. This is called grace. It relies on God so man cannot work for salvation, neither can he deserve it. We need to realise that the creation of this vast unmeasured universe was far less an undertaking than the working out of God's plan to save sinners.

However the acceptance of God's salvation by the sinner is the most simple thing in all of life. One need not be rich, nor wise, nor educated. Age is no barrier nor the colour of one's skin. The reception of the enormous benefits of God's redemption is based upon the simplest of terms so that there is no one in all this wide universe who need be turned away.

How do I become a Christian?

There is but one simple step divided into three parts. First of all I have to recognise that I am a sinner (Romans 3:23; 6:23; Ezekiel 18:4; John 5:24).

Secondly, realising that if I want a relationship with Almighty God who is perfect, and recognising that I am not perfect, I need to look to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour (1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:6; John 3:16).

Thirdly, by the exercise of my own free will I personally receive the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour, believing that He died personally for me and that He is what He claims to be in an individual, personal and living way (John 1:12; 3:36; Acts 16:31; 4:12).

The results of Salvation

The results of this are unbelievably wonderful:
My sins are taken away (John 1:29),
I possess eternal life now (1 John 5:11,12),
I become a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17),
The Holy Spirit takes up His residence in my life (1 Corinthians 6:19),
And I will never perish (John 10:28-30).

This truthfully is life's greatest transaction. This is the goal of all people; this is the ultimate of our existence. We invite and exhort any reader who has not become a Christian by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ to follow these simple instructions and be born again eternally into God's family (Matthew 11:28; John 1:12; Acts 4:12; 16:31).

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EZRA CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The time period we enter with Ezra the great Scribe is a period where we see the great flowering of the civilizations that will dominate the world until the last days. The great Gentile Empires that will “trample Jerusalem” were seen by the prophet Daniel in the century before Ezra’s day, and Daniel gets a glimpse of the entire panorama of world history from that time to our own today. Refer to the BTB study, PROPHECY – DANIEL’S 70 WEEKS, EMPIRES IN DANIEL, NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S DREAM SEQUENCE OF END TIME EVENTS.

The previous civilizations of the Fertile Crescent have gone into the dust of history, having played their part and been supplanted by newer and more vigorous peoples. The people of Sumer and Accad are gone, Ur of the Chaldeans is a ruin by this time, the Assyrians are gone, and the power of the Canaanite and Syrian kings are the stuff of history. We enter the period with the book of Ezra that introduces our modern world, and sets the stage for the “Last Days” of man. Many will feel that I am far too dramatic in my language here, for we still have 2500 years from the start of Ezra’s history until our own days, and then whatever time is to be played out until the Lord returns.

However, the stage is set in these days for the First Advent of the Messiah, and the stage remains set for His Second Advent. The nations that move to central stage now will remain at the centre of world events until the end. Throughout this study I will underline words that are worth referring to in a Bible Encyclopedia, or searching on the Internet, to get additional background material on our journey through Ezra and Nehemiah. As to authorship of this book, I accept that it is the work of the historic figure Ezra, who lived and wrote in the 440s BC, and who worked with the Satrap Nehemiah.

Who are the players and what is their role? First let us be clear on this man Ezra, for he sets up what we now know as “Rabbinic Judaism” after the Exile, and ensures by his reforms, his assembling/editing of the canon of the Old Testament, and by his own writings, that the Jewish people never enter into idolatry towards any foreign gods again. Sadly, his system will become over the subsequent centuries fixed in the concrete of LEGALISM and lead to the rejection of the Messiah by the majority of the Jewish people in the first century of our era. However, his words and life example will be the encouragement to those who do accept the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

We will not blame Ezra for the evils that are worked out in the Sanhedrin in the days of Jesus once we have read and studied his words and seen his work. This man prepares the path for Messiah to come, and establishes the work of the local synagogues so that they will become the centres of Judaism for the rest of history, and the focal point for evangelism in the early Jewish Messianic Assemblies. For further study, we recommend you refer to the book by Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Hebrew Christianity”, as it forms the best simple explanation of the Jewish origins of the early church.

The wonderful work of Ezra finds its fulfilment in the early Messianic Synagogues established by the early Apostles, all of whom were Jewish. Refer to the internet site, www.ariel.org and utilise the wonderful material that our dear friend Arnold has placed there freely for you to study each day to build up your faith and knowledge of the Jewish origins of Christianity.

Ezra lived in the fifth century before the Lord, and his history covers the period from the decree of Cyrus the Great around 536 BC, until the decree of Artaxerxes Longimanus around 445 BC. Nehemiah will take the story onwards until around 415 BC. Ezra is a leader of the Babylonian Jewish Community, born into a family that did not return with the first exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest in 535 BC. He grows up under the Medio-Persian rulers of the new Empire established by Cyrus the Great. The foolish citizens of Babylon rebelled against the Persian rulers in the early years of the fifth century (482 BC) and it is probably as a result of the aftermath of this rebellion, that was brutally put down by the Persians, that Ezra and many other Jews in Babylon realise that the Lord’s place for them is back in Jerusalem with the descendents of those who returned in 535 BC.

Ezra leads a second group back around 458 BC and establishes worship in a godly fashion and brings the needed revival of spirituality and holiness. The priesthood membership that had returned initially had become quite corrupt through the first decades back in the land, especially due to the intermarriages amongst the pagans who dwelt in the land. Marriages amongst pagans were forbidden for Israelites, and all marriages that are spiritually “unequal” remain forbidden for believers today. 2 Corinthians 6:14. For God’s people there are to be no compromises with the world, the flesh, or the devil. Galatians 5:17-24, 6:8-13. Refer to the BTB study of SEPARATION, for this is a major theme of Ezra’s history. He is ably supported in his work by Nehemiah, who is appointed as the Jewish Persian Governor of the province of Judah through part of the time Ezra lives in the land. Ezra appears to have served as Satrap before Nehemiah comes.

Ezra’s work is not a history in the traditional sense as we understand history. He does not give us the facts and figures relating to the settlement of the land, indeed he ignores everything that does not refer directly to the worship of the people. His sole focus is the godly, pure, and proper re-establishment of worship in the rebuilt Temple. Ezra is fixated on getting worship right, and getting the priesthood and the people “right” before the Lord. He sees with absolute clarity that all believers who are serious about their service of the Lord need to get a grip on themselves and every detail of their daily lives. He sees that it is righteousness that exalts a nation! We need to fully take onboard Ezra’s heart for the Lord,

for we all need to stand before the Lord our God with holy heart and holy hands. The need for personal and corporate holiness is at the highest level of concern when we approach the worship of the Lord.

This remains a major concern for the church today as it was for those who entered the Temple in Ezra's day. Those today who approach the Communion Table in a spirit that is less than holy are in grave danger of judgement. 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. Do a short study now of the following New Testament verses to see that this theme of holiness before the Lord remains central for our own worship, as it was in the days of Moses and then Ezra. Look at the following verses, 1 Corinthians 3:17, Ephesians 1:4, 5:27, 1 Timothy 2:8, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 1:12-16, Jude 20, Revelation 4:8. Let us ensure that we are as "fanatical" as Ezra was in regard to dealing with personal sin, for only then are we walking in the place where we can worship, serve, and be blessed by the Lord. Refer to the BTB studies below.

The time period we move into here sees the birth of the future great European nations that will bring European Civilization as we know it to Europe. Rome is established as a vibrant village by the River Tibur in the mid 700s, and by the years of the fifth century has expanded and is on its path to domination of its surrounding area. By the second century BC it will have eliminated the threat of Carthage on the coast of North Africa, and the Greek city States in the south of Italy, and begin to control the western Mediterranean area.

Between Rome and Persia the new and vibrant Dorian Greek culture is emerging from the dying days of the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. These Greek tribes arriving in the years around 1000 BC, establish themselves in the cities of Greece and build their strength and power. They will fight each other, and join together only to take on the might of the Persian Empire in the days of Ezra and the century after him. The great battle of Marathon, that we still remember today from the epic run of the Athenian messenger, is fought by the Greeks against the Persians in 490 BC. The next round of the titanic struggle between the west and the east occurs under the next Persian leader, Xerxes. He wanted to avenge the defeat at Marathon, and so he formed a vast army to invade and conquer Greece. In 480 BC he built a pontoon bridge across the Hellespont, and marched his army of as many as 200,000 men (including camp followers and supply forces), across into Europe where he meets and fights the 300 Spartans and their allies in the pass at Thermopylae.

Led by their king Leonidas the 300 Spartans (plus their allies) fight to the last man and buy the time the other Greek States need to re-organise their defences. Xerxes seizes Athens and burns the entire city, that is made of wood at this time (the Athenians will later celebrate their victory by rebuilding in marble). The entire population of Athens has already used the time Leonidas bought them and relocated to the island of Salamis, and it is off this island that the Athenian Admirals win their great naval victory against the Persian fleet with their people watching.

The next year, 479 BC, the Persian Army meets the Greek combined army at Plataea for a bloody and close fought battle. The Spartans develop what they call "the hoplite run" and train the combined army to sprint in full armour for 250 yards and then seize the Persian archers from off their horses and kill them on the ground. The great Persian prince and general Mardonius leads his men from the front on his white horse surrounded by his 1,000 man guard of a section of the famous "Immortals", the Persian body guard of the king. His men are attacked by the Greeks doing their "hoplite run" and he is killed at a crucial point in the battle and the survivors of the Persian host flee the field. Such is the wealth in the Persian camp that the Greeks spend ten days on the field looting the dead and their camp.

This wealth ensures that the Greeks have the money to rebuild their cities and their naval forces. They also become the mercenary forces for a number of Persian kings in the future and some of the great literature of the Greek world comes from the journeys of Greek mercenaries in this period. Xenophon's book Anabasis ("The Persian Expedition" of around 401 BC) records the exploits of one such Greek mercenary army. The Greek historian and traveller Herodotus also travels the Persian Empire in this century and all these books have survived and may be referred to as background reading to the Biblical texts before us, as he is a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Persian king Xerxes is else-where fighting with another Persian Army when he hears the news of the defeat of his Greek expedition at Plataea. When he returns to the Persian capital he is depressed and drinks more and more to deal with his depression. We meet him in the scriptures, for he is the man referred to by his Persian Religious leadership title of Ahasuerus. Esther will be led of the Lord to marry this man to stop a planned pogrom against the Jews by a faction of the Persian nobility led by Haman. Jewish people were active in the politics and administration of the Persian Empire and were resented for their power and influence as we will see in the book of Nehemiah.

The three books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are grouped for the historic reason that they are Jewish people in Gentile Empire positions of power in the fifth century BC. They each, with Daniel 100 years earlier, illustrate the new role of the Jewish people within the new Gentile Empires. Jewish people, from the falls of Jerusalem in 606, 597 and 586 BC, have become a secondary force in the politics of the world, but individuals will play key roles in Gentile kingdoms to fulfil the Plan of God. They will play key supporting roles in the dramas of the rest of history, and it will only be under the returned Lord Jesus Christ that they will become as a nation, the leader of the nations that they briefly were under David and Solomon. The "Times/Age of the Gentiles" has begun.

The very language of the scriptures will change through this period also. Hebrew is the dominant language of the Old Testament, but Aramaic is the language of diplomacy in the Middle East from around the 8th century BC, and is the one used by the administrators of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Empires in the entire Middle Eastern area. It can be written the same way as Hebrew, and to the untrained eye it looks the same, but its presence in the books of Daniel and Ezra is the sign that the prophetic "Age of the Gentiles" has begun, 606/605 BC, and it will run until the Lord's return. **Luke 21:24.**

Aramaic will be the daily language used by the Jewish people of Jesus day, in association with the Greek language that Alexander the Great will introduce after his defeat of the Persian Empire in the 330s. By using the language of their conquerors and making it their own, the Jewish people of Ezra's day through until Jesus day demonstrate that their independent power is over, and they are under the political control of others. In the Luke passage above, Jesus notes that the city of Jerusalem will be "trodden down" by Gentile boots until that time of His final return to rule over this earth.

This "Age of the Gentiles" began at the fall of Jerusalem in 605 BC, and from that point the great Gentile Empires rule the earth until the Lord's return. The dream of Nebuchadnezzar, that Daniel interprets, Daniel Chapter 2, makes this clear to Jew and Gentile alike. Refer to the BTB studies on PROPHECY, and also CHRIST – FIRST AND SECOND ADVENTS, CHRIST AS THE ROCK and DISPENSATIONS, AGE OF ISRAEL, CHURCH AGE – INTERCALATION/INSERTION.

The spiritual "Age of Israel" continues within the "Times of the Gentiles" until it is broken by Messiah being "cut off" as Daniel predicted he would be, Daniel 9:26, but politically the centre of world history moves westwards through the centuries from the days of Ezra. He is born into the "Silver Age" of Medio-Persia, and within four centuries the Empire of Iron (Rome) is on the scene, and is the final oppressor and destroyer of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Rome's modern derivative nations (modern Europe and North Africa and the Levant) are the key players in history until the end when the entire edifice of man is brought down by the ROCK that is Christ. Daniel 2:44-45. Refer to the EBCWA Commentary on Daniel Chapter Two and study this vision as it forms the historic background to the events of this book before us.

Within the book of Ezra, the decrees of the Persian monarchs are written in Aramaic (also referred to as Chaldean), **Ezra 4:8-22, 5:6-17, 6:6-12, 7:12-26**, and the section on the rebuilding of the Temple are also in Aramaic. **Ezra 5:23-6:18**. This indicates Ezra's closeness to the Monarch, and makes me believe that these sections are either copies of official records, or official records sent back to Persia to report progress. Ezra was very likely given the role he has by the Persian King, who took a great deal of interest in the religious affairs of his peoples. We will see this when we get to the appropriate section.

It is clear to me that both Nehemiah and Ezra were Persian officials (Satraps) as well as being Jewish leaders. Persia brings peace to the region, and with that it brings prosperity which the Jewish community benefits from through their involvement in trade. Jewish entry into world trade and banking begins at this time period and continues into the next time period, the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great. This book follows on from Daniel and describes a great turning point of history. As we will see, this man Ezra has much to teach his people about holiness and righteousness, and his words burn down through the centuries and teach us today with the same power they did 2500 years ago.

EZRA 1:1-11

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, **2** Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. **3** Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. **4** And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. **5** Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. **6** And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. **7** Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; **8** Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. **9** And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, **10** Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. **11** All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 4. Having read these verses look back at the closing verses of 2 Chronicles Chapter 36. Read verses 11-23, and then start straight in and read this chapter before us again. Notice the similarity in style and the direct connection between them. Most commentators believe it is Ezra who is the author of Chronicles and the book before us that bears his name. He is the great compiler of the canon of Scripture that we have as our Old Testament. He gathers the texts that have survived the Exile together in Babylon and is credited with establishing a theological school there that will over the next centuries write what is known as the "Babylonian Talmud". The only work that is to be added into the Old Testament that is not extant by the days of Ezra is the prophetic work of the later prophet Malachi. He will write around the year 400-397BC. Refer to the BTB study on BIBLE – CANONICITY.

Ezra introduces in these first verses a key player in world history; Cyrus the Great. Cyrus is the empire builder of Medio-Persian power, and he establishes a power base from which to take over the Babylonian Empire established by

Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar. Refer to the BTB studies on NEBUCHADNEZZAR, and CYRUS. Cyrus the Great was born of a Persian father and a Median mother, and so was perfectly positioned to be the uniter of the two peoples of the area now known as Iran. Cyrus inherited the Persian kingship and began to establish his power base within his own area and by strategic alliances and espionage secured the defection of many Medes to his banner. He unseated the Median king Astyges and treated him with dignity and reverence. He incorporated the best of the previous and present peoples of the land into his administration and army structure. He used Elamite scribes, Median Officers and administrators, and Persians for his army and the court was mixed. He combined the two armies into a new and very efficient fighting force. He combined the best of both cultures, and with the composite bows their archers could fire faster and more accurately through any armour than any weapon until the Long Bow of the Welsh/English in the 14th century.

His main enemies, or rivals to power in the Middle East, were Babylon, by then under Nabonidus and his regent Belshazzar, and the kingdom of Lydia, under its king Croesus. Cleverly Cyrus selected Croesus as his first target, so that he would deny Babylon any support from the north or west when he chose to deal with them. By amazing military courage, guile, and brilliant strategic thinking, he defeated the Lydian king in 547 BC, and incorporated the Lydian Empire and the Ionian Greek states on the coast of what is now Turkey into his Empire. He built a road for speedy horse riding messengers to use, from the Aegean to his new capital of Pasargadae in Persia.

This "Royal Road" was 4000 miles long and his messengers could ride from one end to the other and deliver intelligence or orders in under fourteen days. Hundreds of riders rode back and forth along this road daily as part of this original "pony express" to carry information that enabled Cyrus to move quickly to deal with problems as they occurred. He had to put down a serious revolt amongst the Greek States within two years of seizing the Lydian Empire, and he did this with surgical violence. Cyrus the Great treated honourable enemies with dignity, and respected their religions and their rights. They had to pay their new taxes to him, but they enjoyed peace and prosperity as a result. All who dealt fairly and honestly with Cyrus were dealt with well, but those who broke their word and rebelled were ruthlessly exterminated.

Cyrus moved vast numbers of carpenters and stone masons from the conquered Greek and Lydian areas to his new capital city in 546 BC and they took part in the building of this amazing place, the ruins of which still take the visitor's breath away. He removed masons from the worksite at the Temple of Artemis/Diana of the Ephesians, which was being built at the time, and they were only allowed to return and complete that great temple when they finished the palace complex at Pasargadae. As he did this he moved his armies into the north and east and pacified all the threats behind him, before turning his attention to Babylon. By 540 BC he was ready to move against Babylon.

King Nabonidus, and his son and regent Belshazzar, started to prepare their defences and reform their religious systems to try to re-unite their people together for the threat they could now see clearly was on their very doorstep, but they were too late. Cyrus used his section of the army to draw Nabonidus and the standing army of Chaldea away from Babylon to the north, and Babylon itself was left in the hands of Belshazzar. Cyrus' able general Gobryas drained one branch of the Euphrates River and entered the city by marching his army under the water gate while the foolish Belshazzar felt so secure behind Babylon's massive walls that he was throwing a great party for his leadership. Daniel 5.

On our 13th of October 540 (or 539) BC the city fell without major battle, with most of the population welcoming the Medio-Persian invaders as liberators. The Bible alone records Belshazzar's fate. Cyrus treated the old defeated king Nabonidus (who surrendered shortly afterwards in the north) with dignity, as he had the Median king Astyges. Nabonidus was allowed to retire to the oasis of Timna in the desert to spend the rest of his days in religious worship in honourable retirement at the shrine he had built there. There were more Chaldeans "pro-Cyrus" than were against him in the end.

It was Cyrus' policy to keep able leaders of captured places in power if they proved loyal to the new empire and so it is logical that Daniel retained his respected role, in overall rulership over the new provincial area. It is likely that Cyrus had a Median name, and was the "Darius" who Daniel mentions, as he had a Median mother with connections to the palace in Babylon, one of whom I believe was Daniel and the Queen mother (herself half Median). Daniel was pro-Median, with his associations and would be expected to use Cyrus' Median name. Cyrus wanted new areas to become "Medio-Persian" in their thinking, and that meant being respectful of all others in the empire. Cyrus was the first king who truly understood that the way to unite various cultures without subduing, insulting, or destroying any, began with respect and learning of them. Cyrus took four years to consolidate his power over the area, and learn of the traditions of the various people he had inherited by capturing Chaldea. Only then did he make his next move. He never fought on two fronts at once! Read the Commentary on Daniel (Last Words File, or Old Testament Commentaries file, on the USB/CD).

Cyrus was a careful and scholarly man, who would himself read everything he could about people, or order his intelligence section to study them, well before deciding how to deal with them. I believe Cyrus read, or had heard of the Hebrew prophecies regarding his destiny and the role of his empire. He clearly met Daniel well before attacking Babylon, and would have known of his work and written words, and I suspect this may be why Daniel was out of favour with Belshazzar, and had to be "called" to that last fateful banquet. He would have received copies of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah to peruse, and very likely had access also to copies of the Mosaic Law. These Medio-Persian kings built upon the great libraries established by the Babylonian kings. They delighted in literacy and the gaining of knowledge about others. This was a man who valued other cultures and saw that their strength as an Empire was welding peoples together in mutual respect for each other's culture and religion. He knew that political unity was achieved by religious and cultural respect – it appears also he was a believer, led to the Lord by Daniel, although we will only know in heaven.

All that happened with Cyrus had been foreseen by the prophets of the Lord and stated clearly well before he made his moves. This meant that he had much evidence to read that proved that the God of Israel truly foresaw the deeds of men.

Even one hundred years before this time, Isaiah had made what must have seemed a strange prophecy regarding Cyrus, who was yet to even be born, that he would order/allow the rebuilding of the Temple and City of Jerusalem. This occurs over a hundred and twenty years before Jerusalem is destroyed! **Isaiah 44:24-28, 45:1-13**.

These passages of Isaiah are attacked and explained away by the liberal scholars, as they make no sense to anti-supernaturalists, but they are passages that believers who see the truth of prophecy identify as further evidence of God's almighty power. Isaiah Chapter 45 is a strong proclamation of God's sovereignty and foreknowledge. God doesn't need to wait until people are born to speak accurately concerning their destiny and role in His Plan! Refer to the EBCWA Commentary on these chapters of Isaiah now, and understand this principle before advancing in the story of Cyrus.

The prophet Jeremiah was given the revelation of the time that the people would be under Babylonian Exile, and to the very year the people could expect political deliverance in 536 BC. **Jeremiah 25:11-14, 29:10, 33:7-13**. The work of these prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah was well known in Babylon, Isaiah having been delivered there by the early exiles, with Jeremiah's work delivered by Baruch after Jeremiah's death.

These books, with the Mosaic Law, formed the basis for the revival of Ezekiel, and the basis for the interpretation given by the Lord to Daniel of the seventy weeks. Daniel Chapter 9. Ezra makes it clear, that all that occurs in history through this time is what the prophets of the Lord have foreseen and told in their scriptures. God's Plan is being worked out.

When he was master of the required information Cyrus made an edict for the return of the Jews to Judah to rebuild the nation as a new province of his empire. Cyrus sees that to allow the exiles to return to the land of their fathers will immediately weld their political loyalty to him and the empire. Historians and modern archaeologists tell us that he will allow not only the Jews to return, but also the descendents of the captured Canaanites and Philistines, who were also all rounded up and taken to Babylon after the 586 BC Campaign by Nebuchadnezzar. By publishing this decree, and others, he secured an immediately loyal population in this border area that provided a buffer for him to Egypt, which a later ruler will bring into the empire.

When we read Cyrus' words in verses two and following we can either see a careful and cunning politician, or a man who genuinely is a believer in the one true God. Historians and theologians are divided on this matter. He has clearly taken the prophetic words of Isaiah and Jeremiah seriously as referring to himself. This is not arrogance on his part; it is recognition of the truth. Does he truly accept this, or is he playing politics? I believe he is genuine, for he sees that these prophetic words are evidence that the God of Israel is indeed the "Lord God" over all, for He accurately through two prophets portrayed him and the nature and timing of the exile of the Jews.

Cyrus recognises also the nature of man in his edict. He knows that many of the captured peoples have become settled and prosperous through their time in Babylon and surrounding areas. Their exile was not total slavery, for each family had it's own house and garden, and over time those who did well were promoted and allowed to enter into other trades and work as their skills and energy allowed. Many of these people had built large homes in Babylon and other cities by now. They would not want to return to the wild and desolate border lands of Judah and rebuild their nation, but such wealthy members of the Jewish community who would stay in Babylon would, by Cyrus' edict, pay and support the others who went. This return of the Exile Community would be supported by the king and empire, but mainly would be supported by the wealthy members of their own community who would stay behind in Babylon and Persia.

The Babylonians and later the Persians valued energy and skill and rewarded all who demonstrated both. A slave could become a master of all they surveyed by using their talents. The strength of both cultures, and what made them the "head of gold, and breast of silver" (Daniel 2:31-33) amongst all the nations and empires of the earth was their openness to talent amongst their servants, and their lack of arrogant self centeredness and racism. All could rise up within their empires if they had the talent, the energy and the loyalty. The two attempts by individual kings to impose religious intolerance, or in the first case megalomania, were dealt with by the Lord, and the kings involved repented of their error. Daniel 3, 6. The vast majority of the Jewish community in exile will not return under Zerubbabel and Joshua, or even later with Ezra, but will either stay in Babylon, or move on into Persia and Media, as both traders and government officials. Jewish Communities in what is now Iraq and Iran would remain there and be active and prosperous until the 1970s of our own era with "Operation Magic Carpet" when the Israeli Air Force uplifted them.

Verses 5 – 6. The edict of Cyrus is expected from prophetic revelation, and so it is prepared for by the Jewish people who know that the seventy years is up. Many are ready to return to the land of their fathers, and there are some, who left as young children in 586BC, who desire nothing else other than to return and be buried in the city of their fore-fathers. The majority of the exiles are of the three tribes, Judah, Benjamin and Levi. The ten northern tribes had been decimated and destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BC, and their exiles are scattered in the northerly areas of what is now Iraq. They also are allowed to return under Cyrus edict and clearly many do also, for there are twelve tribes again by James day, James 1:1, but Ezra records the story of the southern group who came in the deportations of 605, 597 and 586.

Every person involved in the return from exile gathered all the valuable items they could, as they would need available currency to buy building materials when they arrived in Judah, and also pay for food for the first years before their crops came in. All their neighbours, who were not going to return, also took up collections and donated all they could to the returning Exiles so that they had a share in the return and rebuilding of the Temple also. By giving, all shared in the work. Refer to the BTB studies GIVING, STEWARDSHIP.

Verses 7 – 11. Cyrus then returned to the care of the priests under Joshua all the items that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple of Solomon in 586 before it was destroyed. Every religious item taken by Nebuchadnezzar's armies is returned so that it can form the basis for the new Temple's worship to begin again. All these items had been kept in the temple treasuries of the pagan gods of Babylon. Temples were the banks of the ancient world, so too much ought not to be read into the fact that the treasures of the Temple of Solomon were stored in the pagan temples of the gods of Babylon.

These items were carefully catalogued and counted back to the leader of the house of Judah, amongst the Exiles, who was the legitimate king of Judah, but who will never take that title. He is called by his Babylonian name, but we know him as Zerubbabel. His name here indicates that he may have had an official role in the Persian government, and may have returned as the leader of the Exiles with Persian authority and even a title behind him. His Gentile name is used to also remind us that Judah has entered the "Age of the Gentiles" now and they will not have a true king again until Messiah comes.

The great "kings of the Jews" of history are remembered as the descendents of Herod the Great, but the family of Herod the Great of the New Testament period are half Jewish, half Edomite. Notice the exact numbers of items here. This list is from the original, as it is exact, not a "rounded off" list to the nearest numbers, except where the vessels are around the thousand mark.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. The requirement for Holiness before the Lord is a demand that no believer can get around. We are challenged by Ezra to deal with sin in our life and target any area of our life where compromise with evil has occurred and return to godly paths again. He identifies the importance of the Biblical Doctrine of Separation; not a false separation based on self righteousness, but a recognition that we need to let our spiritual light shine, and that we need to be as far away as possible from any forces that will extinguish our light.

2. Both those who do a work and those who give to support that work, all share together in the work. Let us preach the biblical doctrine of giving, for by giving to the Lord's work, all believers share in it together. Let us also reflect upon our role in the Lord's plan for our life, for each of us need to know where we ought to be and what we ought to be doing. It is not right to be giving money when we should be giving ourselves! It is equally wrong to do a work, when our call is to support it, but not go ourselves. Let us be clear on the Lord's will for each of us, and then let us do what we are called to do. Refer below to the BTB study on GOD – THE PLAN OF GOD.

3. Nothing, or no-one is lost by the Lord. The vessels of the Temple of Solomon are not lost and are all returned by Cyrus. The people of Judah are not lost, and all who wish are able to return to re-enter the land and fulfil their destiny there. No matter what happens to us, the Lord's plan for us will work out through our lives if we are prayerfully obedient to the Holy Spirit's leading. Let us walk in the power, and under the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit, for there alone is there security and safety and a path to the purposes of God for us.

NOTES

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

This appears to be the surviving official list of the family or city groups that left Babylon under Zerubbabel in 535 BC. Ezra is writing from nearly one hundred years later and so he is working from written records, not personal witness and there are not enough details to assist us as historians in some areas that we would like to know more of. Each of us who is passionate about history is keen to talk to these men and women in heaven, and then we will get all the facts.

The roll call here tells us how the group of returning exiles (from Babylon only) were organised for their march back and gives very good back up to our own post-trauma strategies for dealing with people in such situations. It is well understood today that if a group of trauma survivors can be kept together in their family or other natural groupings, and the group dynamics strengthened, then the people will build strength and power and achieve great things at the end of their ordeal. Leadership has the opportunity to operate amongst people who have a natural reason to be together, and such groups form a cohesive whole faster than a group that has no natural bonds between the members.

The groups below vary in size, but are all of a size that can be coordinated by a single leader, with officers to assist him, and all can be broken into smaller sub-groups for administration. This list is only that of the exiles from Babylon, and Ezra hints in verse 70 that there were others from the north and possibly the east, made up of the other ten tribes, that also returned as an additional group to this one. What we have here is a summary of the Babylonian contingent, but it does not exclude the possibility of there being others in addition to the names we have here from Judah, Levi and Benjamin.

The unit of modern armies is called the Battalion. Modern army Battalions are around 600 men, led by a Colonel, with two or three majors over two or three companies each, with companies at around 120 men in size. Each company is led by a Captain. Lieutenants are in charge of smaller units within each company of 25 – 50, and Non-Commissioned officers (Sergeants and Corporals) are in charge of the sub-sections of these groups, called platoons, comprising 10-12 men. These modern groupings of personnel go all the way back to the days we are reading of, and it is likely that we find this sort of military organisation in the exiles marching order under Ezra.

What we see with these groups below is that their numbers can all be worked into these basic and very manageable sized units and sub-units. Larger groups can be broken down into smaller units easily, but be kept together under their natural, and often family leaders, on the march. They will march in groups that are organised along military lines and will be kept together so that when they reach the land they will be able to all “peel off” and settle in their ancestral areas, with good internal cohesion and leadership that has been tried on a several thousand mile march over many months. This would have been crucial for their self defence in their settlement areas in the land, where the Arab tribes would sweep in at times from Moab, Edom or Ammon.

The thought that such a group as Zerubbabel led just walked as an uncoordinated rabble is false. There is a good system of organisation behind each of the three formal returns, and the administration involved would have been significant. To keep a group of over 40,000 people moving forward, with food and fodder for animals on the way, and supplies to ensure they can build and settle a desolated land on their arrival required very good planning, coordination, and control. Supply dumps of fodder and food must be pre-positioned, as over this time frame no group can carry their own supplies easily. Such a journey would have taken around four months of hard walking, and each returning leader faced the challenges that Moses had in leading the people out of Egypt in the Exodus, without the daily manna and water in the desert, although they had time to plan and prepare, and at least had the Persian Government’s financial and military support, and they needed it for each of the groups returning is similar or bigger than the Exodus Group.

The records that Ezra is working from are basic ones, possibly kept by the Persian government for taxation purposes. The Persians were very careful about record keeping, and recording exact numbers of people involved in any great expeditions, as they liked to know how many people were heading out, so that they could keep an eye on their growth and prosperity, through the annual returns of the Governors, for after a few years of establishment they would begin taxing them. Ezra has access to Persian records to tell the early story of the return, and from the Jewish records of the time, kept in the rebuilt Temple he will have more information. He himself leads the second group back in 458 BC, seventy seven years after the first group arrives back.

EZRA 2:1-70

1 Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city; 2 Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mizpar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

3 The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two.

4 The children of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy and two.

5 The children of Arah, seven hundred seventy and five.

6 The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve.

7 The children of Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.

8 The children of Zattu, nine hundred forty and five.

9 The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore.
 10 The children of Bani, six hundred forty and two.
 11 The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and three.
 12 The children of Azgad, a thousand two hundred twenty and two.
 13 The children of Adonikam, six hundred sixty and six.
 14 The children of Bigvai, two thousand fifty and six.
 15 The children of Adin, four hundred fifty and four.
 16 The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight.
 17 The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and three.
 18 The children of Jorah, an hundred and twelve.
 19 The children of Hashum, two hundred twenty and three.
 20 The children of Gibbar, ninety and five.
 21 The children of Bethlehem, an hundred twenty and three.
 22 The men of Netophah, fifty and six.
 23 The men of Anathoth, an hundred twenty and eight.
 24 The children of Azmaveth, forty and two.
 25 The children of Kirjatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty and three.
 26 The children of Ramah and Gaba, six hundred twenty and one.
 27 The men of Michmas, an hundred twenty and two.
 28 The men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty and three.
 29 The children of Nebo, fifty and two.
 30 The children of Magbish, an hundred fifty and six.
 31 The children of the other Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four.
 32 The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty.
 33 The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty and five.
 34 The children of Jericho, three hundred forty and five.
 35 The children of Senaah, three thousand and six hundred and thirty.
 36 The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three.
 37 The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two.
 38 The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven.
 39 The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.
 40 The Levites: the children of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the children of Hodaviah, seventy and four.
 41 The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight.
 42 The children of the porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, in all an hundred thirty and nine.
 43 The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth,
 44 The children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon,
 45 The children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub,
 46 The children of Hagab, the children of Shalmal, the children of Hanan,
 47 The children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah,
 48 The children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam,
 49 The children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai,
 50 The children of Asnah, the children of Mehunim, the children of Nephusim,
 51 The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur,
 52 The children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha,
 53 The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Thamah,
 54 The children of Nezhiah, the children of Hatipha.
 55 The children of Solomon's servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda,
 56 The children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel,
 57 The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Ami.
 58 All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon's servants, were three hundred ninety and two.
 59 And these were they which went up from Telmelah, Telharsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not shew their father's house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel: 60 The children of Delaiah, the children of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two. 61 And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: 62 These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. 63 And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim. 64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, 65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women. 66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five; 67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty. 68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: 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 priests' garments. 70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 2. The list is that from the Province of Babylon. From this and the later comments of Ezra I believe that he doesn't have access to any other lists from more northerly or easterly places, from where those of the ten tribes of Israel could have returned, so he makes it clear that this is the Babylon list only. He gives us in some cases the areas the exiles originally came from, and this in itself is a clue to the extensiveness of the defeats of Judah in 597 and 586 BC. The survivors were marched into captivity from a wide variety of places. Many more return than are noted here.

Some of their leader's names are given to us, and these are the senior princes of the tribes, and possibly the key administrator or officials of Zerubbabel, who are likewise appointed by the Persians to lead the expedition. It is no minor walk, but a journey of several thousand miles, on foot, and with the requirement for food to be carried for the march, or purchased on the way, and the settlers needed to be equipped to settle a land that has been lying fallow for seventy years now. This was a well co-ordinated and led expedition.

Zerubbabel was the son of Shieliel, and a grandson of Jehoiachin, the king who reigned for three months and then surrendered and was taken into captivity. He had children and they grew up without him in the captivity, but this grandson, who could have claimed kingship, has accepted a commission in the Persian administration as Satrap, and has chosen to serve his people by leading them back to establish Judah as a new Persian Province. Some would consider this man a political traitor, but he is a man who lives to serve his God and his people. He has turned away kingship to be the servant of the Lord and his people in the new "times of the Gentiles". He may have been taught or mentored by Daniel, and would have read Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and so believes the Word and plays his part. This man like the new High Priest will not try to re-establish the "good old days", but will play **their part before God!**

Zerubbabel is ably supported by other great men who are looking to play their part in the great plan of God, not play the political games of their ancestors that led to such disasters as the losses of 605, 597, and 586 BC. The next man mentioned is the High Priest, Joshua. This is the shortened form of Jehoshua, and he is a grandson of the corrupt High Priest of Jehoiachin's day, Seraiah, who was put to death for treason by Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. 2 Kings 25:18-21. These two men have dealt with the sins of their fathers, and have committed themselves to doing a better job than their forefathers did through their absolute obedience to the Lord. Refer to the BTB studies on OBEDIENCE, SUBMISION.

The twelve men next mentioned here, with the two key leaders, are the new leadership of the revived nation. They are not meant to be the new heads of the twelve tribes, but twelve is the significant number for Israel, and so Cyrus, ever with an eye to tradition and history, has had them appoint (or he has appointed) twelve men to lead them as their first government under their governor Zerubbabel. These other men are not fully described, with their lineage mentioned, so it is hard to identify them, as their names are common ones amongst the Jewish people.

Ezra clearly has no other information, and can only list the names, not their fore-fathers, as was the Jewish traditional way of listing names. It is this fact that makes me think the list he has is from Persian sources, for Jewish records would have the lineage recorded, whereas to the Persians these people are simply returning Prisoners of War. The Nehemiah mentioned here is not the author of the book of scripture, for he returns many years after Zerubbabel's group. Reflect upon this list now, for although we do not know these men, the Lord does, for they were obedient to His Will. The Lord knows the name of each faithful servant, and the well done of the Lord is what intelligent men and women seek, not the praise of men who are dust. Matthew 25:21-23.

These men stepped outside the old nationalism of their ancestors, and were prepared to become servants and officials of a Gentile nation in order to spiritually and politically serve their people, and fulfil the will of the Lord their God. Let us be ready to step outside our own human frameworks of thinking and be ready to do anything in order that we might be obedient to the Lord's will for our own life. All through the scriptures this is the challenge to believers. We are not to slavishly follow the traditions of men, but the will of Almighty God. We are not to be unthinking flag wavers for petty nationalism, but servants of the Lord of all men.

We are called to be focused upon our service to His eternal kingdom, not our temporary place and honour within the kingdoms of men. Note the following verses that cover this principle through all of scriptural history. **Genesis 3:19, Psalms 103:14, Malachi 3:16, Matthew 6:10, 25:21-23, Romans 1:14-15, 1 Corinthians 9:19-27.** Pastors, as a study, take your people through each of these verses and reflect upon the readiness of the heroes of faith to step outside the expected and do what the Lord requires! Let us all challenge ourselves with this same issue today. Are we ready to lay aside the concerns of today's politics and do things that transcend politics and power amongst men and seek the Lord's path?

As we saw when studying the books of Kings, believers in the north fled south after the Assyrian invasion and many were saved by joining with Judah. All the Israelites are now referred to by the generic term, "Jews", which means "of Judah", even though large numbers of Levi and Benjamin are included. It may be that the other tribes all became amalgamated into, or adopted by, the tribe of Judah after the collapse of the northern kingdom. We cannot know for sure, so it is best not to waste further time speculating on why we do not have names that are clearly from other tribes. Let us also remember verse 70, which does indicate that others joined the returning group from further north and east, which was where the ten tribes were sent by the Assyrians.

Many of the ten tribes had also been sent into the land of the Medes, and may have joined from there once the initial group left Babylon. They would have had their own leaders, and would have had to pledge allegiance to the Persian

Governor Zerubbabel, of the house of David, when they joined the column of march. 2 Kings 17:6, 18, 23. We will only know how many of the old ten tribes returned when we reach heaven ourselves, but from this time onwards all the surviving people of the twelve tribes are known as “Jews”, for they were all delivered through their association with the southern kingdom of Judah. There are no “lost ten tribes”; as God doesn’t “lose” people, and even in recent decades tribes have re-emerged in northern India and Ethiopia, and modern DNA analysis lets identity be formalized and specific.

Verses 3 – 35. As we look at these verses we cannot identify all the areas these people’s ancestors were taken from and the places they returned to for the information is too scant to get definite results. At the time everything was clear, as people were still alive who recalled their ancestor’s journey around eighty years before, and they could be referred to, but from our distance we have no real way of identifying the majority of the people or the places they were from and returned to. This may be the reason details weren’t given by Ezra, as they were all part of active and well known oral history at the time! The best way to see where these people may have come from and returned to is to study place names of the time and see which are closest in spelling or pronunciation to the names mentioned here.

Several towns stand out as a clue to this, with the descendents of Bethlehem’s population identified as numbering 123 men who returned. Anathoth, Jeremiah’s birthplace, has 128 men returning to re-establish it. Kiriath-Jearim and two other associated Benjamite towns have 743 men. Ramah and Geba of Benjamin have 621 men. Bethel and Ai from the area of Benjamin have 223. Lod, Hadid and Ono, in Dan’s old tribal area have 725 (clearly Northern Tribal groups). Jericho has 345 men return. There are hints here that some of the other names may have been associated with other tribes than Judah, or some may be sub-sections of the population of Jerusalem.

Verses 36 – 39. The priesthood has many survivors, due to their wholesale deportation in 597, and their young princes nine years before in 605/6 BC with Daniel and the others. Of the four key priestly groups there are over four thousand surviving male family heads to replenish the land. One in ten of the Jewish men returning is a descendant of Aaron, and it is interesting that this remains the ratio for the establishment of a synagogue even today. If there are ten Jewish men in any place then a synagogue can be established. This is also why within Jewish communities there are many Cohen/Levy variant surnames, as these reflect the tribe of Levi, and of Aaron in particular.

Verses 40 – 58. The numbers of general Levites are fewer than the priesthood, but there are still many of the singer’s families who have survived so that full worship may be restarted. There are 74 Levites, 128 singers for the Temple services, 139 descendents of the door keepers of the Temple, and 393 other descendents of the servants of the Temple of Solomon. There are ample adults to re-establish full worship again.

There is great discussion amongst commentators about the differences between Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s lists of people. The difference between the lists of Ezra and Nehemiah may result from the times of the census date behind the lists. It may be others arrived, or some died between the two counts. The differences may also be due to scribal errors, but it is more likely that the numbers were totalled at slightly different times and the variations are natural ones, just as Moses did a “before and after” census.

Verses 59 – 70. A number of people went with the returning exiles from Babylon who were not able to identify their places of origin exactly, or whose families had acknowledged mixture from other cultures and peoples. They are priestly families by their name or from the knowledge they have, but cannot prove it. The ancestors of some had been taken from places in ways that meant there were no records existing as to their exact lineage, and so they couldn’t prove that they were truly Jewish and of the priestly or Levitical line with the required number of generations of pure blood, without pagan mixture. This would be a common thing after such carnage filled invasions as 597 and 586 BC. These adults returning may have been descendents of child aged survivors of places that had been sacked and destroyed, and the surviving children were just herded together and taken into captivity, and so without adults of their families surviving, lost their knowledge of where they were from originally.

These particular people have been staying in two major Babylonian districts, Tell-Melah (Salt Hill), and Tell-Harsa (Forest Hill). This doesn’t help us exactly at this distance, but as Babylon is absolutely flat, there are two possible explanations that suggest themselves from these interesting place names. The first is that discussed above; that these are the descendents of the children rounded up from various places, and sent to work camps (Salt trading centre, or forestry camp) as child slaves in the hills at a distance from the city of Babylon. A Tell is a raised man-made platform indicating long term occupation of that site for living or working.

The other strong alternative explanation is that these may be descendents of the people of the ten northern tribes who were sent to the hill country of the Assyrians after 720 when Samaria fell. After 200 years they could not prove their lineage, but had kept their basic Israelite, and even Levitical, identity intact through the years and hoped for a return to the land. These people are enrolled as returning Israelites, but cannot fulfil any full religious duties until a High Priest stands up with the Urim and Thumim in operation, and gives God’s verdict upon them individually.

We are used to being inclusive with membership, so that racial and cultural barriers in the church are gone, but for Israel the barriers were protective from the paganism that surrounded them. The priestly families whose blood was “mixed” or who could not prove their lineage were deemed polluted by the surrounding pagan mixture and so were excluded from service within the priesthood. Once there was a High Priest operational with the breastplate operating, then these people could be formally re-assessed. Today their descendants are able to be tested by DNA analysis.

Three groups of men were affected by this ruling and they accepted it and still journeyed to the land of Israel and served in whatever capacity they could until they were re-assessed. Until the High Priest fully functioned the Persian Governor decided that these people were to be excluded from eating the "sacred" meals, and would serve in other capacities. It is a reminder to us today, that service in the Lord's work requires being able to "prove your lineage", and that for us means, proving you are a genuine believer, and then that you have the **required** gift and fruit from the Holy Spirit. Refer to the BTB study CHRISTIAN LIFE – FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, CHURCH – PASTORS-ELDERS.

Ezra then lists the animals that they took also into the land at that first great return under Zerubbabel. He also notes that they took 7337 servants with them of mixed or foreign race. This is a reminder that under the exile many people did very well indeed, and made enough money to be able to afford to have large houses and servants to run them. The group that returned was from all social strata, and sadly the wealthy will later work deals and swindles to become wealthier in the land itself. 736 horses returned, and these were a sign of wealthy men who would ride them, as horses were luxury transport in the ancient world. There were 245 mules, and these also were the beasts of burden for the wealthy, as were the 435 camels. The middle class vehicles for transport were the asses, and there were 6720 of them.

Ezra then records that many of the elders of Judah gave significant gifts to the re-establishment of the Temple. The total of the gold was 61000 "drams" of gold. This equates to millions of dollars today! The silver was also extensive, and the gift of 100 sets of priestly garments, made in Babylon, was also a very expensive gift. These people have been blessed in the captivity, and this is a sign of the Lord's hand upon them, and their future purpose before the Lord. God is able to bless us in difficult places, and turn cursing into blessing as we are obedient to the Lord's words, work and will. This group marches into history and they are part of making history through their obedience.

THE WORLD OF THE DAYS OF ESTHER, EZRA, AND NEHEMIAH THROUGH UNTIL ALEXANDER

I briefly introduced this century in the last chapter, but before we advance further let us pause and see the time line of this amazing century and the next, so that you can understand what is happening else where. Use this to be able to do further reading to enhance your understanding of the Plan of God as it works out through this period of world history. Every event in history occurs within a context and understanding the context helps understanding of the people and their actions in the light of history. We are all called to "make history" in our service of the Lord, and we do that by playing "our part" in the unfolding drama of redemption in our own day. We can only play our part by total obedience to the Lord's Word, for we lack the brain power to identify all the needed facts to make our own plans. Read the passages that these men referred to often I suspect. **Isaiah 55:6-9, Jeremiah 10:23-24.**

The underlined names are for further research for you. Many of the literary works of the Greeks that have survived from this time are available to purchase still in English and other language translations. Check your local library or bookshop for "Penguin Classics", as most of the authors below have books that are still in print in the Penguin Classics series. We can still see many of the great buildings from this time, especially in Greece and Iran. This period covers the birth of the first four great kingdoms of the Gentile period seen by Daniel in his vision. (Refer to Daniel Chapter 2.) Underlined names should be looked up in encyclopaedias or searched for in the internet. The results will be well worth the effort.

- 586 BC Jerusalem falls for the third time to Nebuchadnezzar – August - the Temple and city burn.
- 550 BC Cyrus takes the throne of Persia. Makes war and "deals" with Medes, then takes Lydia.
- 539 BC Babylon falls to Cyrus' Medio-Persian Army under General Gobryas.
- 536 BC The Decree of Cyrus for the Jews to return to Judah and Israel.
- 535 BC Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest lead the first group of 40,000+ back.
- 534 BC The Temple building is started but discontinued by 529 BC. Cyrus dies in a battle he shouldn't have fought. Pride/Honour was his weakness and he died, and his son stopped the rebuilding. When Cyrus' son is replaced by Darius the Great, the prophets HAGGAI and ZECHARIAH urge the people forward again in their rebuilding.
- 520 BC The Temple work is started again in Jerusalem and finished/dedicated in 516 BC.
- 500 BC Democracy gets established in Athens around this time.
By 450 BC it has become perverted into an evil Empire under tyrants.
Rome becomes a Republic around this time with the exile of the last king.
- 490 BC The Battle of Marathon. The Athenian Army beats the first Persian invasion force.
- 480 BC The Battle of Thermopylae then Salamis. The Spartans buy time for Athens to leave the old wooden city and then the Athenian Navy defeats the Persian Navy at Salamis.
The Roman Republic begins its wars against neighbours to gain territory.
- 479 BC The Battle of Plataea. The second Persian invasion of Greece is over. Xerxes is depressed.
There is battle on and off between the Greeks and the Persians until the 400s.

- The Marble Acropolis at Athens is completed in this time frame. The poet Pindar writes. The great sculptor Phidias is active, and the dramatist Aeschylus is active.
- 478 BC Esther becomes a queen of Xerxes.
- 473 BC Esther saves her people from Haman's evil plan to exterminate the Jews.
- 464 – 424 BC Artaxerxes Longimanus rules, with Nehemiah as his cupbearer.
- 458 BC The second group of Exiles return under EZRA.
- 450s BC The Greek writers Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, are active. The Roman Law of the 12 Tablets is codified in 449 BC.
- 445 BC The Decree of Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem is proclaimed. Nehemiah leads a third group of exiles back to the land and the work begins.
- 444 BC The Walls and streets of Jerusalem are rebuilt. The prophetic clock to the coming of the Messiah starts ticking from this year. Daniel 9:24-27.
- 440s BC Hippocrates works on turning medicine into a science (dies 399 BC as Malachi writes). The Greek historian Thucydides writes 460 – 400 BC. Socrates is active in Athens, and dies by execution/poison in 399 BC. The Parthenon is completed in Athens.
- 431 – 404 BC The Peloponnesian War between the allies of Athens and Sparta. Sparta is finally victorious with Persian support and deviousness.
- 400s BC The Greeks enter directly into Persian politics.
- 401-400 BC The march of the 10,000 told by Xenophon, in his extant book, "The Persian Expedition".
- 400 – 339 BC Political Chaos amongst the Greeks. The rise of Macedonia and its king Philip. Plato sets up the Academy and teaches through until around 347 BC. Aristotle, his pupil teaches from around 350 – 320 BC. Aristotle founds the Lyceum. He tutors a young Alexander of Macedon.
- 397 BC Malachi writes his prophetic word and the Old Testament is complete.
- 390 BC The Celts invade Italy and sack Rome. Rome rebuilds its army and city walls.
- 336 BC Philip is murdered, Alexander the Great takes charge and leads the Greeks. The invasion of the Persian Empire begins by Alexander the Great.
- 333 BC Tyre falls in exactly the way that the prophet Ezekiel said it would. Ezekiel 26. The Jews welcome Alexander the Great into Jerusalem, and many join him. They read the prophecies of Daniel to him. Daniel 2:31-39, 8:5-7, 20-21.

Additional ancient sources for the history of this period above are easily accessible today. The best Jewish source is the historian Josephus. Josephus, the Jewish "turn-coat" general from the Jewish War of 67-71 AD, wrote his history of the Jewish people for the Romans to ensure that Jews were not all treated badly after their rebellion. His "History of the Jews", and the "Jewish War", have both survived and are worth reading. You must remember that he is trying to make the Jews appear good in his account, and that it is propaganda, but that being said, he gives great insights into information that he had, but has now been lost.

Josephus records that Alexander the Great was going to sack Jerusalem and use its additional loot to pay his troops after their hard fought battle to take Tyre, but that the Jewish High priest dressed up in his formal clothing and led the priests and singers out to meet Alexander and his Army. Alexander got off his horse and bowed to the High Priest, and reported to his friends and companions that he had seen a vision of this man when back home in Macedonia, well before heading out to attack the Persian Empire. God had given Alexander a vision of the Jewish High Priest in exactly this formal regalia that he put on that day, and had therefore prepared for the saving of Jerusalem from attack and the blessing of the Jewish people as the Persian Empire collapsed around them. God had truly "gone before them".

The High Priest was able to open the prophecy of Daniel and read to Alexander of his victories in the passages from Daniel above, and assure him that he would not just defeat the Persians, but that he would establish a new and great empire himself. Alexander loved hearing good news about him self and so he blessed the Jewish people and invited them to join him. Many did join his expeditionary force, as support soldiers, and merchants following his army. When he built a new city in Egypt, and modestly called it "Alexandria" after himself, he invited the Jews to become the dominant population with the Greeks. The Jews in that city alone numbered over one million by the days of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many Jews had stayed within the Persian Empire and were in its civil service by this time and when Alexander won, they simply served the new rulers as they had served the old ones. As a result of Alexander's victories large areas opened up for settlement and Jews took the opportunity to settle throughout his new Empire. The liberal theologians like to doubt this use of the book of Daniel, but it is the only logical explanation for the massive Jewish movement of population under Alexander the Great and his blessing of the Jewish people. God's prophetic Words are always for the weaving of his purposes, and Alexander will open the door for Greek speaking Jews to influence the known world.

Many Jews moved north as traders and merchants into the area we now know as Syria and Turkey and into Greece itself. Synagogues were established throughout the Greek speaking world, and it would be these that would allow Paul to spread the Gospel where ever he went in the first century of our era. By around 280BC the Jews of Alexandria started to translate the Jewish scriptures that Ezra had organised into the Old Testament Canon, into the Greek language. This would be done over a number of years and be called the Septuagint (LXX) and it would become the Bible of the Jews in what became known as the Diaspora (the places where they were scattered away from the land of Israel).

Jewish centres of culture existed after Alexander's victories throughout the Greek speaking world, and even as far as India, where his empire went to. God had opened the door for many peoples to be exposed to Hebrew monotheism and this meant that the door was open by the first century of our own era for the message of Christianity.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. We are called to step outside the cultural and social expectations of our contemporaries, and seek the Lord's path for our life. These people became servants of the Persian Empire in order to fulfil the plan of God for the Jewish people. They had to put aside the nationalism that had driven their ancestors to rebel and fight against their overlords, and through humility and acceptance of domination by a foreign power, they found the will of the Lord for them. Let us challenge ourselves regarding nationalism and other passionate beliefs and values that we have, for no matter how legitimate these things are, they are to be laid aside if the Lord calls us to walk another path. Even the separate identity of the twelve tribes is lost from this period onwards, for all are known as "Jews"; of Judah. Many keep their names, like Levy, and Cohen, that identify them as of other tribes, but their identity is bound up now with the tribe of Judah. They are all blessed by their association with Judah, and they accept the rulership of Judah's tribal elders over themselves. Are we prepared to accept the leadership of those the Lord has called to rule over us? Are we prepared to put aside any political issues and serve the Lord in humility, with our eyes fixed upon Him alone? This is our call before the Lord our God.

2. Can we prove our lineage as believers, and give evidence of our gifting as pastors and teachers by the fruit in our life? **Matthew 7:13-23, Galatians 6:16-26**. Those who could not prove their lineage were excluded from ministry and those today who do not give evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their life are to be excluded from ministry to protect the church from fake brethren. Let us be careful and only allow men and women to serve who can prove they are genuine born again children of God, with the fruit of the Holy Spirit in evidence of that status. No evidence of the Holy Spirit = no genuine Christian Life. **Romans 8:4, 9, 14**.

3. Cursing is turned to blessing in the Lord, as we are obedient to the Lord and follow His will and seek His path for our lives. It is the Lord's will that we repent quickly and be restored to the right path for us to walk, and then His blessing will pour quickly upon us. While we live there is hope for blessing and these people illustrate this principle, for in slavery, after great disobedience they are restored through the revival led by Ezekiel and are greatly blessed. They then pour their financial blessing into the new Temple and so the entire nation is blessed for generations. Giving to the Lord's work will always be a blessing that overflows for years and so these people and their descendents see their gift offerings bringing spiritual blessing for over 500 years.

DOCTRINES – Study in the Bible Topic Book

CHRISTIAN LIFE – OBEDIENCE

CHRISTIAN LIFE – SUBMISSION

CHRISTIAN LIFE – FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

CHURCH OFFICERS – PASTORS/ELDERS

NOTES

CHAPTER 3**INTRODUCTION**

There is the mistaken belief amongst some believers that when you are on the Lord's path for your life that all will go well. Nothing could be further from the truth! As servants of the Lord we are active participants in the ANGELIC CONFLICT and this means that we become targets for the enemy of saved mankind. Satan hates all who serve the Lord and his hatred must be accepted as a normal part of our "Active Service" life. The more on target we are in our service for the Lord, the more we will become targets for the devil and his angelic forces of evil. We see this well illustrated in this chapter and the next, as the people face real enemies in their land.

The people have reached the land and they have official status under the Persian Empire, but even within the fabric of the Empire's leadership there is hatred and suspicion of the Jews, and the settlements come under attack from various sources. The people do what we all must learn to do quickly under pressure; they come before the Lord at the altar of prayer. They offer the sacrifices that speak of God's grace provision of a Saviour from their sins and they pray for the Lord's deliverance. Refer to the BTB studies, EVIL, PRAYER, LEVITICAL OFFERINGS.

They meet the pressures of their time with worship, and this remains the best approach to trouble through the centuries. Isaiah 61:3. God's lasting purpose for His people is that we bring blessing out of the enemy's cursing through believing prayer addressed to the God of Grace. The Lord alone brings comfort in the midst of hatred and evil, for He alone is the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords. These people must worship in a rubble filled building site for many years, with the signs of the destruction of 586 all around them initially, and then only foundations of many buildings for many more years. In Nehemiah we will see the rebuilding more closely, as the Exiles returning both times appear to take the timber to reform roofs so they have secure places to live, but for 100 years there are no secure walls and gates to Jerusalem.

The challenge for the returning Exiles is to see past the judgement of the past and the building site of the present, and worship the God who made space and time and all that is within it. The focus of most is upon the Lord, not their surroundings, but those who get sidetracked by their surroundings get depressed. The challenge remains for us every day of our own lives; will we focus upon the Plan of God, or will we be distracted by the temporary details of this life?

EZRA 3:1-13

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. **2** Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. **3** And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening. **4** They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; **5** And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD. **6** From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. **7** They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia. **8** Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the LORD. **9** Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites. **10** And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. **11** And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. **12** But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: **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 shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 3. The people have been settled in the land for some time through the summer season and they have used that time to rebuild homes and prepare for the coming first winter in the land. They have been too late for the Passover and so they focus upon the celebration of Tabernacles as a community. To us, from this side of the cross this is significant, as Passover looks at the first advent and Tabernacles looks at the second advent of Christ and his

rulership over the land. They are centring their thinking and their worship upon God's future plan for them as a people, and that is the right thing in this place in their history. They are positioning things for Messiah to come to this place.

The people re-gather, clearly at the command, or pre-arranged time frame, that was set by their leaders. It would be the normal thing after their arrival to be told, "we meet here again in three months", and for everyone to attend this next important meeting. The altar is built again in the presence of all the people on the site of the original. It may have taken many months of hard work to clear the site of the Temple and find the location of the old altar and get to this point of rebuilding it. All the Mosaic offerings are then offered up on the altar, and it is dedicated in the blood of the sacrifices, as the altar in the tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple had been. Exodus 29:36-44, Numbers 28:1-8, 1 Kings 8. Fear drove the people to their knees, which is always the right posture to deal with fear. **1 Peter 5:5-9**. Refer to the BTB study FEAR, FAITH, PRAYER. They have only been in the land a few months and they have faced the hatred of the pagan peoples who had settled there in the previous fifty years after the deportation of 586 BC.

Verses 4 – 7. The Feast of Tabernacles has a double significance for these people; firstly it reminds them that they are a pilgrim people, and have been in the "wilderness" before. It reminds them that they depend upon the Lord alone for their prosperity and blessing. It also reminds them of the PLAN OF GOD and challenges them to orient themselves to their own place within it. Under Joshua the first of the High Priests after the Exile, they do exactly what Moses commanded in the Law, neither omitting any thing, nor adding any thing. Leviticus 23:33-36, Numbers 29:12-40, Deuteronomy 16:13-15. They are careful and prayerful in their work. From this great feast they ensure that all the great feasts of the Lord are kept by the people, and that the daily sacrifices and the New Moon sacrifices are kept.

The temple has not been dedicated as yet, indeed it is a ruin, with its old broken foundations exposed. The priests are slowly cleaning things up and they are getting ready to begin the work of rebuilding on the devastated site. Joshua and Zerubbabel utilise the decree of Cyrus the Great at the right time, and order only the timber they will need in the next season so that the timber that is ordered does not rot on site because they are not ready to use it. They coordinate the rebuild so that everything arrives at the right time. Good project management is good stewardship. Refer to the BTB study of this topic GIVING, STEWARDSHIP, SUBMISSION

They realise that they do not have to wait until everything is "perfect" before they worship, for it never will be perfect with imperfect people, and the majority see that it is not the perfection of the architecture of the buildings that matters, but the perfection (that is the completeness) of their obedience that matters. Their spiritual obedience worked down to the level of their wallets, and these people gave all they could to ensure the right master craftsmen started work on the project as soon as it was possible. The site of the old Temple of Solomon was still at this time a wasteland of rubble. The blocks used in the construction of the Temple of Solomon weighed many tens of tons, so specialist help was needed to clear the site for rebuilding after the total destruction of 586. They may have been able to reuse great stones weighing as much as 20 tons, but would have had to remove others from the site.

There are times when a church "working bee" can do a job, and a time when a mechanical or structural engineer needs to be engaged in a task. Let us be intelligent and get the right people for the right jobs. A lot of money is required to pay for these craftsmen and the people give freely for the work to be done. These people are rebuilding their communities, and houses and businesses, and yet they give, when the human tendency at such times is to save money for another "rainy day". They gave of themselves to worship and then they gave of their funds to build the Temple, and so they received the blessing of peace and prosperity. This is God's order; first get worship right, then get giving to the Lord right, and then the details of life will flow from that place of worship, service and blessing.

Verses 8 – 9. The second year begins the rebuilding process in earnest, as the materials start arriving and the need to train the Levites and others becomes important. There is always a "lead time" for all great projects and by this stage things are really ready to flow and we can assess just how good the planning has been. The priests and Levites are now functioning in the desolation of the Temple mount of the day, and the sacrificial system is operating properly, with the new men being trained to do the work now. The actual building of the Temple can now begin to be done with the tradesmen required on site all coordinated by the priests and Levites.

Verses 10 – 11. The stones required in the foundations will weigh great amounts and only specialists could move them. There are great stones in the Herodian platform of the present Temple Mount that are over a hundred tons in weight, and well beyond even the capacity of a modern crane. We stand in awe of these early engineers at what they did, and the Levites and Priests stand well back as these specialists place the foundation stones into their places. The Levites and priests are all ready to worship as the great stones are slid into position, and everyone is dressed in their best clothing for the ceremonial. They have their job and don't interfere in the engineers work – no micro-management...

The size and weight of these stones were such that several week's work was required to ready them for their moves, and so the exact day for them to be slipped into position could be planned for and the worship that was appropriate prepared and practised for. These people are ready and trained to worship with song. They have taken time to ensure their singing is a sweet sound to the Lord. Let us not be "amateur night" in our worship – but serve the Lord in holiness, humility, and in the fruits and giftings we have, not what we imagine we have! If we cannot sing – we don't!

It is a glorious day as the foundation for the walls are laid. The Psalms of Asaph (**Psalms 73 – 83**) are sung aloud and the entire congregation of priests and Levites shouts aloud to the Lord and recalls the great doctrines of scripture that are being illustrated as the stones slip into place. Truly the Lord has brought His remnant back from the brink of destruction and settled them again in the place of blessing. The Psalms of David are then quoted as being the choruses to be sung

between the Psalms of Asaph. Psalms 24:7-10, 103:17, 106:1, 107:1-6, 135:3, 136:1-6, 145:1-11. The people see that the Lord has done a marvellous thing in bringing them back and they rejoice as they see the great blocks of stone being laid down to form the inner and outer walls of the new Temple in which they can praise the Lord.

Verses 12 – 13. The sad thing about the joy of the Lord, is that not all share that joy, and some are so full of self pity and self centred emotions, that all they see is their own perspective on events. There are great things to praise God for here, but many of the old people only see their own perspective from the days of their youth when they saw the Temple of Solomon fifty years before. This is a small start to the Temple that is yet to be built, and it is without the magnificent surroundings of Solomon's great temple, but this one will be visited by the Lord. It will appear to be small, and a building without the glory of the old one, but it will be the one that Messiah will come to.

Zechariah and Haggai really encourage the people through this time and Zechariah has harsh words for these old men who criticize the worship of the young ones. Zechariah 4:10. They are not to mock the day of "small things", for this Temple will bring the spiritual heart back into the nation, and it will do this in a way that Solomon's Temple failed to do in the end. Solomon's Temple only lasted 418 years. Solomon's Temple also became a snare to the people and idolatry was in its very midst by the end, but this new Temple will be their spiritual centre as a nation until 70 AD; it will last for over 586 years.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. How often do we look at things on the ground, rather than the state of the hearts and minds of the people involved in the project before us? The Lord looks into the heart and seeks our obedience there, and so let us emphasize the heart, not the buildings and trappings that men can obscure themselves within. We don't have to wait until buildings are complete before using them. We don't need to have all the externals right before using what the Lord has provided. Let us be flexible with our use of things, and obedient with the spiritual details that we must get right to honour the Lord, but not interfere in other's work.

2. First we worship and give of ourselves and then we open our wallets and give of our goods. Let us get the order right, for the giving of ourselves to worship must always precede any offering. Let us be focused upon casting all our cares upon the Lord, not waste our time worrying about them, and let us bring all our concerns to the Throne of Grace. Hebrews 4:16. God seeks to turn our worries into items of praise. Let us be ready for the attacks of the enemy and the frustrations associated with living in the devil's world, but let us bring all these issues to the Lord and walk closely with our Saviour.

3. Let us take time to get worship right, so that all that occurs is a "joyful noise" to the Lord and a "sweet smelling" perfume to all who are present. Psalms 66, 81, 95, 96, 98, 2 Corinthians 2:15, Philippians 4:18. Songs should be learned well, and singers well practised. No-one should ever be embarrassed about poor performances of the Lord's people, for all that is done ought to be done well. If a person has no ability or gifting in one area, they need to pray and find it in another.

4. Beware pastor of despising the day of small things. It is easy to overlook or look down upon small beginnings and yet the Lord delights in obedience in small things and can lift a ministry up from the most humble origins to greatness. Small faith, as of a mustard seed, is all that is required of us, and from this place the Lord can build great things in His mighty power. Let us build what the Lord has called us to build and saturate each small step with worship and praise for His mighty Plan, for in every small step forward we are part of that eternal plan. Look up on the EBCWA website or USB/CD the article PROVIDENCE AND EBCWA, Book 150, and see what the Lord has done from small things in this our ministry.

DOCTRINES

ANGELS – ANGELIC CONFLICT

ANGELS – SATAN'S STRATEGY AND TACTICS

EVIL

CHRISTIAN LIFE – PRAYER

OFFERINGS – LEVITICAL OFFERINGS REPRESENTING CHRIST

FEAR

CHRISTIAN LIFE – FAITH

GOD – PLAN OF GOD

CHRISTIAN LIFE – GIVING

CHRISTIAN LIFE – STEWARDSHIP

CHRISTIAN LIFE – SUBMISSION

CHAPTER 4**INTRODUCTION**

Before you read this chapter, refer again to the BTB study on ANGELS - SATAN'S STRATEGY AND TACTICS, SUFFERING, also check out the Text in the Diploma Theology "Post-Graduate" file, ANGELIC CONFLICT. It is important to remember that the enemy of our Lord is our sworn enemy also, and his hatred of us knows no bounds. Whenever we do the work of the Lord he will seek to undermine and distress us in any way he can. Don't take it personally, take it "as unto the Lord", for you are attacked because of your position in Christ Jesus. You are in good company; you are with the Lord, and He is with you. Read again the promises of the Lord regarding these things. **Matthew 28:20, John 15:18-27, 1 John 4:4**. We have comfort from the Lord and the Holy Spirit in the midst of the pressure situations, but they are still pressure situations at times.

Satan must seek the Lord's permission to attack any of the saints, and so we can be assured, on the basis of the character and promises of God, that we will never be pushed beyond the point we can stand, if we stand in the power of the Lord. **Job 1:7-12, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Hebrews 4:1-12**. Adversity is always to be taken to the Lord, for it is within His Plan, and that is our safe walking place upon this earth. Note I say "safe", not pain or worry free. We will face adversity as these people faced adversity, and it may be subtle and devious at times, given its source is Satan. No matter what we face, we are challenged to take it to the Lord who has allowed it in accordance with His great and perfect plan, for through prayer alone we will find meaning for the things that have happened.

EZRA 4:1-24

1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel; **2** Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither. **3** But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us. **4** Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, **5** And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. **6** And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. **7** And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue. **8** Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort: **9** Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, **10** And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble A snapper brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time. **11** This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king; Thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time. **12** Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations. **13** Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings. **14** Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king; **15** That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed. **16** We certify the king that, if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river. **17** Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time. **18** The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me. **19** And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein. **20** There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. **21** Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. **22** Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings? **23** Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power. **24** Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 3. This approach from the peoples of the northern lands of Israel is not long in coming and the response of Zerubbabel and Joshua may seem a little harsh, even racist, but there are vital reasons for their opposition

to these people. The subsequent actions of the Samaritans prove that the Jewish leadership was correct in their assessment of their approach. They wished to join with them in building only so as to undermine the work more thoroughly from within, not from any desire to be godly in their worship. This is a lesson in malice – and one every pastor must learn or see it played out in the Lord's church in his stewardship. The enemy always puts his best people into churches, and tries to get them into places of authority, for then they can undermine good work easier.

We must remember the worship of the old Northern Kingdom of Israel was re-established by the Assyrians, and it was re-established as "Golden Calf" idolatry. The name of God (JHWH) was used but the context of the worship started there was pagan and based upon the Golden Calf. Had these people had any say in the building of the Temple it would have been a compromised building from the very beginning. There can be no joining together of pagans and believers in the one true God without true faith being diluted and having its power destroyed. There is to be no meeting with evil religion!

These people are the group later known in history as the Samaritans. Their arrival in the land is described in **2 Kings 17:24-41**. The writer of that record is as negative to these people as Ezra is and the reason is the same. These people "feared the Lord", in the sense that they knew He lived and was God above all, but expressed their real faith in idolatrous ways that were pagan in form and content. By their initial words they honoured God, but by their subsequent deeds they demonstrated that they had the faith of the demons, who know God is real, but will not ever worship and serve Him.

Hear the words of James and build discernment in these things. "You believe that there is one God; you do well: the devils also believe, and they tremble. But will you know vain man, that faith without works is dead." **James 2:19-20**. Once again believer, hear James words and understand them. Bind them with Jesus own words in **Matthew 7:13-23**. Understand that the devils can affirm a belief in the reality of God, and they have very real fear within them as they make that affirmation, but it is not saving faith! Fake faith is dangerous satanic religion, and they will kill the truth if they can.

These Samaritans, like the devils, acknowledge the truth, but will not allow the truth to transform them; rather, they seek to undermine and distort the truth, so that others may not see it. They know God exists, they fear God, and they hate Him. It is the FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT alone that identifies the true believer, not any affirmation of belief in the existence of God. These theists are dangerous! Refer to the EBCWA website or CD and study the Diploma Course on CHURCH HISTORY, for throughout the history of the Church the most dangerous people have been theists and Deists, who believe in the reality of God's existence, but hate the truth and deliberately set out to undermine the faith of many.

On the basis of both the Matthew and James passages above, we are urged to be "fruit inspectors" of all people who seek to join themselves to any ministry the Lord has called us to. Only God's true people, certified by the fruit of the Holy Spirit, are to be allowed to partake of any ministry work. If we fail to do this auditing of the truth of people's professions of faith, then we open ourselves to enrolling the devils own people into our work, and our work will be destroyed from within.

Ezra makes it clear from the outset of the story of their approach to the Jews, that these people are "adversaries", not friends or fellow worshippers of the one true God in holiness and truth. These people have an agenda behind their offer of support, and whenever we are approached by people to "assist" us in the Lord's work, we need to be as careful and deliberate in our decision making as Zerubbabel and Joshua are here.

The reasons behind people's "offers of service" are crucial to ascertain before accepting their offer. Their true spiritual status needs to be identified clearly and openly. We need to be "Spiritual Fruit Inspectors" to ensure these people are safe, and not indeed servants of the enemy, just as the theist-demons are. Keep remembering the truth that our Lord and James explain in these two passages; theism is not enough for salvation, and proves nothing about the spiritual nature of the individual involved. Asking people to pray aloud is often the fastest way to expose the fake; it is good fruit inspecting.

Satan's main technique to destroy believing organisations has always been to infiltrate them with his people and destroy them from within. Any organisation can be easily disabled by ensuring it loses its firmly held and true focus, through petty squabbles, infighting, and agendas that are not the "core business" of the group. Once an organisation has lost its true focus, the best people will get frustrated and leave, and then Satan's people can quietly take it over completely and shift the entire agenda into religious apostasy. Refer to the BTB study of RELIGION, for it is the devil's ace trump!

Ezra records the actions of Joshua and Zerubbabel. They reground themselves in the truth of their call from the Lord, and in the exact nature of their official business as agents of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. They go back to their authority, the edict of Cyrus, and they quote that as their authority, and make it clear that they are authorised to build the Temple, and they have no authority to enrol others for the work, for it has been given to them to complete.

By doing this, they practise great wisdom, for they make it clear that they will be upholding the Law of the Medes and the Persians, and that they will do what they have been ordered to do, and nothing else. They avoid the theological issue of their call from the Lord, for they do not want to debate theology with fake believers. The Lord does exactly the same thing when he meets the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar many centuries later. John 4:19-24.

There is no point entering into a theological debate with people whose entire premise for the argument is flawed or missing. The only issue is true worship, not true statements. God exists, and man's acceptance of that fact changes nothing for that man or woman! It is their response to that reality that changes the basis for a discussion. The Lord does not discuss theology with the woman at the well, he discussed sin and her need for salvation, for that is the only issue for one who knows there is a God, but does not have a relationship with God. Refer the BTB study SALVATION, SIN, SEPARATION.

Verses 4 – 7. The enemy is quick to act against the people of God and they are coordinated in their attacks. Their coordination and malice will surprise believers at times, but it shouldn't, for they are the servants of Satan, and he is the most intelligent being ever made. Remember however, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world". 1 John 4:4. By walking in the Holy Spirit's power, and following the guidance of God's Word, you will find the Lord's way through each crisis, even when the enemy appears to win at times.

The people who had settled the land in the fifty years since 586 BC, and the Samaritans, who had been there since the mid 600s, all worked together to weaken the resolve of the Jews, and they actually physically abused and assaulted them to stop the building process. Nehemiah will later face the same assaults, and from the same sources, and he will quickly get weapons strapped on and be ready to fight, but for some reason Joshua and Zerubbabel do not feel able to take this route. The reasons for this may be found in Persian politics of the day.

Cyrus the Great was a warrior king, and spent most of his time in the saddle leading his army in the various fields he fought in. He had allowed the Jews to return as part of his inclusive religious policy, but also to strengthen the southern frontier. He wanted loyal people in the south of Israel in preparation for his planned invasion of Egypt, that he intended to make after he dealt with the northern threat from a major tribe of the Scythians.

He could have left these people alone and come to a negotiated settlement with them, as Nebuchadnezzar had many years before, but that was not Cyrus's way. He believed he could conquer these people and he tried, with his full army, but for the first time he was flawed in his logic and strategy. He fought them on their ground, and he lost the battle, his army, and his life. His death occurs around this time, and it plunges the Persian Empire into a period of chaos that the various local satraps and rulers used in order to build their own power and influence.

It may be that Joshua and Zerubbabel didn't believe they had the authority to really stand up to the northern satraps of Samaria and Syria who appear to be behind the troubles they face. Joshua and Zerubbabel certainly don't feel as confident as Nehemiah will later feel to fight those who oppose his work, and maybe with good reasons due to dominant Anti-Semitism. When we study Nehemiah later we will fully see why he could be so confident. He was a friend and confident of the king of the time, and the reign of that king was stable throughout Nehemiah's work.

Joshua and Zerubbabel are appointed leaders, but do not have the personal relationship and respect/admiration of the king that Ezra and Nehemiah will later have. They feel that they must prove themselves to win this respect, and so they tread carefully, prayerfully and do not use violence to protect themselves. In this, at this time, they are correct. The PLAN OF GOD is still being followed and it will work out, even though there is going to be delay of several years. Just as there was a gap between the first fall of Jerusalem in 606 BC and its final fall and destruction in 586 BC, so there will be delay between the return of the first Exiles in 536/535 BC, and the completion of the Temple in 516 BC.

The twenty year delay is a time of grace and learning both times, and it was "God's delay". The people's resolve to do the work of the Lord is being tested, and the Lord will use the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them, just as he had used Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the earlier period. Any delay in the completion of the Lord's work is always to be prayed over, in case it is caused by the sin of God's people, but once the enemy is responsible, God's people can know it is delay "by permission of God", and must be for educational and maturity purposes.

We are to pause when facing opposition, pray and consider the Lord's path through the obstacles, and seek the Lord's will in the midst of the troubles we are facing. When the work is clearly the Lord's, we need not doubt our calling, but we need to reflect upon what the Lord is teaching us on the path to the completion of the job we have been assigned. I have personally faced this for sixteen years, unable to sell my house and being held under extreme financial stress all through this time by men and women who have destroyed the lives of twenty other families by their policies! I have prayed for deliverance, and it has been clear that the Lord's delay is purposive. I can see the benefits of my being held here under this terrible pressure – it has been amazingly fruitful – far more than it would have had I been in pleasant pastures!

In the case of the Exiles in the years 535 – 515, there were also gross sins in their communities that needed to be addressed. The two prophets were called to assist them in this, and the entire community learned the lesson of holiness before the Lord in the process. If we face delay, we are always called to pray and reflect upon the Plan and Purpose of the Lord. There is no such thing as "delay" in the Lord's plan; it will always be completed in the right time for the Lord. So our call is to understand what the Lord is doing in the process we grapple with, not give Satan any credit for slowing the work down. God is always in charge – let's see that. Refer to the BTB study DIVINE GUIDANCE – THE WILL OF GOD.

The enemy did all they could to weaken the resolve of the Jewish people to complete the task, and they were successful with the majority and they became discouraged. Many today feel exactly the same way, and I have heard many believers say at times, "God's work is not meant to be this hard; maybe we are wrong in our plan, because if God is in it, then it shouldn't be this difficult!" It is for this reason that Ezra is so careful in recording this early phase of the work of the Exiles, for this "logic" **is false** and comes from the court of Satan himself. God's path is tough! **John 16:33**.

God's work will always be strongly opposed by the enemy, and that means, even when saturated by prayer, it may be very hard at times. We are called to the hard and narrow (constricted) path, not the broad way that leads to destruction! **Matthew 7:14**. To obey the Lord may require the strength of every fibre of your being. It may be **very hard indeed** to do the Lord's work, but it is the Lord's work and **He calls us all to persevere**. That is why the doctrines of SUFFERING, OVERCOMING BY FAITH, and WALKING are so important to understand and apply in daily life.

The political nature of the opposition is hinted at by the references in verse five. They hired, or rather “bribed” false witnesses to report evil of the Jews to the court in Persia. Their attacks upon the Jews continued from the last days of Cyrus right through until Darius the Great takes charge. This covers a very interesting period of Persian history and as a historian I wish Ezra had given us more detail here, for great events occur through this period. We have no idea from Ezra of exactly how long the opposition went on for before the people ground to a halt in their working on the Temple.

Cyrus died in battle in 530 BC, and his son Cambyses took over. As the Crown Prince he had served as regent in Babylon for the previous eight years and his Median name or title may have been Darius like his father’s, by which Daniel may have known him. Daniel 6, 9:1, and Daniel 11:1. We must remember that the names often used in the Persian period were all titles, and may refer to a number of men through the next hundred years. The name Darius meant “Restrainer”, (that is the one who restrains evil in the king’s name), and the name Ahasuerus meant simply “Lion King”. We cannot know precisely the actual identity of Daniel’s “Darius” for sure, but we can be assured of the truth of the scriptures and the accuracy of Daniel in his words about him and events in Babylon while he ruled there as regent, or if it was actually Cyrus being referred to; that he was actively involved with Daniel.

Cambyses faced a great deal of political turmoil in his short reign and he is probably murdered by one of the warring factions while leading the army in Egypt. He was anti-Jewish however and stopped the Temple rebuilding project. Daniel also dies around this time and we have only legends to give us any information – lets wait till heaven, but I would be certain that the story he hear then will be better than the speculation. One key faction was led by a contemporary of Cambyses father Cyrus the Great, Hystaspes. His son, also called or titled Darius, became a powerful figure in Cambyses government. This Darius becomes the “spear bearer” of the young king. Cambyses spent four years preparing for war against Egypt and then launched his invasion. Darius, Hystaspes’ son, is by his side all the way.

Cambyses launched the invasion of Egypt with psychological warfare and political intrigue. Egypt used Greek mercenaries and Cambyses bribed them into changing sides at a crucial moment in a major battle. Egypt fell and becomes a Persian Province. While in Egypt Cambyses arrogance reared its head however. He sent an army of possibly as many as 50,000 men to the desert oasis of Ammon to destroy the temple of Zeus there, and his army was caught by sand storms in the desert and disappeared totally. This disaster is seen by all at the time as a judgement upon him by God, and many of his Satraps secretly join the factions that are starting to rise against him.

A brother Bardiya (Smerdis in the Greek language) raises rebellion against him in Persia while Cambyses is in Egypt. Cambyses ordered him killed and the assassins apparently do their work. In 522 BC however there is a man who rises up and claims he is Bardiya, and gathers support for his rebellion in Persia as an agent of the Magi. On the way back to deal with this revolt Cambyses dies in mysterious circumstances. He is possibly murdered by agents of the Magi, or by his “spear bearer” Darius, who then launches a counter stroke at this fake Bardiya (Pseudo-Smerdis) and kills him and gains the throne in his own right. He is twenty eight years of age and he is acknowledged as king Darius of the Medes and Persians. All we know securely at this distance is that after Cambyses death Darius and four other generals head back to Persia and agree on the way that Darius will be king and that the others will support him. Darius lived up to their trust in him, and is known to history as “Darius the Great”.

It is through the events of this time frame that the battles over the building of the temple occur, and it is a time when the Persian armed forces, and many of its top diplomats, were very active in and through the Provinces of Syria, Samaria, and Judea in readiness for the Egyptian campaign. Together these provinces were known as the “Beyond the River” Super Province. The satraps of Syria and Samaria are active in the plotting against the Jews to enhance their own power and have Cambyses ear. The Persian Empire was “Darwinian” in its structure, with Satraps being encouraged to build their own power and fight for strength, but always support the centre. The invasion of Egypt is coming and the satraps that are seen to be most loyal will reap any rewards that such a successful invasion will bring. Lust for money and power drives them and it appears that Zerubbabel was outplayed for a time by the others. The Jewish refugees have just returned to the land after 70 years away, and so they may not be seen to be providing enough supplies for the Egyptian Campaign and so were dominated by the others.

In light of these events of history Joshua and Zerubbabel do the right thing by resting in prayer and watching to see what the Lord will work out through prayer and the words of His prophets. They wait, and given the power games being played around them, that is the right thing to do. They are in no position to join the power players and it would be wrong for them to have done so, as they are a very poor group of returned exiles, without the resources of the northern group. Nehemiah will face an altogether different situation, and we will see that when we get to that time frame. Work on the temple is stopped for many years, but at the right time in the plan of God it is recommenced, and it is finally fully completed exactly 70 years after the first Temple’s destruction. God’s time table involved the apparent “delay”.

Darius the Great is early middle aged, tough, wise and ruthless, but also he has an eye to the future, and he knows that his alignment with Cyrus the Great will assist him, and so upholding the edicts of Cyrus is politically vital for him. This would be especially important if he had killed the son of Cyrus! Through the apparent chaos of the years of opposition the Jews have faced many hurdles, but this most unlikely champion of the Jews becomes their deliverer from even more evil men. The Lord will ensure that Darius is in exactly the right place and with very strong motives to support the Jews after the intrigues of the days of Cambyses, Bardiya/Smerdis, and Pseudo-Smerdis. Ezra 6:7-11.

Verses 8 – 10. The two key conspirators are now named and shamed by Ezra. Rehum and Shimshi are recorded as the two key writers of the slanderous and initially successful attacks upon the Jews. Their co-conspirators are possibly groups of Samaritans, but may also include some tribal groups of Syria and the Trans-Jordan area as well.

Both the Satraps of Syria and Samaria are involved in this plotting, and we may have their names in verse eight. The great and noble king “Asnapper” is the Assyrian Esar-Haddon who settled the Samaritans and other peoples in what was northern Israel and parts of Syria and Jordan today. They begin their complaint by noting their residency in the land since the days of the Assyrians, and record this as a way of indicating that they are loyal and peaceful people who have been there longer than these troublesome and just returned Jews. They will also argue that they are settled and peaceful, and have never been a threat to the peace of any Empire, Assyrian, Babylonian or Persian....

Their argument will go as follows. The Jews were so bad in the past that the Assyrians and then the Babylonians had trouble with them. The Jews had rebelled against both great empires in the past repeatedly, and can be depended upon to rebel again, and indeed that is what they are planning to do. The two satraps and their associates will argue that the rebuilding of the Temple is the first step towards the creation of a citadel and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem so that the Jews can use it as a base for armed revolt against the Persian Empire.

Both against the Assyrians and the Babylonians the Jews had allied themselves with Egypt, and so that spectre is raised by their complaint also. As Cambyses is about to invade Egypt any possibility of a strong buffer state that is tied to Egypt, and with a mighty fortress as Jerusalem had been, is a military threat to his plans. The enemies of the Jewish people are cunning, and draw on the truth from the past to make their case, and it is apparently a strong one, even though it is presently totally false. Satan has never let the truth get in the way of his stories.

Verses 11 – 16. Ezra then quotes from a copy of the letter that was sent that he has got hold of. The name of the king is “wrong”, but before you join the liberals and note that this is clear evidence of a person writing years later who didn’t know which king was which, pause and reflect upon my earlier point. These monarchs had multiple names and titles, and the term translated “Artaxerxes” may simply be another one of the titles used by Satraps for the kings after Cyrus. The real king who used this title as his ruling name, Artaxerxes will rule several years later, following Xerxes, who married Esther, as we noted in an earlier chapter.

Ezra knows this is not the real king later called by that name, for he lives through his reign, knows of Esther, so isn’t going to make such a mistake. The name Artaxerxes is formed by four words in Hebrew, Ar, Takh, Shash, tau. It is a title rather than a proper name but could be used as a proper name. Here it appears to be the title used by satraps to the king. It may mean something like, “the kingdom of Arta – the lion king”. The Satraps may be referring to the king as the personification of the kingdom, which would make sense given their role, and their objectives.

The accusations made in the letter are false, although they could argue that the Temple forms a subtle citadel for the city, and in rebuilding the platform upon which it sits, the Jews are preparing to rebuild the defensive walls of the once great city. Without directly accusing the Jews of preparing to side with Egypt, they are making it clear that they believe the Jews are readying themselves to raise full and open rebellion and be a traitorous nest of disloyal people behind the lines. The two northern Satraps pretend that they are guarding the reputation and security of the Persian King; they are loyal, while these Jews are suspect. Satan’s people never let the facts get in the way of an evil story to create fear!

Anti-Semitism runs deep amongst these people, and they play this hate card to the full limit. The argument about rebellion is as strongly made as it can be by the two evil men, and they claim that if Jerusalem is rebuilt, something magical will occur; the king will lose all his territory west of the Euphrates! This is such over-exaggerated nonsense, and the facts simply do not stack up. There are only 45,000 Jews at most, and they can barely settle the land let alone raise rebellion, but the ancient fears are rekindled and the plot of these evil men works. By their fruit you know them....

Verses 17 – 22. The Persian king, probably Cambyses, has had the letter read aloud to him. He has checked the past records regarding Jerusalem and of course they show that this city was the centre of the insurrections against the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, and that Nebuchadnezzar had been required to besiege it three times. The past indicates that this place holds great dangers for the empires of the east, but all this information is over fifty years old, and the reality on the ground is that there are only 45,000 exiles trying to rebuild their temple, with no hope of defending themselves, let alone threatening anyone else. The walls and gates are shattered and the city is no citadel at all.

Cambyses demonstrates in his decision making here why he will later make fatal miscalculations in his Egyptian campaign and lose an entire army and then his own life. He does not seem able to think out of the square, and ask the right questions. Logic dictates that more than an historic enquiry be made, but it is not. He sends no-one out to inspect the work and approve or stop it in accordance with the Decree of Cyrus the Great. He simply supports his two evil Satraps; men who may be in trouble after Darius’ rise to power. The work on the Temple platform is stopped and for the next decade the Jews must worship at the open air altar in front of the foundations of the temple. They must pray daily for the Lord’s deliverance of them, and prepare their hearts for worship that is a daily reminder of their divinely disciplined position. Refer to the BTB study FIVE CYCLES OF DIVINE DISCIPLINE.

Verses 23 – 24. The two northern Satraps waste no time taking the letter and their local army, and stopping the Jews from their work with violence. At very least many of the Jewish workers and contractors are beaten up, but at worst, many may have been killed by these men. The work is stopped and the Jewish leaders are humiliated and insulted. This is the hardest thing to take from pagans who insult your faith and then insult you. The Lord’s words come

to mind here. Turn the other cheek to them and await the Lord's vindication. **Matthew 5:38-41, Luke 6:29-31**. The men of Zerubbabel's day have the passage of **Isaiah 50:5-11** as their comfort and encouragement. They know that the Lord will justify them in His time, and that His Plan will be worked out in full. The work is now halted until the second year of Darius.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Satan's main allies are theists, who believe in the existence of a supreme being, but hate Him and despise those who seek to honestly serve Him. When we are enthusiastically greeted by people who claim to be believers in God, and they seek to join with us in our ministry, we need to be particularly careful to check out the fruit of their lives and witness. We need to ask of all who seek to join themselves to us whether they hold the true apostolic faith, and whether the faith they hold has a good and total grip of them, and there is godly fruit in their daily life to prove its reality.

2. Delays are not to be seen as disasters, for if they are dealt with in prayerfulness the true believer will always be led to the right path through them to the goal of the Lord. Often delay is a learning process for us and others, and if we walk in the Holy Spirit, it will always be simply a step on the path to the fulfilment of the Plan of God. God's Plan will be fulfilled. Our confidence can be expressed at all times in this certainty, and in that faith we can step out into each day and do what the Lord calls us to do. Let us see our adversities in terms of the eternal Plan of God – God's timing alone.

3. Finding the right way through our difficulties is the key to success in the life of every believer called to work in important areas. Joshua and Zerubbabel must pray and wait, whereas Nehemiah prays, arms, and stands ready to fight. Their leadership styles and their strategies differ in all aspects except prayer. This is the lesson to us. Let us pray in all situations, but be guided by the Holy Spirit as to the correct strategy to adopt in facing our particular adversity. At times we may be asked to wait, at others to stand facing our foes, and at others we will be told to fight them. Let us be sure, for to get the path wrong is to miss the role the Lord has for us. Let us learn from all the leaders we meet in the Lord, but not select one as our sole model, for the Lord deals with each of us totally differently depending on our own background experiences and the situations we must face. There are no clones in Christian service only in science fiction and amongst the sick sheep of New Zealand! (A cloned sheep called "Dolly" lived to the south of me here in NZ, but we are not called to be like dumb antipodean sheep, nor like the scientists who have played God to make a cloned one). We are called to be real, and real believers have the fruit of the Holy Spirit, not the deceiving words of the counterfeits.

DOCTRINES

- ANGELS – SATAN'S STRATEGY AND TACTICS** **CHRISTIAN LIFE – SUFFERING**
- CHRISTIAN LIFE – FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT** **RELIGION** **SALVATION**
- SALVATION – SIN – MAN'S NEED FOR SALVATION**
- CHRISTIAN LIFE – SEPARATION** **GOD – PLAN OF GOD**
- GOD – DIVINE GUIDANCE: THE WILL OF GOD** **CHRISTIAN LIFE – OVERCOMING BY FAITH**
- CHRISTIAN LIFE – WALKING**
- ISRAEL – FIVE CYCLES OF NATIONAL DIVINE DISCIPLINE**

NOTES

CHAPTER 5**INTRODUCTION**

The Lord is never without his faithful witnesses in difficult times, and the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah rise up to minister the truth to encourage the people. The year is around about 520 BC. The work on the temple has been held up throughout the reign of Cambyses and the strife afterwards with Pseudo-Smerdis in Persia. Darius has seized the throne and held it into his second year when the prophets of the Lord are raised up to challenge and exhort the people to return to the task of completing the work begun fifteen years before. The Lord's timing is perfect, and the prophets begin their cooperative ministry at exactly the right time to encourage the people so that the work will be done in time for the seventieth anniversary of the first temple's destruction. There is a time table here and it is the Lord's timetable. The job of the men involved is to respond to the calling of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and obey His inner voice. This remains our calling also; not to follow or be influenced by the plots of time-space limited human beings, or angels. **Galatians 1:6-10.**

EZRA 5:1-17

1 Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. **2** Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua 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. **3** At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall? **4** Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building? **5** But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter. **6** The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai and his companions the Apharsachites, which were on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king: **7** They sent a letter unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace. **8** Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands. **9** Then asked we those elders, and said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls? **10** We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them. **11** And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up. **12** But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon. **13** But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God. **14** And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; **15** And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place. **16** Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished. **17** Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 2. As you go through this chapter, having studied the previous one, you will notice that everyone is a lot more thoughtful and truthful in their letters to the new king Darius, and the Jewish leaders get heard this time. The entire mood in the empire has changed and the message is out there that this man Darius is not to be played with as Cambyses had been. The leaders of the Persian Province of Judea had not felt they could exert their authority during the chaos of the empire after the death of Cyrus, but now they believe they can re-assert their authority under Cyrus' edict, and the Lord moves the prophets to urge the people to restart the Temple, and they do. Zerubbabel and Joshua move slowly and prayerfully, but with the two prophets to clearly support them with the Word of God, they order the rebuilding to commence, and to be done as fast as the builders can achieve their goals within the "Health and safety" guidelines.

Verses 3 – 5. Within a short time of the restart of the building work the spies of the two northerly governors have reported to them that the temple is begun again. The two Satraps of the northern provinces personally arrive in Jerusalem to check things out. They identify that the building is moving quickly and that in association with the temple a section of the wall has been rebuilt. This wall section is probably the platform of the Temple mount that supports the temple itself. These two northerly satraps actually have no jurisdiction in this province, but the neglect of proper government under Cambyses, and the chaos that accompanied the seizing of Egypt has led them to believe they have more authority over Judea than they have. They are playing politics and "polite threat", as Satan's people do.

Their question is polite, but firm, and this time they do not offer any violence whatsoever. They seek the names of authorising officials in order to accuse them, but the Jews initially remain silent and defiant, but respectful. They prepare

their answer to the king in their own formal letter, but continue the building project until Darius makes a ruling, and they make it clear that they are entitled to do this under the Laws of the Medes and Persians. Their formal letter will be incorporated in the northern satrap's letter in the end, and the northern men will know they are beaten when all the facts emerge. Now the ruling of Cambyses had ordered a halt until he told them otherwise, so this act of defiance by the Jews will be based upon two things; firstly the prophets words of encouragement, and secondly, the sure knowledge that they face now a different king who will respect the acts and edicts of Cyrus the Great.

Verses 6 – 10. Notice the more careful letter to the new king than had been written fifteen years before by the satrap's predecessors. They mention their visit to the province of Judea in the most casual terms. There is none of the arrogance of the previous letter, for they now have full knowledge that this is indeed a Province and it is led by Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel), and they realise that the previous letter could now get them in deep trouble. The satraps then seriously overstepped their jurisdiction, but succeeded due to the total lack of intelligent response by Cambyses, but this time they realise the investigation will be more thorough and relevant to the actual facts of the case.

The satraps of the northern areas are very cautious, and from the comment in verse ten I take it that neither Joshua nor Zerubbabel immediately made themselves known to them, as they considered the whole thing none of their business. Both men waited until the right moment to report the truth, and only then reveal what will be in their letter to Darius. This was a smart move, as it gave Zerubbabel, as the appointed Persian Governor, the opportunity to really embarrass them, as their predecessors had embarrassed and insulted the Jews fifteen years before. It is always best to wait for revenge, and take it in God's time fully and thoroughly against the enemies of the truth.

Verses 11 – 17. The northern Satraps were forced by the turn of events, to report exactly the words of the Jewish Governor Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) and his associate Joshua. I suspect they were quite worried as they penned the words we read here, for it meant all actions earlier undertaken by the previous satraps had been illegal and wrongful; and a total violation of the edict of Cyrus the Great. These men are now forced, because they have entered the province of Judea uninvited to report the matter fully and explain themselves, with the sure knowledge that if they leave anything out, then Zerubbabel will report himself. Their actions in interfering in the province of Judea means they must pen the letter and take any judgement personally that Darius gives. It is always best to wait upon the Lord, is it not? Doesn't the Lord have a wonderful sense of humour when he deals with his enemies? Wait upon the Lord and see His work!

The report of the Jewish leadership is an accurate one relating to why their labour is required to rebuild their temple. They acknowledge the rebellion of their fore-fathers and the wrongfulness of their actions and evils. They however take their firm stand upon the edict of Cyrus. They mention the vessels of gold and silver being returned also, so that the new king can cause thorough search to be made for these actions and edicts and certify this as correct. He will also discover that the great king Cyrus had himself supported the rebuild of the temple with these vessels, and his own gifts. This will make the northern satraps squirm, for their predecessors stopped a work authorised and supported by the great king who established the empire they serve! The Jewish leader's words are devastating to the case of the northern satraps and the tone of their letter indicates they know they are beaten well before the reply is received.

In verse sixteen they try to fudge the truth, by claiming that the Jews have been building all this time, when actually they were illegally stopped. They end their letter by respectfully asking for the new kings ruling on the building, on the basis of Cyrus' edict and they indicate their readiness and 100% willingness to obey the edicts of Cyrus and Darius. This is a wonderful example of squirming politicians who know they are well beaten and are trying to make themselves look as good as they can. This defeat of their evil purposes will give Nehemiah the opportunity to be strong also over half a century later.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. We do not have to worry about the Lord's timing, or understanding all the breadth of the Lord's Plan; we only have to concern ourselves with personal obedience to the commands the Lord gives us. Let us keep our eyes on the Lord's will for ourselves, not concern ourselves with the details that we do not need to know to do our part in the plan. In the Armed Forces this is called SECURITY, and this means that each person is told only what they "need to know" to do their part in the plan. That way the plan remains secure, and if all are obedient, then the plan is successful. Let us trust the Lord's Plan, and be obedient to the details that we have had revealed to us, and leave understanding the rest until we see it all spread out before us in heaven.
2. There is a time to stand up to assaults and a time to turn the other cheek. There is a time to resist evil with physical violence and a time to resist with words. These men get their timing and their acts of obedience to the Lord right according to the days they live in. Let us walk in the power and light of the Holy Spirit and so get the timing and the actions we are called to correct.
3. God will vindicate His people. We do not need to rush to find vindication for any wrongful treatment, for the Lord will be our protector and our vindicator. Let us leave our case always in the Lord's hands, and when the opportunity comes to tell the truth fully, let us not be polite and weak and hold back. When evil men are nailed in their lies, believers need to fully and completely tell the truth so that such evil men do not ever rise up again to abuse others. Let us strongly stand for truth, and when the time comes to silence evil men and women, let us move with ruthless thoroughness so that the innocent are saved from further abuse. No mercy must ever be shown to those who have shown none lest further evils be worked in the devil's name.

CHAPTER 6**INTRODUCTION**

True and bone fide revenge, or better, justice, is always a dish best served cold. It is always best to await your vindication and the justice of your cause by the most powerful of people, rather than try in lower courts to secure judgements. The Lord's timing and methods are always better than anything man could organise. The satraps beyond Euphrates are humiliated and severely warned regarding their conduct in this reply of Darius, who makes it clear that this temple will be rebuilt and he will share in the glory of its completion, as Cyrus did in ordering its beginning. The Lord's plan is fulfilled and the Temple is dedicated exactly 70 years after its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Those who thought they could oppose God's work have learned that this is not a smart move, and they are ordered to utilise their funds from taxation to assist in the rebuilding, and even in the provision of animals for the sacrifices that will be offered up at the temple's dedication. As we will see as we advance in this chapter, Darius knew a great deal about the earlier Temple of Solomon, and the dimensions in Ezekiel's vision of the Temple, and he knew how many thousands of animals had been used in the dedication of the first temple. He is ready for such things again. This man wants the rededication of the temple to be a great day for the entire empire!

Unbelievers cannot build the temple, as we have seen previously, but the "donations" of these pagans are acceptable as a fine for their previous evils. The king of the Empire will also give from taxation to assist the rebuilding, and this is also acceptable. This is an important principle regarding building ministries today. We are never to accept donations in normal circumstances from unbelievers for the Lord's work, but on the basis of this chapter, it appears there are important exceptions. We may accept the formal support of our own governments, official agencies of those governments, or individuals who are being "fined" in some way for opposing the Lord's work in the past. This is done on the basis of a direct work of the Lord only, and does not break or eliminate the rule; but it remains an important and rare exception.

Darius will be prayed for at the rededication of the new temple, just as Alexander the Great will also be prayed for, and have sacrifices offered for his successful expedition, when he visits this temple in the 330s. Political involvement in any spiritual endeavour is a dodgy thing, for the Holy Spirit's purposes can be high jacked by politicians for their own ends, but in these circumstances before us we see the exceptions to the general rule of no involvement of unbelievers in believing work. Both Darius and Artaxerxes Longimanus, and then the Greek leader of the new empire, Alexander would all play their part in the plan of God with the possibility of salvation for each, although we have no secure data on that.

Whenever the Lord, by prophetic word, makes it clear that an individual or group is to be involved in a work, then it would appear that this over rides the principle behind the doctrine of Separation, which otherwise limits involvement in politics. Let us see how this works out in practise in this case and then be very careful in our own day in admitting an exception unless we have clear mandate from the Lord to do so. Two prophets clearly preached for prayers to be offered for Darius, and they had Daniel's prophetic words to draw on to know that this king would be the greatest of them all.

EZRA 6:1-22

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon. **2** And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written: **3** In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; **4** With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: **5** And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God. **6** Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence: **7** Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place. **8** Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. **9** And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: **10** That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons. **11** Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. **12** And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed. **13** Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. **14** And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. **15** And

this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. 16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses. 19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. 21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat, 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.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 5. Every formal act of a Persian King was a “decree”, and the first thing Darius orders is, “Get me all the facts about this”. Unlike Cambyses he requires every bit of information that his people can find, and this is his first decree on this matter. On the basis of all the facts he will make his second “decree” which the satraps must action in full. The material he sought was possibly laid up in Babylon, rather than Persia itself, and so he orders the search be made in Babylon for material related to the Babylonian dealings with Judah, and the actions of Cyrus there before he moved back to Persia. Finally his people uncover the decree of Cyrus in the archives at the palace of “Achmetha” in Media.

This indicates how thorough Darius was, but also how hard he had to study this matter. He has taken this matter very seriously. It appears that Cambyses may also have been looking in the wrong place, or was deliberately led astray by a powerful faction of his court, for he clearly didn’t find this document. The actual location of this fortress-palace in Media is probably Ecbatana, the old capital of the Medes. While Cyrus was initially king of the Persians, his mother was Median, and after his death his papers may have been divided, possibly with each set of nobles (Persian and Median) trying to retain relics of the great man. Whatever the reason the decree regarding the Jews, or a full copy of it, is in a very unusual place, for Cyrus built his new capital elsewhere, so that neither Persian nor Median would feel slighted.

The actual text of the decree is then given, and it is very precise and directive. My belief from the way the text reads is that this is an actual copy of the decree, not the original, and if I am right in this it may explain a great deal about the days after Cyrus’ death. If his decree relating to the Jews was unpopular amongst many in the court, it would be expected that they might try to remove evidence of there ever having been such a decree, and even remove evidence of the appointment of Zerubbabel and Joshua. Or it may have indicated the Median connection of Daniel all along, and actually reflect the best place for him to “hide” a secure accurate/official copy of this away from Persian intrigue, especially if the Magi were involved in plots and murders.

If the originals of these decrees and appointments were destroyed in the Persian Court, that would explain why the two northern satraps acted as they did; either from ignorance, or because the first two at least, were a part of the Anti-Semitic conspiracy to “deal with” the Jews and subjugate, assimilate, and so destroy them and their religion. There may be an anti-Daniel element here also, for he was a very senior satrap over Babylon, and a Magi, and he was pro-Median. Whatever has happened here, there are dark satanic forces at work behind the scenes, (Daniel 10:18-21), but at the right time the official copy of this decree re-emerges and the Jewish people are vindicated. God works right up to the line, here and in the next challenges to His people, and He uses the obedience of a few to save the many. Refer to the BTB studies again, OBEDIENCE, SUBMISSION. There are many stories to be heard/seen in heaven on all this!

Anti-Semitism is very strong through this early period of the Persian Empire. It is a close run thing that the Jewish people survive. Such evil attacks upon the Jews are not over with the vindication of this decree being found in 520 BC. Within forty years, in the great rebellion of Babylon, in the early years of the fifth century, many Jews are implicated and killed along with the native Babylonians. This creates further suspicion of Jews amongst many in the courts of the Empire.

Simultaneously there are many individually gifted Jews rising to high office in the Empire, and they are loyal to the Empire and more efficient and effective than the native Medes and Persians. They receive the resentment of the old guard of the Medes and the Persian aristocracy as the “new boys”. There are many personal, political, and religious reasons for many in the Persian court to hate the Jews. This Anti-Semitism will find its pinnacle of danger in the subtle satanic actions of the Persian aristocrat Haman who will try to kill all the Jews. Esther 3:8ff. This will be stopped by the intelligence, bravery, and self sacrifice of Esther and the righteousness, foresight, and courage of Mordecai.

Cyrus clearly took an active interest in the actual architectural dimensions of what he was ordering built. The very dimensions of the new temple are spelt out in his decree. From this detail he must have had access to details in the books of Kings and that later get spelled out by Ezra’s great work, Chronicles, where the dimensions of Solomon’s Temple are detailed as if from written records, that as Satrap he would be expected to have access to. 1 Kings 6:1ff, 2 Chronicles 3:1ff. He may also have referred to Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple from Ezekiel 40-41. The reason I suspect this is that the new temple is not going to be the same as Solomon’s Temple was. It is not a straight rebuild of the old, but a modification, and only the King with power, or a prophet would lead to that state of affairs.

This is unusual, as the king could be expected to approve the exact replica being rebuilt, but to modify the original plan means he is taking more than a passing interest in the building and what it stands for. This temple is to be built with slightly different dimensions to Solomon's Temple, and the points of difference are noted, not the points of similarity. The length of Solomon's Temple with the porch included is about 100 cubits in length (about 150 feet), and this will remain the same, so it is not noted in the decree. Its breadth was twenty cubits (about 30 feet). Its height was 120 cubits (about 180 feet high).

The Temple authorised by Cyrus will be the same length as Solomon's, but it will be wider and not as high. It will be three times as wide, at 60 cubits (about 90 feet), and half the height at 60 cubits. These may be external measurements, whereas the measurements of Chronicles may be internal; we cannot be too dogmatic here, so beware of people who make comments on this that are too specific and detailed, and then foolishly try to draw it.... No photos were taken...

These dimensional differences are very significant however and the footprint on the ground will differ, so the old foundations of Solomon's Temple will not be able to be easily used for this one. The Temple Mount itself will have to be expanded to fit this wider temple onto the site and this is alluded to in verse three, where the new foundations need to be "strongly laid". The very thing that got the Jews into trouble; the rebuilding of the platform walls, is directly ordered by Cyrus! This temple is the one that Herod beautifies, but he does not appear to alter the basic dimensions of the stone building. Josephus describes the measurements of the inner dimensions of the Temple in Jesus day. The Holy of Holies was described as 20 cubits wide, by 20 cubits long, by 60 cubits high. The Holy Place as 40 cubits long, 20 cubits wide and 60 cubits high. This appears to mean that they were free-standing rooms within the temple walls that were at least 40 cubits wider than the internal walls.

From the description of Cyrus in verse four in front of us, we may have the explanation as to how this worked. The external walls were sixty cubits wide, each wall being made of three rows of monumental blocks, and inside them were wooden walls that formed the internal spaces for the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The three rows of stone for the outer walls would have given them excessive thickness of many cubits, and would still have provided the space for a free standing inner wooden wall for the holy places within them. There may have been a corridor around the wooden Holy rooms. In Solomon's Temple the wooden walls of the Holy Places were attached to the single row of stone of the outer walls. It may be that the three rows of monumental stones in this new temple were meant to illustrate the three coverings of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, which covered the wooden walls. Exodus 26, 36. Refer to the BTB study TABERNACLE.

All this detail in the decree text makes me think that Cyrus (and Darius later) really researched this subject before giving instructions, and had access to the Jewish scriptures to do so. He appears to be trying to get a temple that was more like the tabernacle in structure than Solomon's Temple. It is strong evidence for the completion and collection together of many of the books of the Old Testament by this time, as the king is referring here to at least, the Torah, early copies of the books of Kings and Chronicles, and possibly the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezra will complete the writing and collecting work (Only Malachi remains) but much has clearly been done earlier by Ezekiel and Daniel in the Exile period.

The last items mentioned are the silver and gold utensils of the old temple and the decree specifically notes them, and that they are to be placed within the new Temple as soon as it is completed. This raises a couple of questions. Firstly where was this incredibly valuable collection of items held through these chaotic years when the temple was not completed and there were no walls around the site to protect from marauders?

The two northern satraps who stopped the building process are liable for any losses that have occurred, and the two new satraps would be sweating when they find out just how much gold and silver plate was involved, for their provinces are now liable for any losses. Ezra 1:7-11. This is another reminder that the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonians destroyed it was a real wasteland, with broken down city walls filling the valleys, and broken walls and roofs filling many of the streets. Secondly the question arises as to whether anything was missing? It appears that nothing was stolen through this period, which is a testimony to the ability of the returning Jews to find secure hiding places amongst the rubble to secure these valuable items.

The rebuild of the houses will be able to be done by rebuilding old walls and simply using new timber for roofs and supports. If the walls were stone, some of the original blocks may have been able to be salvaged and reused, and there are many examples of that in archaeological sites in Israel. Simpler houses were made of clay brick, and rubble of these materials can be used as fill and new structures built upon the top. Clay bricks are easily made, and thatch is easy to repair or prepare fortunately, and can be done very fast. Timber is the real need for roof and second floor support beams. The provision of the timber for the temple rebuild appears to be a cost that Cyrus wants taken directly from the royal revenues of taxation of the provinces. The same support will be given 80 years later to Nehemiah and his exiles who return to rebuild the wall and gates, and the official buildings and remaining houses in the city.

Verses 6 – 10. The words of Darius to his satraps are very powerful, and form a last "performance warning" to them. They are told to "get out of here", and stop interfering with the decrees of the great king Cyrus, and they are told very simply and strongly that if they interfere again they will pay with their lives. Zerubbabel is referred to as "the governor of the Jews", and this is the first time since his appointment that he has been recognised as such by officialdom.

Darius then makes his own decree about what these satraps will now provide for their interference. They are to open their own revenues from their provinces and use their own tax money to support the speedy rebuilding of the Jewish

Temple. They are also provide, young bullocks, rams, sheep, wheat for meal offerings, wine and olive oil. They are to meet the daily requirements of the priests of Jerusalem, and they are to meet them “without fail”. These proud men now must answer to the demands of the Jewish priesthood, not just be respectful to their governor. It may be that Darius has in mind the feast of dedication, but from the language here it appears he is asking them to supply any shortfall for the daily sacrifices also. This means that for the next four years at least the northern provinces have to supply all the priests need to keep the altar functioning.

Then king Darius explains why he is keen for this to be done properly; he is going to be prayed for, and his sons also. He knows how unsettled the crown sits, given his role in executing Pseudo-Smerdis, the Magi, and possibly even getting rid of Cambyses. He is keen that his dynasty has the prayer support of as many people as possible. This is a command for us all in our churches today, and let us pause and ask whether we have been faithful in praying for governments and leaders, whether we like them or not. **Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-4.**

Verses 11 – 12. Anyone who interferes with the rebuilding of the temple now faces the wrath of Darius, and he makes it clear what will happen to such a person. Anyone who tries to stop a single piece of timber going into the temple at Jerusalem is to have the timber in their house removed, and that timber be made into a scaffold for that person to be hung upon that scaffold, made from the wood of his own now destroyed house. The remains of the house are to be flattened and it is to be used as a rubbish dump thereafter. This was a thorough message – “Don’t mess with this...”

Darius indicates that he recognised the God of Israel and calls upon God to judge any nation which raises itself up to attack this temple and destroy such nations and their leadership. He ends his decree with the command for the satraps involved to make it happen as fast as they can. In the navy we have a way of ending major orders. Having ensured they are understood the senior officer simply says, “Make it so!” At that point everyone stands and heads off to their area of the ship and does what has been ordered immediately. It is this sort of order that is given here.

Verses 13 – 16. There is no debate now, nor any hesitation on the part of the satraps, for they realise just how close they have come to death in their interference in the things of the Jews. The Jewish leaders urge their people on to new energy and the work proceeds quickly, with volunteer labour and specialist builders working side by side. The two prophets of the Lord, Zechariah and Haggai also encourage the people by words and deeds. Prophets can handle a hammer or a paint brush! Always be hesitant to follow any woman or man who won’t get their hands dirty in the Lord’s work! The prophets encourage by words and they both say, “Amen”, with trowel, hammer, paint brush or spade.

They are active in the work of clearing the site and assisting in the rebuilding of the temple for their God. In verse 14 we may have a scribal error of some sort with the reference to Artaxerxes, whose decree will be the basis of Nehemiah’s work nearly eighty years later. It may equally be that Ezra is simply adding together all the decrees that ensured the temple and city were rebuilt. The final stage of the rebuilding lasts four full and busy years, and when it is finished they had a great dedication festival for the temple, exactly when God wanted it – 70 years exactly after its destruction.

Verses 17 – 22. The quantities of the special offerings for the days of dedication are now given to us. These are not excessive, as were the quantities at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple, but they are significant. The northern satraps, as punishment, must provide these offerings, and as noted above, possibly the daily sacrifices all through this period. We must remember that the exiles returning have not had the time to raise their herds back to a level where the temple offerings could all occur without exhausting their herds. In verse seventeen we have the reference to the twelve tribes of Israel also, and this is another reminder that the ten northern tribes were not “lost”, for they are still remembered here, and clearly many of their members are present here, or such an offering has no meaning.

The Torah of Moses is the basis for how the worship is organised, with the courses of the priests organised in the Mosaic manner. Numbers 3:6ff, 1 Chronicles 23-26. Due to Nebuchadnezzar’s exiling of the priesthood there are enough survivors of each family for all the ancient divisions/courses of the priests and singers to be made up and new groups organised for year round service in the temple. Each division or “course” of priests served for one lunar month and then headed home to work their land, and the door keepers, singers, and other Levites, also were assigned one month service time only through each year. With every family assigned to one of twelve divisions or “courses” they would all be serving every year at a slightly different time, as the lunar months rotated. In an agrarian economy this meant each group served for a different month each year and so there was fairness for all given agricultural demands upon each family.

The first great Passover in the new Temple of Zerubbabel was a fantastic event. By the time of this feast all the priests who are present have been purified and trained in their duties, and all can be a part of this first new year with their new temple. Everyone who had prepared themselves in holiness and separation from paganism, verse 21, for the Passover, was able to eat of it that year. This verse tells us that there were some who did not separate themselves in holiness to eat the Passover. It tells us the sad truth that we see even in our own day, that many do not value the things of God, even though they are surrounded by things that ought to remind them of their importance.

The reference to the “king of Assyria” here is not an anachronism, but reminds us that Darius was the king of the North, where Assyria had been. By these days the nation of Assyria was gone and few even recalled it. By 401 BC, when Xenophon and his 10,000 march past the mounds of Nineveh they cannot find anyone around who even knows what great city was once there. The reference to the Assyrians may remind the people of Ezra’s day that the Assyrians were the first nation to remove the Israelites from their land and end their control over the north, and destroyed their faith. This temple reunites the remnants of all twelve tribes in the truth again, just as the Assyrians had divided and destroyed them exactly 200 years before this time (720 – 520 BC).

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Let us be careful in all our dealings, that we do not overstep our own mandate in any matter that doesn't concern us. The northern satraps overstep their mandate and get really "dealt to" and humiliated by Darius as a result. It is easy for us to overstep our own mandate as believers regarding the inappropriate giving of the Gospel in a time, place or manner that causes offence, and even yesterday I saw that in my wife's place of work with a local high profile Christian, whose actions reinforced the unbelievers in their view that all Christians are "nuts". We must also be careful of the right of the believer to criticise a government for its apparently pagan policies. We must tread carefully when we are in conflict with governments, for we are sworn to pray for them by the Lord. We have a prophetic duty to warn of the danger of immoral laws, and challenge ungodly things, but there is a limit to our criticism. Acts of open rebellion against any government need to be very carefully backed by scriptural principles and precedents. Let us be careful and prayerful and not leap onto any political "band-wagons". By waiting and praying the Jews got the will of the Lord and received total vindication for the wrongs done to them. Let us walk very carefully in the political world.

2. When we face any area of conflict it is vital that we get all the facts, as most church conflict evaporates when all the facts are obtained. Most conflict is based on misunderstanding, and when things are clarified there is nearly always a way of avoiding further conflict. When there is firm ground for disagreement and it is serious, we must walk even more carefully and prayerfully, so that we stand for righteousness in a righteous manner, and do not argue or scream like pagans.

3. God wants us to rejoice in the Lord. The people here really worship the Lord in power and joy and that is the call to us also today. Let us lift our hearts and voices with power to the Lord our God in joy at who He is and what He has done and will yet do for us and for all saved mankind. We are in God's hands, and His Plan will work out perfectly.

DOCTRINES

CHRISTIAN LIFE – OBEDIENCE

CHRISTIAN LIFE – SUBMISSION

CHURCH – WORSHIP AND PRAISE

TABERNACLE

NOTES

CHAPTER 7

INTRODUCTION

Historians like myself can feel a momentary annoyance with Ezra about how he starts this chapter, for he has gone from events of 520 and 516 and then skipped to the reign of Artaxerxes, which is in the years 464-424 BC. My annoyance is momentary, as I am with his heart in the divine history we read, rather than the standard histories of man from this time. We must keep remembering as we read his words that he is telling events from God's perspective, not man's. The deeds of men through this time after the rebuild of the temple are irrelevant, and the next time the Lord moves powerfully by the decree of a Gentile ruler is in the reign of Artaxerxes, so that is when the story restarts. We must get used to seeing things from God's perspective, not man's perspective. The petty details of the battles, wealth and power of unsaved men and women is an irrelevancy to the story of redemption. Although we can register our questions about the Jewish population's involvement in the rebellions in Babylon in the 480s....and ask the questions in heaven.

The books of Zechariah, Haggai and Esther contain all that is useful to know from this period that affects the lives of the Jewish people. The only other thing to note is that unsaved and carnal Jews in the land made sinful mistakes by following their Old Sin Natures rather than the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, and so the next event in the land is the revival led by Ezra. We are surrounded by "human viewpoint" today and so we have difficulty seeing the "divine viewpoint" at times. Our multi-media today are obsessed with the stories of unsaved people doing pointless things. I have just picked up my Sunday Newspaper to look for a key article a journalist friend has written, and have been unable to find it, but I have seen page after page of "gossip columns" about foolish people living foolish lives on the "broad way that leads to destruction". **Matthew 7:13-23, Revelation 20:11-15.**

The so called "tragic", or humorous, stories of unsaved fools making stupid decisions is the stuff of modern history and television drama, but their destiny is the Lake of Fire, and their stories are a waste of time and printers ink unless salvation stops their head long rush to death. This is not how the godly authors of scripture told their accounts of what the Lord wanted recorded. Remember, all that matters are things of eternal significance before the Lord; nothing else will figure in eternity. Those who love their sinful pleasures have them now, but they have nothing later except irresolvable regrets. Jesus could not be more serious about this issue, and we desperately need to see things from His viewpoint. Note the number of times He refers to this sad issue. Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30. Refer to the BTB study of WORLDLINESS, OLD SIN NATURE, ETERNAL LIFE, JUDGEMENT – GREAT WHITE THRONE.

These fifty eight silent years (516 – 458 BC) have lots of action within them in the Persian Empire. Turn back to chapter two and refer again to the time line there. The great battles between the Greeks and the Persians occur in this time frame, and some of the greatest of the Greek buildings that still can be seen are built in this time, and the greatest of their poets, playwrights, historians, and artists are active. It is a time of the flowering of what we now know as classical Greek culture, but in the great unfolding drama of redemption all this cultural explosion is but a side show.

Once again we are confronted with the difference between our way of seeing things and God's way of seeing things. Great cultural icons are interesting and amazing to our eyes, but they do not lead to the salvation of the lost, and that is the purpose and focus of the authors of scripture and the true servants of God. We can enjoy and celebrate our own and others culture, but we must not be obsessed or distracted by it as if it leads to eternal blessing, for it does not. All that man makes decays, and the study of the classical period of Greece, and later Rome should teach us that, and refocus our minds upon what God is doing through this period not what great men did.

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's reflection upon this truth after a life of enjoying the pleasures of power and wealth. Remember the life and legacy of Solomon. All his great glory, and all the glory of his works were lost within a few years of his death! Nothing remains of the many glorious buildings of Solomon's reign, and few of the ancient world's "Seven Wonders" are anything less than shattered reminders that all man's efforts are at best stones that decay. Only those who do the will of the Lord build a legacy that lasts forever. **1 John 2:15-17.**

Artaxerxes is the next Persian king to play a significant part in the Lord's Plan for the Jewish people after Xerxes is led by Esther to save the Jewish people from the satanic plot of Haman. Xerxes is not mentioned in the Bible much at all, for other than being the husband of Esther, he achieves little of note in the plan of God. Xerxes is known in history for his great, but doomed invasion of Greece, but he is in his later life, when we meet him in the Biblical text, a drunkard, and Esther's self sacrifice in marrying him and living with this man saves her people and rightly wins her renown down the ages. His bad habits led to the chaos that nearly saw the Jewish people exterminated by Haman's evil plan. Esther's greatness is that she laid aside her own happiness for the survival of her people. She lost her chance to really enjoy her life so that her people could be saved. She sets a high standard for all generations to follow in the area of selflessness.

The next king after Xerxes is Artaxerxes Longimanus. He is a pivotal king in the Age of the Gentiles that began with Nebuchadnezzar, for it is his decree that begins the count down to the arrival of the Messiah and the final events of man's history. Given their part in history we can wonder if either man was saved, but we have only hints on that. Daniel forms the bridge between these early kings of the Gentiles, and he sees the vision of the "Seventy Weeks" and he sees that they begin with the decree for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. **Daniel 9:20-27.** Zechariah is also given further visions to assist the people in identifying their Messiah when He comes, and telling of how He will be "cut off". Zechariah 9:9-11. He is also given the revelation regarding the events of Daniel's seventieth week. Zechariah 12-14. He

may even pay with his life for his witness – another series of questions for heaven are here for people like me. The prophetic clock begins to tick towards the end of time from this time period we enter now. Ezra and later Nehemiah are at the turning point of history between Moses and Messiah, and Ezra now introduces their work. Refer to the BTB studies, PROPHECY – DANIELS 70 WEEKS, EMPIRES IN DANIEL.

EZRA 7:1-28

1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, **2** The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, **3** The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, **4** The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, **5** The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him. **7** And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. **8** And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. **9** For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him. **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. **11** Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel. **12** Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. **13** I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. **14** Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand; **15** And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, **16** And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem: **17** That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. **18** And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God. **19** The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem. **20** And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure house. **21** And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily, **22** Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. **23** Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? **24** Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them. **25** And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. **26** And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment. **27** Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem: **28** And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 6. Ezra gives us his lineage back to Aaron the High Priest. In Jewish terms this does not mean all his ancestors are mentioned, for it was traditional to leave out some generations and simply name the most important people, and this appears to be what he does, for he cannot be the “son of Seraiah, who was executed at Riblah by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, for it is now around 458 BC. This is not unusual, and reminds us that Jewish ways of thinking meant you could be referred to as a “son of” a person who was a great grand-father. The key point is that he is a direct descendent of the great High Priests of the past, but he refers to himself as “the scribe”. This title tells us that this man valued the Word of God ahead of all else, and its proclamation and illustration as the core reason for his being.

The direct teaching of the Word of God was the purpose of the synagogue system that Ezra has historical credit for establishing. He understood the centrality of the Word to stop heresy or idolatry gaining power amongst the people again. He also understood the vital importance of the Mosaic or Levitical sacrificial system. Every sacrifice spoke of the person and work of the coming Messiah, and although those like Ezra may not have understood this fully, they saw that it was vital that the Levitical system be maintained in as pure and accurate a manner as was possible. He saw that it portrayed or illustrated the truth that God wanted them to understand, and he wanted the service of the temple and synagogues to be in holy hands.

As his ancestor Phinehas had felt great outrage at the fornication of his people and taken ruthless action to end it, so Ezra is led to take action at the wrongful marriages of the priesthood of his day and so bring in holy revival. Numbers 25:1-15. Ezra is burdened with this task from the Lord while he lives in Babylon. He feels the Lord's burden upon him to return to Judea and bring the message of revival to his people. He is well placed enough to be able to speak with the king about this matter and have his approval and commission to do this. There is a biblical principle that flows down the millennia; that the Lord uses prepared people, and this is seen here.

Once again we are left to wonder how Ezra was able to do this, and what role he held in the Persian Court so that he could directly approach the king at all. Only the most important people in the empire had audiences with the king. Nehemiah and he work together and it may be that they both held official roles in the court. We know of Nehemiah's role, but with Ezra we must guess. It appears to have been related to his scribal function. The Persians maintained a spirit of openness to the great religions of their empire and it is likely that Ezra was the "Scribe of the Law of Moses" to the Persian Court, answering any questions the king had about the faith of Judea. Evidence for this is found in verses eleven and following.

Verses 7 – 10. Ezra has asked the king for permission to do what he does, and it has been granted, and is granted "according to the hand of the Lord upon him". All work for the Lord must be "called" work. If the Lord's hand is not directly upon us we have no business doing work for the Lord. All believing work must be called and be Holy Spirit led, or it is worthless, and possibly dangerous. **1 Corinthians 3:1-17.** Pause and read this passage of St Paul's, for it sums up the doctrinal issues behind Ezra's mission.

The priesthood has become carnal due to their intermarriages with pagan women. Believers have no business being tied in with the morality and ethics of unbelievers in their close business relationships, let alone their families and their worship. Ezra has heard of the difficulties that the people are having in Judea, and he has heard of the mixed marriages amongst the priesthood and the Levites, as well as the general population. He is determined, in the power of the Lord, to remedy the evils that have occurred.

He secures the kings' permission to return, and to lead a second group of exiles back to reinforce the priesthood and Levitical families. Most of the Jews had not returned with Zerubbabel. The vast majority had remained in Babylon, and then spread out into the Persian Empire once the opportunity for trade and social acceptance opened that door. Most of the Jewish people were from this point onwards in what became known as the "diaspora" – the vast empires that were well away from Jerusalem, and most lived and died and never saw their ancestral home, although to visit once in a life time to celebrate the great feasts there in the temple became an important part of their post-exilic faith.

Ezra recognised the reality that most would remain scattered amongst the Gentile nations by choice, and developed the synagogue system to maintain the Mosaic Law in far flung places. By the days of Alexander the Great there are synagogues from India to Europe, where ever Jewish traders settled and worked.

Ezra gathers a group that comprises all the priests, and Levites that will be needed to give a spiritual "shot in the arm" to the people who are in Judea already. The problems that the Judeans have requires encouragement and correction and so Ezra takes the people he needs who are willing to go back to assist him. It is only those who have the free will to go that are to be part of this group.

My suspicion is that this group is made up of Ezra's trainees. It is as if he takes his Bible College students and their families back to restore true worship and teach the others in the land properly, as they have been taught. Babylon will correct Judea! It is of note that even amongst Jews today, the Babylonian Talmud is held in higher regard than the Palestinian Talmud. It is likely that we are seeing in this chapter the origin of this. Once again we are challenged with the fact that this man Ezra is a "prepared man". He is ready to serve because of the years of study and prayer that have preceded his call.

Verses 11 – 17. Ezra has the copy of the letter of authority from the Persian King, and it would have been a treasured possession, as it gave him authority to do all he did. Once again Ezra describes himself carefully as a man of the book. His whole life centres in and round the Law of Moses. His title from Artaxerxes is "Scribe of the Law of the God of Heaven". This sounds very much like a Persian court title to me. I may be wrong, but it looks like Ezra served the king in some way as his interpreter of the Law of Moses, and perhaps as a spiritual advisor, as the old Magi under Daniel had been earlier to the Babylonian rulers.

The decree goes out around the empire for all who are of the families of Levi to examine their hearts and see whether they believe they ought to be back in the land and serving in the new temple, and all such as believe they should be back are to go with Ezra. Free will is vital for believing service. If a person serves the Lord for any other reason than totally free devotion, that service has no spiritual value. His commission from the king, which will be answered by a formal report later, is to see what has been happening in Judea and make sure all is in accord with the Law of Moses.

Ezra has a royal commission and a divine commission. It is the Lord's will for him to return and bring revival, and it is the kings will for him to report on the affairs of the province and ensure things are spiritually settled there. The king has an eye to the political stability of the land, but he realises that this depends upon the spiritual holiness and stability of the people within it. We cannot know whether this man is a genuine believer, or just a very clever political ruler, but he knows the God of Israel is to be followed by His people, and that their stability as a people depends upon their obedience to the Mosaic Law.

The king and the court all have given gifts of silver and gold for the temple also. This is amazing in itself and indicates that there is a level of spiritual awareness here that is not found in other places. This may explain why the Persian Empire was blessed for the 200 years it ruled over the Middle East. It must be noted that there is no certain historical evidence of the salvation of the king or the court, as there is in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, but this court respects the Lord, His Word, and His people. Daniel 4:34-37. We may meet these kings in heaven with Esther and Mordecai.

This unique incident also reminds us that people can give to the Lord's work who may not be full members of the local assembly, but the gifts must be free will offerings, and they must come from an understanding on the part of the giver of the person and work of the Lord. No gift can ever be accepted that might hinder the giver seeing that they need a Saviour. This is the main reason why it is nearly always unwise to accept offerings from unbelievers, for they may think that by giving money to the Church they have met their obligation to the Lord, and may not see that they need to accept the Gospel message for their salvation. This incident here is however a reminder that there are times when this general rule of accepting gifts from those who are not certified as genuine believers is waived. God is doing something powerful here with this government, and so while the help and gifts of the semi-pagan Samaritans cannot be accepted without spiritual compromise, the gifts of the Persian court may be.

Verses 18 – 22. Many Jews and Gentiles have also given to the temple function to ensure that there will be ample sacrifices for the feasts to come. This specific provision may indicate the main problem in the land of Judea at this time. The earlier decree of Darius had directed the northern satraps to provide animals for sacrificial purposes, but over the reign of Xerxes, with all the other war based demands upon the empire, this may have been forgotten, and the Jews do not have enough animals, or money to buy them, for the sacrifices to be offered regularly in the new temple. The Persians desired to make their own empire more magnificent by the building of magnificent buildings and the celebration of worship in different places and ways amongst their many peoples. The great wonders of the world of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus is built around this time by the satrap Mausilos, and the Temple of Diana of the Ephesians is completed by this time and supported by the Persians. They delighted in majestic buildings with spiritual purposes, and it may be that this is what is behind the things we read of here. Great buildings that were glorious made the Empire glorious!

The king also authorises Ezra to utilise all monies as he thinks fit on his arrival after the animal supply problems are remedied. Once there are ample animals for the sacrificial system the wealth that has been donated may be used for any purpose whatsoever that he thinks fit. It is also clear from these verses that additional golden and silver vessels have been provided as specific gifts for the temple treasury by the Persians. These are to be delivered to the temple.

Ezra is also given authority over the taxation of the province of Judea, and has access to the treasury to utilise all monies required on the temple functioning, further rebuilding, or beautifying. This makes me wonder whether he has actually been appointed governor of the province, as Nehemiah will later be. Ezra is a humble man and so he doesn't blow his own trumpet here and list all his titles. Artaxerxes then makes an order to be obeyed by all the governors on the far side of the Euphrates; that they are to re-apply the decree of Darius, and supply Ezra with anything he needs to beautify the temple or supply its needs up to a set annual amount.

The set amount is a significant annual amount of silver, wheat, and olive oil, but allows for an unlimited supply of salt. This is a serious level of support by the Persian Government for the Jewish Temple. Persia's support for Israel and her worship blessed the Empire for the next 200 years, but history ends with Persia joining the Gog-Magog assault on Israel and the Arabs in Ezekiel 38-39 and they are judged and leave the centre stage of history permanently.

Verses 23 – 26. The reasons for the support are now simply and clearly given to us. The king is clearly very superstitious about the power of the Lord God of Israel and does not want anything to happen to him or his sons as a result of not paying correct respect to the God of Israel. Whatever Ezra believes is to be done in the Lord's holy name is to be done, and the money found from somewhere. Nothing is to stop the work of the Lord or the worship at His holy temple. Possibly the Persians looked at the fall of Babylon as a judgement by the God of Israel. They may also have read the prophetic words about the rise of the Persian Empire, from Daniel's prophecies. Very powerful reasons are driving this king, for the fear of getting things wrong in Artaxerxes language here is clearly visible. He is very concerned to support the temple and thereby secure his own life and posterity.

The decree goes as far as protecting the Levites and priests who return from any taxes as they pass through borders and any customary obedience that they cannot fulfil to any local gods on the journey. We forget that to travel in the ancient world was often to be placed in situations of religious compromise where a pinch of incense may be required to be burned to the deity of the emperor or a local god. No member of Israel could do this without breaking the Law. Exodus 20:1ff. The king exempts them from all things that they would find burdensome on the journey back to the land of Judea.

Ezra is then made the official "law giver" and "law maker" of this province. He may not have the title of satrap, (he doesn't tell us this) but from the content of verse twenty five, I cannot but think he is indeed for some time at least, the governor/satrap of the province of Judea. He has the power of life and death, or banishment, and the setting of fines for law breakers. He will work with the next man, Nehemiah, and the result of their work is that the prosperity of the Jewish people for the next 200 years will be established.

Verses 27 – 28. Ezra now blesses the king for his edict and all it means. The money received will be used to beautify the temple and make it more magnificent than they would have thought possible to make it. Solomon had covered the entire original structure in gold, and Ezra is determined to make this house also a wonder of the world. Ezra

acknowledges the grace, mercy and power of God in moving upon the king so that he ordered these things done, and has opened the door to such blessing upon the house and people of God.

Ezra recognises a fact that we all need to reflect upon today. The Lord alone opens the doors of blessing and purpose for mankind. If the Lord is going to do a great work, then it will be done, and the challenge for us as men and women of the Lord is to be ready to do whatever we are ordered to do. God is moving and we have two choices; we are with the Lord moving forward, or we are castaways. 1 Corinthians 9:27. There is no “coasting by” with the Lord.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Ezra is described as a “ready scribe”; he is a man who is always ready to teach and preach the Word of God. Let us be “apt to teach” also as the servants of the Lord. Great service rests upon the foundation of great amounts of study and prayer. It is our spiritual life that prepares us for spiritual service. Let us call our people to be “prepared” people for the Lord’s work by daily devotion to study and prayer. Let us all heed the inner voice of the Holy Spirit as we open the Word of God, and let us live and work as the servants of the Lord in our daily life in home and work place. It is our obedient and faithful walk in the ordinary places that opens the door to the extra-ordinary places.

2. God is moving in this world today, just as He moved in the days of Ezra. Are we with the Lord in the place of blessing, or are we under His discipline or judgement? There is no neutral ground upon this earth, and so let us commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the service of the Lord in spirit and in truth.

3. Receiving great gift offerings for the Lord’s work can create spiritual issues for the giver and the receiver. Let us be discerning in these matters and give no offence, except to the offensive. The Samaritans could not be accepted at all or the entire temple project would have been perverted away from the truth, but the Persian Government’s support is wholeheartedly accepted as it opened the door for blessing to be upon Israel throughout the entire Persian Empire. Let us be as discerning as Ezra was in our dealings with unbelievers, and carnal believers.

DOCTRINES

WORLDLINESS

SIN – OLD SIN NATURE

JUDGEMENT – GREAT WHITE THRONE

CHRISTIAN LIFE – ETERNAL LIFE

PROPHECY – DANIEL’S 70 WEEKS

PROPHECY – EMPIRES IN DANIEL

NOTES

CHAPTER 8**INTRODUCTION**

Once again we see in this chapter the difference between the Jewish way of telling history and the Gentile – Greek/Roman way of telling of events. Ezra is giving us here the order of march from Babylon to Jerusalem but much of the detail we seek from such a great event isn't here. Ezra is recording names that have little or no significance to us at all, but to those who lived with him and afterwards these were vital testimonies to the key families who returned with him in the 450s and joined their brethren and were part of the great revival that he leads.

As we come to lists of names like this we must pause rather than rush on to more interesting text. We must pause and remember that the names of the saints are precious in God's sight, and He delights to hear the names of those who serve Him in spirit and in truth. Pause and turn to and read **Malachi 3:16-18**.

EZRA 8:1-36

1 These are now the chief of their fathers, and this is the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king. **2** Of the sons of Phinehas; Gershom: of the sons of Ithamar; Daniel: of the sons of David; Hattush. **3** Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty. **4** Of the sons of Pahathmoab; Elihoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred males. **5** Of the sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males. **6** Of the sons also of Adin; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males. **7** And of the sons of Elam; Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males. **8** And of the sons of Shephatiah; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him fourscore males. **9** Of the sons of Joab; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males. **10** And of the sons of Shelomith; the son of Josiphiah, and with him an hundred and threescore males. **11** And of the sons of Bebai; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty and eight males. **12** And of the sons of Azgad; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him an hundred and ten males. **13** And of the last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them threescore males. **14** Of the sons also of Bigvai; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them seventy males. **15** And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi. **16** Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Jojarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding. **17** And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God. **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; **19** And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty; **20** Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name. **21** Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. **22** For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. **23** So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us. **24** Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them, **25** And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered: **26** I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; **27** Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold. **28** And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers. **29** Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD. **30** So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God. **31** Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. **32** And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days. **33** Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites; **34** By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time. **35** Also the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin offering: all this was a burnt offering unto the LORD. **36** And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 2. In these first verses we have the two extended families from the two priestly families that joined him on the march back to Jerusalem. The two men named, Gershom and Daniel, may be quite old, and are possibly grand-fathers of their groups. From this group of men of the two surviving family lines of Aaron, Ezra will later select twelve leaders to entrust the gifts to, and so the indication is that the families may be quite large, with around twenty males in each, just as the Levites later, verses 18-19.

The reference to the son of David, Hattush, reminds us that many members of the family of David survived the captivity. We do not have any idea of who amongst the family of Hattush accompanied him. We have no idea here of what relationship he was to David, whether he was of the line of Solomon or of Nathan, or another son, and so we cannot speculate with any certainty on his relationship to Joseph or Mary later.

Verses 3 – 14. We now have a list of the names of the common people who accompanied the Levites and priests back to the land. These people are descendents of those who choose not to return with Zerubbabel nearly eighty years before, but have now seen that their future, and the future of their children, is in Judea rather than Babylon. Twelve family groups are mentioned, and while there are significant numbers in each extended group, it is an indication of just how many still remained behind after each migration.

Most of the family groups here are similar or identical names and families to those who returned with Zerubbabel. This also reminds us that at his return families divided, with many staying behind from each family, so that each family is represented again eighty years later in a new wave. If we compare this with the Irish and Scottish migrations of the years 1820 – 1900 we get similar situations with family groups dividing when the first wave leaves home shores, and then later other descendents follow, so that in another hundred years there are large groups of the family in the home country and in many of the original settler's destinations.

1. The sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males 150.
2. The sons of Pahathmoab; Elihoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him 200 males.
3. The sons of Shechaniah; the son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 males.
4. The sons also of Adin; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 males.
5. The sons of Elam; Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 males.
6. The sons of Shephatiah; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him 80 males.
7. The sons of Joab; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him 218 males.
8. The sons of Shelomith; the son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 males.
9. The sons of Bebai; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him 28 males.
10. The sons of Azgad; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 males.
11. The last sons of Adonikam, whose names are these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 males.
12. The sons also of Bigvai; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them 70 males.

This gives us a total of 1468 males of non priestly or Levite origin, and if each had a family with them, this makes a considerable group of as many as 6000 adults.

Verses 15 – 20. When the people assemble at the selected place to organise for the march, Ezra obtains the list we see here from family heads, and obviously a more detailed one of all the names also. He is then shocked to discover that there are no Levites at all in the crowd. None of the remaining Levites in Babylon have voluntarily come forward to join the return to Judea and to serve in the temple. For all ministers who hesitate to give a "second call" for salvation, or for a specific offering, Ezra gives us all a precedent for second calls here. He stops the procedure and calls for the leadership of the house of Levi in Babylon and asks why they have no representatives present. All these people should actually return, for their heritage centres in the temple, but Ezra will not put that level of coercion upon them, but he asks for another request to be made amongst the families, that the Holy Spirit might convict some of their rightful place. Let us always follow Ezra here, and follow the Spirit in offering grace again, if we feel conviction to do so.

The issue for these people is the "WILL OF GOD"; what does God want them to be doing, and where does the Lord want them to be serving Him? Ezra believes that the Lord intends many (if not all) of the Levites to be back in Judea at the temple. He cannot believe that none have been led of the Lord to return. He calls together the leadership of the Levites in Babylon. The question goes out directly again to them; where are the Levites to return? The region of Casiphia is unknown to us at this distance, but it may have been a scribal dwelling place where the Levites lived and studied. The appeal is for "men of understanding". By this Ezra means men who see what God is doing and respond to His Plan and will for their lives, not make their decisions upon purely human and social motivation.

It was more comfortable to remain behind in Babylon. They had been there at least 130 years by this point and many families were very settled and very prosperous, with all their social and religious networks working in the local synagogue. To return to Judea was to head into the wild frontier, and it was to cross several thousand miles of dangerous roads first. It was a serious and a dangerous thing to do, but if it was the Lord's will for their lives, then it was the right thing to do. The second call does bring two extended families of the Levites who with this second opportunity heed the inner voice of the Lord and join the group by the river, and settle into the tent that they will live in for the next months as they make the journey. Thirty eight Levite families join, and 220 of the singers families join into the group.

Verses 21 – 23. The group was in camp at least three days before this fast was called, and possibly longer, as the stragglers from Levi joined in. This time of waiting is the time for organising the order of the march and working out the needful security arrangements for their journey. Ezra wants the group to be self sufficient and not have to ask for Persian troops as an escort, for his message to the king has been that the Lord will protect them, and he expects the people to heed the Lord and be ready to protect themselves and their families also. Ezra proclaims a solemn fast for a number of days for the people to spiritually prepare themselves for the journey that will have many testing situations along the road. Ezra had claimed the power of God to bless them, and so he felt ashamed to then ask for Persian cavalry to back up the power of God! The people must be ready to stand alone before their enemies on the way and depend upon the Lord alone. We are not told how long the time of fasting was, but a normal time would be at least seven days.

It is the twelfth day of the first month Nissan when they finally head away, verse 31, but the original plan had been to head away on the first of the month. Ezra 7:9. This final departure time is just two days before Passover, and would seem to be a strange time. Why not wait and celebrate the Passover then go? It appears that Ezra wanted to underline the fact that Babylonian Passovers were over for these people, and the next one would be on the march, as in the Exodus march, and the following one would be in the land of Judea. This would have great power for the people, as after two days marching they would still be able to see the familiar sights of Babylon, and would be two days into the wilderness. This would give Ezra the opportunity to teach them from Exodus chapters 12 and following and build their faith and commitment to press forward, just as their ancestors had done.

Verses 24 – 30. From the families of the priests twelve men are selected to carry the responsibility of the gold and silver vessels and bullion they are carrying. These men have the responsibility to guard the treasures for the Lord's house with their lives and keep it safe until it can be delivered safely to the temple treasury. The exact quantity is weighed out, and the items will be re-weighed when they arrive to ensure nothing is missing. The selection of people who can be trusted with money is a vital thing in any ministry, for the Lord's money is to be guarded from all who would use it for any purpose other than that set aside in the ministry.

Great and disgraceful victories are gained by Satan over the Church when corruption occurs with monies collected for the Lord's work. We are to guard the funds closely from all who would steal the Lord's provision. 650 Talents of Silver coinage was a significant amount, and a further 100 talents of gold and silver plate were present to be guarded. Several million dollars in hard currency is being transported here, and every man will need to be ready to defend it from the desert raiders who attacked unprotected caravans on the road they are taking. They must all take personal responsibility for the purpose of this journey, and all be ready to play their various roles.

Verses 31 – 36. Once again, as I read these first verses, I wish Ezra had told us of the battles, or threats they faced on the way, for there is a great book here on the journey itself. Clearly there was great danger but all he tells us is the important bit; God was with them through it all. Ministry is certainly not ever risk free, but it is facing dangers in the presence of the Lord our God. Those who believe that ministry should be a smooth path please turn to 2 Corinthians 11:23-33, and having read those words give thanks that the Lord is also with you and I on our journey. Few of us are asked to do what Paul had to do, but we may be asked to do dangerous and difficult things, and the challenge is to do them in "faith-rest". This means, having faith in the words of the Lord and resting upon His promises as we advance in our service. Refer to the BTB study on FAITH.

Notice the delay after arrival in Jerusalem in handing over the wealth they have brought. Never be too fast in handing over gifts to others; always check them out first and ensure they are as trustworthy as you have been proved to be. Also ensure their security arrangements are as good as yours have been. Ezra is careful, and we need to be more careful in our handling of monies and our accounting for monies so that nothing of the Lord's is lost. Once they have rested after their long journey, the monies are handed over and signed for by the priesthood in Jerusalem. The people then offer up sacrifices in thanksgiving. There are several thousand of them so the quantities are significant, for all had to partake of some of the flesh of the sacrifices. Ezra then introduces himself formally to the king's people in Judea, and to the governors of the other provinces, so they know the decree of Artaxerxes and what it means for them.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Don't be fearful of calling again to the Lord's people to respond to an appeal. If the response is not what you believe the Lord would have at this time, then prayerfully bring the whole matter before the people again. Don't be embarrassed about asking people to go back to the Lord to really be sure the Lord is not asking them to do more. We are by our Old Sin Nature complacent people, who will settle into peace and calm and not move outside the comfort zone where the Lord may require us.
2. Are we ready to farewell our old lives and head into the Lord's path for us; a path which may be totally different and involve great risks to life and property? Many of these people are older and many have young children, and they step out in faith that the Lord wants them in Judea, no longer in Babylon. Do not mistake physical and financial prosperity for the Lord's plan and will. Ask where it is the Lord wants, for He may ask you to take a tough road in later years well away from the prosperity you have known to that point. Let us be obedient, not paralysed by caution, at all ages.
3. When we head away from all we have known it is wise to do so with deliberate steps, and with firm doctrinal biblical teaching as we move steadily away from our comfort zone. Only the Word of God provides stability in the soul of man as we head into places that we have no experiences of before. The Lord goes before us if we walk in His will. Let us

do that today and always. Let us be ready today to be sent in a new direction, and be ready to walk away from familiar paths, but only when we are surely called by the Lord.

BTB DOCTRINES GOD – DIVINE GUIDANCE: THE WILL OF GOD CHRISTIAN LIFE – FAITH

CHAPTER 9

INTRODUCTION

Before we enter this chapter and the last one, and receive the shock behind what Ezra will order done here, let us recall the little book of Ruth, and the genealogy of David. Ruth is a Moabitess, and as such she was by her birth banned from being received as a mother of Israel. Moab had been at the centre of the great temptation that occurred for Israel to entice them into fornication that would bring God's destructive judgement upon them. Numbers 25:1ff. The entire nation of Israel was then told that Moab was "banned" as a source of legitimate marriage partners from that point onwards.

This ban upon these people entering the nation of Israel was to stretch to ten generations, which meant any child born of an Israelite and a Moabitess was to be excluded from the religious life of Israel, and their children were also excluded until ten generations had passed. Having understood this principle from the Law of Moses turn now to the little book of Ruth and read from Ruth 4:13-22. It is clear under this Mosaic Law principle that David was technically under this ban. How could he and his family be considered Israelites at all under this rule of Moses?

The answer to this rests in the concept of the newness of life of the born again believer. John 3:3-16. Ruth becomes an Israelite by salvation, and so is out from underneath the ban. She is no longer a "stranger", and under the curse of the Law, but a fellow believer in the one true God. Salvation made people true Israelites, but all others were referred to as "strangers"; people whose behaviours, beliefs and culture were the opposite of that required of God for Israel.

Absolute separation was to be maintained from all who rejected the truth and clung to their own paganism; no mixing was allowed for Jews with non-Jews who rejected the truth about God. If the non-Jew became Jewish by faith, then they were no longer strangers, but brethren before the Lord. What has happened in Judea through the nearly eighty years after the return of the first exiles is that the people have inter-married with locals, and taken beautiful but determinedly pagan girls for their sons and themselves to marry from surrounding cultural and religious groups.

They had not demanded or required that there be religious, and true spiritual change, before this was done, but practised what we now call, "religious tolerance", of the paganism of their new wives. By doing this they had established political and family ties with these groups, and in one sense secured their alliance in danger, but spiritually the Jews were totally compromised, for these people had not accepted the God of Israel as their God. Ezra is not aware of the extent of this evil until a few days have passed after the great sacrifice of thanksgiving has been completed after his group's arrival. In this chapter he records his response to the evil and his prayer to the Lord addressing this great national sin.

EZRA 9:1-15

1 Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. **2** For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass. **3** And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. **4** Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. **5** And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, **6** And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. **7** Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day. **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. **9** For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem. **10** And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments, **11** Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness. **12** Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever. **13** And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and

for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this; 14 Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldest not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? 15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 2. Not all the princes of the land are involved in this great evil of mixing their households with pagans, and those who were not involved come to Ezra, as the newly arrived leader, to tell him of this hidden sin that is undermining the entire nation. All levels of society are involved in this evil and the effect has been to destroy the unity of faith in the nation. The worst of this is that the inter-marriages have not led to the salvation of the lost, rather the opposite. When the Lord orders us to do a thing, or avoid doing a thing, there is a reason. The command for biblical SEPARATION is a command that occurs in both Testaments. The reason for it is summed up in the saying that is common to many cultures; “the bad apple makes the good apples bad, the good apple never makes the bad apples good”.

The effect of intermarriage on the nation’s spiritual life was catastrophic. There was paganism at the heart of many homes, and the very sin that led to Israel being judged was being repeated. From the very beginning of the nation this had been a sin that was destructive. Solomon had brought this evil to such a high level that within five years of his death the unity between Israel and Judah was destroyed, Judah was defeated in war, and Jerusalem fell to the Egyptians and the Temple treasury was looted. 1 Kings 11:1-10.

This intermarriage, without the salvation of the woman first, brought pagan compromises in the family units. These people had started to practise the paganism of their wives; “doing according to their abominations”. It was a great evil that had been let loose, and it had led to the total destruction of the nations of Israel in 720 BC, and Judah in 586 BC. It is less than 130 years since the first temple and the entire nation was destroyed because of this great evil, and yet the people have started again on the path of death and judgement. Ezra is shocked to the core of his being, for this reality is behind closed doors and has been hidden from him until this point. Like the hidden cancer it is eating away at the spiritual heart of the nation.

Verses 3 – 6. Ezra expresses his deep grief, for he sees what this means spiritually and politically. The nation is only strong, stable, and safe when it is obedient to the Lord. National blessing depends upon the spiritual status of its people. Nations have risen and fallen through history in accordance with the Plan of God, and they have entered into NATIONAL DIVINE DISCIPLINE due to their disobedience to the Word of God. Leviticus Chapter 26, Deuteronomy Chapters 27-30.

Ezra sees that by their actions these disobedient people have opened the door to divine discipline upon the entire nation. He sees what this may mean, for he remembers the Word of God and knows the terrible events of the conquest, and knows the carnage that the nation endured. He fears for the people and for their survival because of this evil, and he is not being “alarmist” or an “extremist”, although that is what he may appear to be to many. Ezra is a “realist” here, and the more I see of life, the more I realise the importance of what Ezra is going to say to the Lord, and then going to do here in the society. The sin of these foolish people is indeed, “Unto the heavens”, for they are doing what Solomon did, and that ended their nation’s life!

Many today have the attitude that the princes who compromised their faith had. They believe that they can “get by” with their sin, and that their religious compromise won’t upset God too much. They take grace too far, and open the door to evils that the Lord’s clear directions tried to stop them from entering into. I have just this minute come from my counselling clinic, where I have been involved in a case where an unbeliever has seen me to ask for guidance, because his fifteen year old son is having sex with a fifteen year old girl down the road. As an unbeliever he feels this is too young to be entering into sex, and what has baffled him is that this girl and her solo parent mother go to a major Pentecostal and Evangelical church in our city! They have invited the boy along to church also, and then plied him with alcohol at their house, and the mother has suggested several times the boy sleep over with her daughter! I have had a very baffled unbeliever today asking me as a pastor to explain this and give him proper Christian guidance! Don’t tell me that we don’t have spiritual and moral compromise ruining the witness of our churches today!

Sexual attraction and sexual power has always been at the heart of Satan’s best temptations in this present world. The power of sexual attraction can lead to compromise of values, and the power sex releases can open the door to further compromises to secure the ongoing sexual relationship. I see compromised people weekly to assist them get back on track with their lives after step by step they traded away all their values for the temporary joy of the sex they were getting from a pagan.

The godly leaders who approach Ezra understand this is a problem, but they feel powerless to deal with the other leaders who have compromised, but they do not yet understand just how big a problem this is. Ezra’s reactions to their news will assist them to see how bad things really are. Ezra’s actions are the highest expression of grief and concern that a Jewish man can publicly make at this time. To tear clothes was a very serious thing, for many people did not have more than one set of clothes, and so to tear them was to show the greatest distress possible for normal grief, but Ezra even goes beyond that.

Ezra now does a thing that shows the worst grief imaginable and was left for expressions of grief for ones closest family members, and even then done rarely. He plucks out, and shaves off his own hair and beard. He literally disfigures himself as he sits and then lies in the dust of the ground by the altar, and he stays there in a totally bereft state all that day. The Old English word, "astonied", was a word that went way beyond "astonished", and indicated total distress that affected every part of the character of the person involved. He felt the full enormity of the insult to God that was at the heart of the pagan compromises made by God's people!

By sitting in such a state in that very public place Ezra sent a spiritual shock wave through the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. He is either the governor, or close to that role in the province, and so for him to publicly humiliate himself in such a way was an astonishment to all the people, and they all very quickly would have been told why he had done this. The princes who have approached him have clearly publicised the reason for their approach to him, and through this day many come and join him in silent trembling for the reality and seriousness of the sin they are now facing.

To tremble at the Word of God is a needful thing when there has been great apostasy or severe unconfessed sin. Let us be fearful in today's world, for we have done what these foolish people did, and compromised with the world in ways we ought not to have. We have become way too casual with the Lord and His Word, and we have under-estimated the importance of holiness before the Lord. We need to tremble more at the Word and let the Holy Spirit convict us of the need for holy words and work.

If we want revival we also need to be ready to sit (or prostrate ourselves) like Ezra and accept public humiliation as we wait for others to join us. If we want revival we must be ready for it to start with us! Ezra sits (or rather, as we will see, lies flat on his face) and waits for the impact of his actions to really sink in with the people, but he primarily lies still so long just because he is overwhelmed by the awfulness of what he has heard, and the seriousness of what it means. God's Word is clear; "Be holy, for I am holy, says the Lord". **1 Corinthians 3:17, Ephesians 1:4, 5:27, 1 Timothy 2:8, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 1:12-16, Jude 20.**

His posture in prayer is total prostration. He has lain down on his face before the altar, his hands out stretched before him. He is so ashamed of what he has heard about the actions of the people that he feels it personally, just as God feels our sin. Be ready to experience this fellow believers, and especially pastors, for the closer we get in our fellowship with the Lord, the more we will feel the awfulness of the sin of the Lord's people. For pastors especially this is an issue that you must confront; feeling the pain of your people's sin is a debilitating thing unless you understand what it is you feel.

The "burden of the churches" that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 11:28, is the care for the people that the Lord gives to all who have a shepherd heart for the Lord's flock under their care. This is a burden that breaks many pastors who do not understand it. Let us assist our pastors by working in prayer at the church weekly prayer meeting to uphold the Lord's leadership and the Lord's people. Let us in prayer surround the Lord's people with loving care, and a powerful conviction for holiness. John 16:8-11.

Verses 7 – 8. Ezra's prayer is written out, for it is a formal and very public prayer. Through the long day he prepares what he will say, and he may even sit and write this out formally at some point, so that when it is as he believes right, it can be copied and distributed. This is a very formal and deliberate prayer. He begins, as we have seen, by noting his shame at having to come before the Lord to even discuss this before the Throne of Grace. It is such an awful thing that he is facing here that he did not think he would ever face this again in Judea's history. The people have returned to the very sins that led to the destruction of their nation in the past! This was unthinkable to Ezra, yet they have followed after their father's sins. They are still surrounded by the rubble of the destruction of Jerusalem nearly one hundred and thirty years before, and yet they have failed to realise that it was actions like these ones that led to this level of destruction in the immediate past.

Ezra speaks his thoughts of grief aloud in this prayer. He is staggered that this generation has repeated the sins of their fathers in the very place that speaks of the results of such actions. Nehemiah will return and rebuild the walls after this revival, but at this time the walls are in ruins, and the valleys around Jerusalem so filled with the rubble of the old city that a person cannot even walk there easily. Ezra reminds the people who listen to this prayer that the reason they have entered the "Times of the Gentiles" and are under domination by the Persians, is because of their sins before the Lord.

He sees that their return to the land has been a little opening of grace for them, and yet they have repaid the Lord's grace and mercy by sinning in such a way as their fathers did. Such an insult to the grace of God is so great it overwhelms Ezra and he expresses to the Lord his shame that he needs to bring such things before the Lord. Refer to the BTB study GRACE. Ezra prays that the people may have their eyes "lightened"; that they may see the truth of the awfulness of their sin and repent in deep grief at what they have done.

Verses 9 – 11. Ezra remembers that they were slaves and yet the Lord was with them and has lifted them up to be rulers and free men again. They have been blessed from slavery to freedom and yet they have accepted bondage to paganism for sex! They have received grace in the sight of the Persian kings and been allowed to rebuild their temple, and even had those kings provide money to assist them. They have been recipients of the grace and mercy of the Lord to a level that is incredible, except when you consider the CHARACTER OF GOD. We also, just like them, have been recipients of the grace and mercy and love of God, and we must ask ourselves, how have we repaid this unpayable debt? The Persian Empire has built a wall around them for protection, so that their old enemies are now just other provinces of the Empire and there is no active threat to their survival, except their own foolish sinful actions.

What can we say? Verse ten. How often have you got to this place in your prayers believer? This is a good place to be before the Lord, for we are reminded that we need to be humble and quiet before the Lord. We need to accept that we have fallen short of the holy standards of God and by His Grace only can we be lifted up. Ezra publicly confesses that as a people they have broken the Mosaic Law and are facing judgement because of it. They have failed to see the uncleanness of the pagans that surround them, and have tolerated things they ought not to have tolerated. They have allowed evil to appear as good, and they have entered into marriages with pagans that have destroyed their spiritual witness and personal holiness. Daniel 9:4-16 records Daniel's very similar confession of the same sin from over a hundred years before this time.

Verses 12 – 15. Ezra now ends his prayer and begins his exhortation to the people gathered around him in shock and dismay. His words are words of correction and demand direct actions be taken. The command is direct and simple; do not give your sons or daughters to pagans to be married. Possibly he has hit on one of their reasons for doing this evil, and that is to win the pagans friendship (peace) and to share in their wealth in the land. These pagans have no lasting inheritance in the land. They have been allowed to grow and prosper there only because of the Jew's absence, but now that the Jews are back, they are to see the land as their own and take it back without any compromise or deals made with these pagan usurpers.

Ezra exposes their flawed human-viewpoint logic. They have made marriage alliances in order to get quick wealth and easy peace with their pagan neighbours whereas God's plan is that they retake the entire land and either convert these pagans to true faith, or exile these pagans from the land. Gods plan for the prosperity and peace of His people never involves any compromise with the forces of the enemy, it involves either their being born-again, or defeated totally. God's purpose is that the land be the possession and inheritance of the righteous, not the unrighteous. Their prosperity and future peace is never to rest upon the good will of pagans, but upon the blessing of the Lord their God.

Ezra reminds them that they have not received the punishment that they deserved for their repeated and persistent evils in the past. God has been gracious to them above and beyond their deserving. God has delivered them and restored them to blessing in their ancestral land, and this is well beyond what they could have expected to receive given their rebellion through the centuries. Given that they have received such grace, should they now break faith with the God who has shown them such love and mercy? When they have received such blessings, and also such clear and concise warning of judgement, should they not pay heed to the words of the Lord their God?

Ezra asks directly what has come over these people that they would join themselves to paganism when the Lord wanted them to be His alone. Ezra then returns to his formal prayer and this chapter ends with his appeal to the Lord that grace and mercy continue, even though judgement is to be expected for their evil actions. He prays that the Lord's anger at their sin and evil be turned away as they stand in repentance before Him. He prays that they might be forgiven as they truly repent, and he recognises that they stand in total trespass, and are unrighteous before the Lord because of this national sin. He recognises that they cannot stand before the Lord and do anything except confess their sin. Refer to the BTB study **CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS**. Ezra has confessed the sins of the nation but they must stand with him and accept all he has said on their behalf and join him in their own confession, and demonstrate that their words are true by actions that reflect their repentance.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. What is the national sin of your own people pastor? What is the immoral behaviour that plagues your nation and is destroying its marriage-family core? Ezra discovers this sort of evil in the middle of the government of Judea; even the princes of the tribes are involved in this evil. He prays, he repents, he preaches for repentance and life change. This is the right order for us as the Lord's pastors, so that we can address the sins of our own nation and start to bring salvation.
2. Revival must begin with our selves. We must sit quietly before the Lord and confess our nations and our own sins and wait for the Lord to touch our hearts and the hearts of those who can then, and only then, be part of the solution for our church and our nation. Let us tremble at the Word more often and allow the conviction of the Holy Spirit to burn into our hearts and lives and change us. God wants more than trembling, as we see from **James 2:19-20**, he wants us to get up and do what is required to deal with the sins that have brought us to our knees.
3. Let us commit to making the weekly prayer meetings the heart and soul of our church. Only as regular prayer meetings blossom will genuine revival occur. Study Church history and every revival that changed nations began with a few sitting or kneeling before the Lord and dealing with the sins of themselves, their nation, and their churches. Let us amplify the importance of prayer so all know it is the power house of the church. When we do humans things we get what man can do, but when we pray we get what God can do.

DOCTRINES

CHRISTIAN LIFE – SEPARATION

FIVE CYCLES OF NATIONAL DIVINE DISCIPLINE

GRACE

GOD – CHARACTER OF GOD

CHRISTIAN LIFE – CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

CHAPTER 10**INTRODUCTION**

Before reading this chapter, read through **James Chapter 1, Verses 22 – 27, and then James Chapter 2, Verses 14-26**. James forms the best introduction to Ezra's prayer and actions, and to the responding actions of the people. What we see here in this last chapter of Ezra is a good Old Testament illustration of James words. Faith without works is dead, and repentance without life change is hypocrisy and fraud. If there is no life change there is no genuine repentance and the believer can stop kidding themselves that they are genuine in their confession of their sin.

Now the process to deal with bad habits may take some time, but in the power of the Holy Spirit there should be some progress and life change over time. With those battling addictive behaviours this change may take years until the individual is totally free of the old evil, but they are daily committing themselves to life change. Without the practical commitment to life change to become more like Christ the believer's words of repentance are hollow and meaningless. The life change demanded here is dramatic and harsh, but that is the only remedy to deal with the insidious effects of the evils of the paganism their actions have let loose.

EZRA 10:1-44

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. **2** And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. **3** Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. **4** Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it. **5** Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware. **6** Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away. **7** And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; **8** And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away. **9** Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain. **10** And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. **11** Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. **12** Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. **13** But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing. **14** Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us. **15** Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them. **16** And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. **17** And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month. **18** And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah. **19** And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass. **20** And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah. **21** And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uzziyah. **22** And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasah. **23** Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. **24** Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri. **25** Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah. **26** And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah. **27** And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza. **28** Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. **29** And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth. **30** And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh. **31** And of the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, **32** Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. **33** Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. **34** Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel, **35** Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh, **36** Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, **37** Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau, **38** And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei, **39** And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah, **40** Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, **41** Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah,

42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. **43** Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah. **44** All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

REFLECTION

Verses 1 – 4. Weeping by itself is not a sign of anything except emotional overflow or high levels of the stress hormone Cortisol, however, when it is associated with thoughtful and prayerful confession it is a bone fide expression of deep convictions. We must beware of fake, so called “crocodile tears”, in our world, for con artists and liars from the beginning of time have manipulated their own, and others emotions, to gain their objectives. Refer to the BTB study on **WEeping, REPENTANCE**. Ezra is however literally “beside him self” with grief and stress as he thinks of what has been done, and what will happen to the nation if it is not remedied. His emotional display is real, not fake, and it is purposeful not random. He is expressing his emotions but also his deepest thoughts through them. His purpose is to show before the people and the Lord their God just how devastated he is with the awful reality he faces.

A vast crowd gathers through this long day of Ezra’s grief, and it now stands with Ezra in great distress also. They have reflected upon his actions and his words and they also have opened themselves to the conviction of the Holy Spirit and bowed before the Lord in repentance for their national sin. Bone fide emotions will always have a positive outcome upon the people who observe them, whereas fake and manipulative shows of emotion will always be destructive. By the fruit of an emotion, just as in any action, you will know its origin and nature. Matthew 7:13ff. As leaders we must always be ready to lead in expression of godly repentance, and not be afraid of wearing our emotions upon our sleeves if it will help God’s people. Many leaders believe they cannot show their real feelings, but Ezra mentors a totally different reality of biblically sound leadership.

Notice the first man to speak a personal confession and notice his words to Ezra. These men knew they had erred greatly, but they felt bound to honour their marriage vows and so stayed in a situation where greater and greater evils were occurring in their extended families. With Ezra’s actions there is “hope” for them and for the nation. This man is ready to take the action that he now knows is the only one that will end the evil. Hear this man Shechaniah, for he is married to a pagan, and has children to her, and he is ready to put her away, and let his children go with her, as he has seen paganism grip the heart of his family.

Pause and reflect upon this, for he doesn’t ask for more time to lead her to genuine faith, or for his children to be led to genuine faith. He recognises that he cannot do anything more about their paganism, and he must let them go, or his family and nation will be drawn down to death by their lives and values. He now trembles at the commandment of the Lord, for he sees what his disobedience has done in the land and recognises that there is no hope for the nation unless the paganism at their heart is cut out and removed completely. These men now see that to save the nation they must follow the Law of God, and they commit to doing that. They see that “education” programs don’t work, and will not later.

They plead with Ezra to arise from the dust of the temple courtyard and do what the Lord has burdened him to do, and they promise to be there to support him, even though it may break their hearts. This man repeats the plea to Ezra; “Be of good courage, and do it!” There is a time to lie still and pray, and a time to stand and fight the Lord’s battles, and the time for prayer is now over, and the time for action has now come. The people all cry aloud their support for the words of Shechaniah. Ezra rises up and the plan to eradicate paganism from the heart of the nation begins.

Verses 5 – 8. The first step in the revival is a national commitment, starting with the religious leadership, to keep the Mosaic Law. It is to be personal and public, with each man standing, and reciting aloud an oath to keep and honour the Law of God through Moses. All stand and affirm this, and that means they will keep all 633 Commandments, not just the Ten Commandments! It is a commitment to keep the entire Law of Moses and follow through with whatever actions are required to honour every provision of the Law in their families.

Ezra has risen up from the ground and is taken into the house of the priests to eat and refresh himself, but he still cannot eat or drink, even though good food is placed before him. He is so distressed that he remains in a state of shock and grief. He sees the truth; that these people have been “carried away” by their lust, and in effect they have been captured by satanic forces. Ezra understands the Angelic Conflict and the attacks of the enemy upon believers, and he feels the great danger the nation is still in, even though they have started the process of repentance.

A solemn proclamation is made throughout the entire land. All who have married pagans and the family produced is now pagan are to confront their sin and deal with the great evil that has been done by personal confession first, and then by public action as the elders command. The command is for all adults to attend the solemn meeting at Jerusalem within three days. This is backed by the most serious warning; that anyone who does not come is going to lose their title to lands and properties, and be driven from the land. Those who want paganism can choose to follow their pagan wives into their pagan lands, but the land of Israel is to be purified.

The seriousness of the order underlines the magnitude of this problem and the determination of the elders to back Ezra in dealing with it once and for all. When we need to move against an evil we need to move with certainty and power. There is no place for half hearted measures when the Lord orders us to move and act; we are to be determined and strong in our service, with 100% commitment to any task the Lord assigns.

Verses 9 – 11. The solemn assembly occurs in the ninth month, which is mid-winter. It is cold and wet when the people must stand in the rain and hear the procedure that is going to be outlined for them to follow. The rain will

actually be too heavy for the people to be able to concentrate and even hear what is being said. The people sat on the ground in the courtyard of the Temple Mount, a vast crowd shivering in fear of the Lord's judgement, but also cold with the driving rain upon them. Ezra stands up and speaks to them bluntly and simply, and brings them to face the truth of their awful sin, and its fatal consequences unless they act decisively. The call is for a biblical separation from evil to occur and to occur immediately and strongly.

Verses 12 – 14. The people accept that they “must do” what Ezra has said. They do not feel 100% happy with this at all, but they all recognise that it must be done for the safety and future survival of the nation. They feel the anger of the Lord upon them through the work of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of the people. Refer to the BTB study HOLY SPIRIT – MINISTRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. The people are also practical, which possibly Ezra is not at this point. Ezra is the sort of man who is so burdened by the Lord that he hasn't even noticed the cold driving rain.

Some of us can be like this; we don't even think of the discomfort of others because we are so focused upon the Lord. It is a good fault, but it is a fault in leadership. The people are quite correct in their observations; this is not a thing that can be done, even in a couple of days, and this is not the time to stand in the rain. The people's observations tells me that Ezra is almost paralysed by the pain he feels at the sins here, for he hasn't planned this meeting well, he has simply called everyone together, and after their clear confession, there is a long awkward silence in the rain.

The people's leaders speak from the crowd and Ezra hears them and then mentally clicks back into “management mode” and accepting their solution, executes a workable plan through the eldership of the nation. Clearly, while the people have been standing in the rain one or more has developed a plan for people to be able to deal publicly with their sin in a way that will ensure every community is thorough in its actions. They know that the sin must be individually faced by each husband, and be confessed and repented of, and that there must be individual action and follow through to ensure it is permanent.

The suggestion is that the leadership of each local community conduct a thorough census of each family group, and identify anyone who has taken a pagan wife, and deal with them individually. They see that the process must be individual, community based, and thorough, or they will remain under the fierce wrath of the Lord. It is a reminder that confession of sin is not a quick and flippant activity; time and effort is to be taken, for we must get holiness right. Refer to the BTB study on this subject again.

Verses 15 – 17. There is some debate, and some oppose the proposal, and the four men named here may have been opponents. The people are dismissed and head sadly to their homes knowing that their leaders will be conducting public meetings in every town and village in the weeks to come at which all who have pagan wives need to publicly divorce them and send them and their pagan children packing. The entire eldership meets to discuss the decision however, and after some debate they come up with the best way to undertake this.

This tells me that either Ezra had not thought the matter through at all at a practical level, or he allows, encourages, or directs this meeting process in order to secure a thorough “buy in” of all the eldership of every town. I suspect that Ezra may have temporarily “lost the plot” due to grief and stress, but that he quickly gets back on track, and the Lord uses, even his distress to glorify His Holy Name. It is not wrong to be overwhelmed at times and temporarily lose focus as a leader due to care for your people. It is only wrong not to recover quickly and get back to caring for the people! As Ezra gets back into direct control he executes a plan that involves all the elders of the nation, and thereby he deals with the opposition of the few amongst them. By hearing all the elder's concerns, and allowing all to debate and speak, he eliminates any half hearted obedience on their part, and secures nearly total and enthusiastic support for the proposal.

Ensuring all leaders feel heard ensures none can come back later and complain, and by getting the entire eldership to take responsibility for this action plan he ensures there is collective responsibility for the decision making. This is a serious and distressing thing that is to occur, and as many as possible of the leadership of the nation must be united in the purge of the pagans from their midst or there will be lasting and deep bitterness. I believe Ezra does magnificently here in handling a thing that has for a time emotionally ship-wrecked his concentration.

He recovers to coordinate an approach that has secured the support of all the eldership except a few die hard liberals who won't be satisfied except with compromise. Men who oppose this would not be satisfied except by inaction. We must get used to over ruling these people and advancing in the Lord's plan, for they will not be satisfied with anything other than Satan's plan.

Verses 18 – 44. This is an awful list and it is the “list of shame”, for all these men had taken wives who were persistently unbelieving pagans, and behind every name here there is a broken family, and there are children who have been brought into paganism, and have to be let go back into their mother's paganism. There is great pain behind these names here. All these men lusted after wrongful objects of affection, and they pay a terrible price for their evil actions, and they must start again in establishing a new and God centred family, and turn aside from every temptation to follow after pagans and their ways. There are priests, Levites and leaders here; all men who ought to have known better.

This incident raises an important point for us today. When believers have married pagans and the pagan has influenced their children so that the children also are now pagans, what is the believer to do? Now the first point is that this question arises only because of the initial total disobedience and foolishness of the believer involved, but by the time they are asking this question, they have faced the error of their ways. It is almost too late to face this issue by the time the children have been perverted by their pagan parent, but for the believing parent it is still important.

Paul faces this issue early in the Church's history at Corinth, where many mixed marriages existed. His ruling is that while the pagan is happy to live with the believer, and there is no insult to the true faith, and the partner is safe from abuse, then the marriage bond is to be honoured, and the children taught the truths of the faith so that they might be sanctified. 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

If the pagan is however determined to be pagan, and to teach the children such evil things, then the believer would appear to be right in leaving that pagan, and if their children choose paganism, then they are to leave their children behind when they leave. The purpose of such draconian actions is for future witness to their children and others; for by living by them selves, at least the believer will have a pure witness to truth, and that will be without the insult or coercion to paganism that existed in the old home. This is a difficult area, but when we put together Ezra chapter 10 and 1 Corinthians chapter 7 the Bible would appear to teach that the believer is to divorce their pagan partner and leave them if the pagan is determined to remain in their paganism.

The future ministry and witness of the believer depends on their being away from the spiritually corrupting influence of the pagan. The evidence of these chapters, and of history itself, is that little is gained by the believer, or anyone else in the vicinity, by the believer staying and having their witness, and at times their life, extinguished by the evil they are surrounded by.

Ezra challenges his people to confront their past stupidity and evil actions, and set things right by the required draconian actions that are essential only because of the evil foolishness that had led to them. The initial stupidity of marrying a pagan is not to be followed by the stupidity of allowing the evil of the mixed home to pollute others near by. The spiritually rotten people are to be cut out of the nation. The little book of Ezra ends with the actions of the people to deal with the casting away of the pagan partners and the children born to them who are also determined to be pagans.

Now I have taken the children referred to here to be of an age when their paganism would have been seen, but it may be that no matter what the ages of the children, that they are all considered corrupt by their birth, and are to be cast away. This is possible, although with the provision within Israel for conversion of pagans, I cannot see that being the case here. I may be wrong on that matter, but have adopted the approach in this book that best reflects the reality of an evangelical Jewish society that was open to "God Fearers" joining the synagogues.

The book of Ezra ends quite abruptly at this point, and we are waiting for further information on how the revival went after this action, but we are disappointed. Remember, biblical history is not man's history, from man's perspective, but it is God's history, from God's perspective. This particular story of Ezra ends with his completion of the task God gave him to do here. Other details of his life are relevant to his personal walk with God, but are not relevant to the great unfolding drama of redemption. He is in the scriptures here because of his obedience at this point, and that is all that matters. He lives and serves the Lord through all his life, and sees that everything was "for such a time as this". Esther 4:14.

For many in the drama of history, their life details are apparently incidental, but one act of theirs is the reason for their being in the story. This man, like his contemporaries Esther and Nehemiah, exist in the great plan of God for one specific action each, and their greatness is that when the time comes to act in obedience to the Lord they do so. This is the challenge for us all; everything else is just background. These three little books remind us that we are here to play a part, and when the time comes to act in that role, we must be ready to throw ourselves into the job 100%. Ezra has met his life test; let us be determined to meet our own.

PASTORAL AND PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. There is a bone fide time to weep and wail for our sins, and a time to sit with the grief of what we have done for long enough to ensure we never go down a wrongful path again. We are too used to quick solutions being offered today, and being encouraged to "move on" and forget the awfulness. We need to sit with our pain, our stupidity, and our sinfulness a lot longer than we have been encouraged to. We need to sit with the awfulness of any sin long enough to really learn from it. Let us not be too quick to "move on" from any mistakes we have made, but pause long enough to learn all we can from them, and so never repeat them again.

2. Let us be ready to show the truth of our thoughts and feelings united together in powerful emotional outpouring for the benefit of God's people. Shows of emotion in ministry are not for self centred reasons, but must always have in view their purpose to demonstrate the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Let us not be afraid of emotional power in ministry, for the Lord must at times break us down before His people, and so open the door to blessing for many.

3. There is a time for prayer and a time for prayerful action. Examine your own life pastor and assess the situations you face in your own ministry. Is it now time for prayer saturated action? Is it time to rise from the ground of prayer alone and let the deep concerns of your heart now flow into determined and strong actions? Let us know when it is time for prayer meetings alone, and when it is time to arise from our prayers and work the work of the Lord. We are here upon the earth to fulfil a specific part in the plan of God, and on the greater stage of life that part may be a single action. Let us be ready to play our part in the plan of God 100% whenever we are called to move forward and do what we are called to do.

4. Ezra loses the plot with the over-whelming emotions of the things he faces, but the Lord is gracious and ensures that some-one within the vast crowd suggests the best way to deal with the problem. Ezra is able to recover and

lead the elders of the people into a full and frank discussion to finally identify the best way to activate the plan to eliminate the paganism from the midst of the nation. God is gracious, and if we have become overwrought because of our pain before the Lord at sin, we can be assured that the Lord will lead others to carry the day, until we are back on track and can lead strongly again. Let us trust the Lord and do what is required in difficult situations. Let us expect opposition, and identify its source. There are those who will always oppose the Lord's work, and who will never accept anything except spiritual compromise. Such people must be strongly opposed today, just as we see the early prophets and scribes, and later apostles oppose such people.

DOCTRINES

WEEPING

CHRISTIAN LIFE – REPENTANCE

HOLY SPIRIT – MINISTRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS