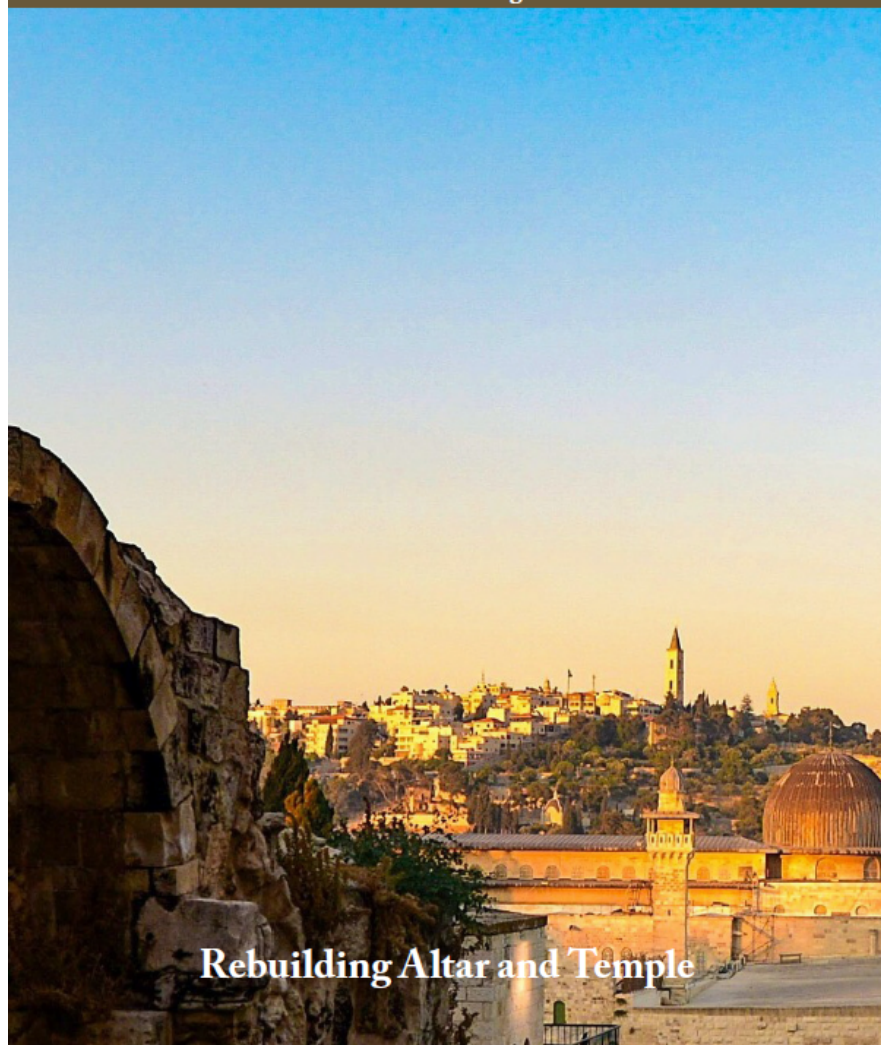


Ezra

Explained & Applied 15

Ger de Koning



Rebuilding Altar and Temple

The Book of Ezra

Explained and Applied

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Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen – Genesis

Exo – Exodus

Lev – Leviticus

Num – Numbers

Deu – Deuteronomy

Jos – Joshua

Jdg – Judges

Rth – Ruth

1Sam – First Samuel

2Sam – Second Samuel

1Kgs – First Kings

2Kgs – Second Kings

1Chr – First Chronicles

2Chr – Second Chronicles

Ezra – Ezra

Neh – Nehemiah

Est – Esther

Job – Job

Psa – Psalms

Pro – Proverbs

Ecc – Ecclesiastes

Song – Song of Songs

Isa – Isaiah

Jer – Jeremiah

Lam – Lamentations

Eze – Ezekiel

Dan – Daniel

Hos – Hosea

Joel – Joel

Amos – Amos

Oba – Obadiah

Jona – Jonah

Mic – Micah
Nah – Nahum
Hab – Habakkuk
Zep – Zephaniah
Hag – Haggai
Zec – Zechariah
Mal – Malachi

New Testament

Mt – Gospel of Matthew
Mk – Gospel of Mark
Lk – Gospel of Luke
Jn – Gospel of John
Acts – Acts of the Apostles
Rom – Letter to the Romans
1Cor – First Letter to the Corinthians
2Cor – Second Letter to the Corinthians
Gal – Letter to the Galatians
Eph – Letter to the Ephesians
Phil – Letter to the Philippians
Col – Letter to the Colossians
1Thes – First Letter to the Thessalonians
2Thes – Second Letter to the Thessalonians
1Tim – First Letter to Timothy
2Tim – Second Letter to Timothy
Tit – Letter to Titus
Phlm – Letter to Philemon
Heb – Letter to the Hebrews
Jam – Letter of James
1Pet – First Letter of Peter
2Pet – Second Letter of Peter
1Jn – First Letter of John
2Jn – Second Letter of John
3Jn – Third Letter of John
Jude – Letter of Jude
Rev – Revelation

Explanation of general format

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

BRACKETS [] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

SHARP BRACKETS < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When **ASTERISKS** * are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

ALL CAPS in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

The book of Ezra

Introduction

The book of Ezra is the continuation of the second book of Chronicles, although there are seventy years in between. This is shown by the fact that the first three verses of Ezra are almost identical to the last verses of 2 Chronicles (Ezra 1:1-3; 2Chr 36:22-23). However, the intervening period of seventy years is skipped because Israel is in exile outside the promised land at that time. With the transportation into exile “the times of the Gentiles” have begun (Lk 21:24). For Israel, since that time, the people are “Lo-Ammi”, which means “not My people” (Hos 1:9). Since that time, God has handed over the throne of the earth to the nations (Dan 2:37).

In the history of God with His people and the earth we see a new point of view in Ezra. There we see the intervention of grace for a remnant that God brings back from captivity to the land. The return from Babylon is not accompanied by signs and miracles, as was the case with the exodus from Egypt. We see no staff to perform miracles, no cloud guide, no mediator, no provisions from the storehouses of heaven from which the manna is raining.

In the book of Ezra, God does not act visibly, but in providence, behind the scenes. He acknowledges the new state of affairs and uses heathen rulers to carry out His plans. The remnant does not go to work in view of God’s dominion over the earth. That is still the future. What is there is the power of faith. What they do, they do in faith, in trust in God, whatever the circumstances.

That is why this book is full of instruction for us who live in circumstances that are in many ways similar to those of the remnant then. They use what they have and they do what they can, but they don’t moderate what they don’t have and can’t do. They have the Word and they use it. They have the genealogies and they use them. They do not do what only the use of Urim and Thummim enables them to do (Num 27:21), because they do not

have them. They don't refuse to do what they can because they can't do everything they want. They wait for others who have what they don't have.

That Ezra is the continuation of the second book of Chronicles is also shown in the main subject of the book. It is about the house of God in this Bible book, just like in 2 Chronicles. God desires to dwell with a redeemed people. This is already evident at the exodus from Egypt, when He gives the tabernacle. This also becomes clear when the people enter the land, when He gives the temple. His desire has not changed now that the people have forfeited everything. When He works a return to His land, it is to dwell in the midst of His people again and that His people come to Him with sacrifices.

This is still true in the time in which we live. The house of God is now "the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1Tim 3:15). God still works the desire to come to the place where He dwells. He now dwells among believers, even if only two or three come together in the Name of the Lord Jesus (Mt 18:20).

The book of Ezra consists of two parts:

1. The story of the return of the exiles, the foundation of the altar and the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1-6).
2. The return of Ezra himself and his service among the people (Ezra 7-10).

Between the two parts there are about sixty years. It is during this period that the events of the book of Esther take place. The first part of Ezra also includes the performance of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1), while we can place the prophet Malachi in the time of Nehemiah.

Ezra 1

Introduction

What happens in this chapter shows a real work of God. It is not a work of man with preparatory meetings and discussions. The hearts of all are controlled by Him.

Ezra 1:1-4 | God's People May Return to Jerusalem

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also [put it] in writing, saying: 2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

Seventy years after the Babylonians led the people into exile, God is going to work to fulfill His word through Jeremiah (Jer 29:10; 24:6-7; 25:11-12; 27:22). That word means that after seventy years the exile comes to an end and the people may return to the land of God. The beginning of the return comes from a work of the LORD in the spirit of Cyrus (verse 1).

God also acts on the basis of the prayers of His servants, which have been introduced into His plans through diligent study of His Word (Dan 9:2-3). He brings back a remnant so that the temple can be rebuilt in its place and so that the true King, the Lord Jesus, can be introduced to them. This act of God is therefore in accordance with the promises given by the mouth of Jeremiah and the prayer of His servant Daniel.

Whatever the external circumstances, God has in His hand the hearts of all men, also the hearts of kings (Pro 21:1). The instrument, Cyrus, was announced two hundred years earlier by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 41:2; 44:28; 45:1-5). As soon as he is in power, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. God does not waste any time. He uses Cyrus, the king of Persia, to give the opportunity to return to Judah. This also means that He does not give Babylon, who led His people into exile, the honor of allowing His people to return.

God is using the world powers here to carry out His plan (verse 2). Cyrus calls Him “the God of heaven” because God has removed His throne from the earth and handed His people over into the hands of the nations. Cyrus does not command anyone to return to Jerusalem. Names are not mentioned, room is given for everyone (verse 3). In this way only God-fearing people will answer the call. The hearts of these people go out to the glory of God and to the place of His Name.

This pagan ruler Cyrus announces that the way to Jerusalem is open. Not only does he not prevent the people from going, but he encourages them to go. He instructs all nations to do the same (verse 4), while he himself gives what Nebuchadnezzar has robbed from the temple.

There is nothing legal in this movement. It must be the result of grace that works in the heart. If it is legal, all freshness and strength will be lost. It is not wise to try to force people to take a position where grace has not brought them. To insist on abandoning human systems and putting that on people’s conscience as a matter of duty is not good. As a result, many people, while outwardly occupying a place of separation, are not really attracted by Christ.

For the flesh it is not very attractive to go to Jerusalem. The city is a ruin. Yet Jerusalem is the place of “the Name” for faith. For the believers now, the place of worship is not a geographical place – “neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21) – but a spiritual place. It is the place of which the Lord Jesus says: “Where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (Mt 18:20). We find that place wherever He is acknowledged to be the only Head and Lord and where His own are gathered around Him in that awareness. That is what corresponds to the

place He chose in the Old Testament to make His Name dwell there: the temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:5-6 | Who Want to Go

5 Then the heads of fathers' [households] of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. 6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.

“The heads of fathers’ [households]” (verse 5) represent believers who are willing to take responsibility. In a revival, it is also necessary that there are people who take on the leadership. They take the lead on the path of faith and others may follow on the path they take. In the local church it is they who show the believers the way to realize that the Lord Jesus is in the midst. They teach about it and they show it in their lives. It is good to seek their company and to go along with them.

There are also “the priests and the Levites”. These are the ones who have the service to God in mind. They have not been able to serve in Babylon, because there is no temple there. It stood in Jerusalem and was destroyed and they were deported. Now they are ordered to rebuild the temple. This will make it possible for them to do their service again.

With every revival it is necessary that these two elements are present. Priestly service today is the privilege of every child of God and is not limited, as in Israel, to a special class. The same applies to Levite service. Every believer has a task, a function, in the church.

Every believer is a priest. There is no distinction in this. Every believer is also Levite. In this there is distinction, because every believer has a different task. Herein not one is above the other, but each believer is a complement to the other.

That the heads of fathers’ households and the priests and the Levites go to Jerusalem to build the house of the LORD is not self-determined action. Just as the LORD raised up the spirit of Cyrus to call for a return to Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the temple (verse 1), so the going up of the three

groups mentioned above is also the consequence of His work. A revival is the work of God, not the result of deliberations and agreements of men.

Although there have been people from other tribes as well, they are mainly people from the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Christ is presented to them at His first coming on earth, with the result that He is rejected by them. The fact that it mainly concerns the two tribes also shows that this is not a national restoration. The restoration of the ten tribes only happens when Christ appears for the second time (Eze 20:33-44; Jer 31:6-14).

There is no spirit of judgment or enmity or jealousy between those who go and those who stay (verse 6). Those who stay behind give everything to those who leave. Although the circumstances are very different, what is happening here is reminiscent of the exodus of the people from the Egyptian slave house. Then the Egyptians also give the departing people all kinds of objects (Exo 12:35-36).

Ezra 1:7-11 | Articles of the House of the LORD

5 Then the heads of fathers' [households] of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. 6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering. 7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9 Now this [was] their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second [kind and] 1,000 other articles. 11 All the articles of gold and silver [numbered] 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Cyrus treats the articles of the house of the LORD with respect, in contrast with the last king of Babylon, Belshazzar (Dan 5:1-4). These articles were robbed at the various deportations (verse 7; 2Chr 36:7,10,18; Dan 1:2). The first deportation takes place at the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim. The second takes place during Jehoiakim's reign and the third in the eleventh

year of Zedekiah. The seventy-year exile is to be counted from the first deportation.

In the spiritual application the objects for the service represent persons. We may see ourselves as silver and gold vessels, in which we see the value we have for God (2Tim 2:19-21). The separation of the articles belonging to the LORD from the articles belonging to the idol temples of Babylon is necessary. What is of God must be cleansed from what is not of Him.

The articles are given to "Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah" (verse 8). Sheshbazzar is the Babylonian name for Zerubbabel. He descends from David and is his heir. His name is also in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus (Mt 1:13). He does not boast of his ancestry, but takes the place of someone whose faith can be imitated. The time of the great things is over. That the articles come under the supervision of Sheshbazzar suggests to us that the Lord Jesus has us at His disposal.

Various articles and their numbers are mentioned (verses 9-11). Among them are also twenty-nine knives [Darby Translation]. Here we see that God does not consider anything small (Job 36:5; Mt 10:30; Lk 12:7). He who counts the stars and has named them all (Psa 147:4) also takes note of the knives brought back from exile and knows their number.

They are knives that belong to the temple utensils and were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 52:17-23). These knives are used by the priests to divide the sacrificial animals into pieces. After being taken into exile, there is no more sacrificial service. After the return, however, it can take place again when the altar is erected. Then the knives are also needed.

We can make an application for those who in a professing Christianity full of confusion have gone in search for 'the altar', the Table of the Lord, and have found it. That is where the knives have their place. The knives are used to skin the sacrificial animal and divide it into pieces to lay on the altar, that it may be a soothing aroma to the LORD. We can say that we use these knives when we are concerned with the inner feelings of the Lord Jesus and tell God what we have discovered. Using the knives allows us to penetrate deeper into the feelings of the Lord Jesus. We don't stop at a superficial contemplation of His Person and work.

A knife also serves to cut in a straight line the Word of truth (2Tim 2:15, Darby Translation). We must do justice to the whole Word of God, i.e. give each part of it its proper meaning and effect.

Ezra 2

Ezra 2:1-35 | Register of the Returned

1 Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. 2 These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum [and] Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172; 4 the sons of Shephatiah, 372; 5 the sons of Arah, 775; 6 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua [and] Joab, 2,812; 7 the sons of Elam, 1,254; 8 the sons of Zattu, 945; 9 the sons of Zaccai, 760; 10 the sons of Bani, 642; 11 the sons of Bebai, 623; 12 the sons of Azgad, 1,222; 13 the sons of Adonikam, 666; 14 the sons of Bigvai, 2,056; 15 the sons of Adin, 454; 16 the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, 98; 17 the sons of Bezai, 323; 18 the sons of Jorah, 112; 19 the sons of Hashum, 223; 20 the sons of Gibbar, 95; 21 the men of Bethlehem, 123; 22 the men of Netophah, 56; 23 the men of Anathoth, 128; 24 the sons of Azmaveth, 42; 25 the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah and Beeroth, 743; 26 the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621; 27 the men of Michmas, 122; 28 the men of Bethel and Ai, 223; 29 the sons of Nebo, 52; 30 the sons of Magbish, 156; 31 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254; 32 the sons of Harim, 320; 33 the sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 725; 34 the men of Jericho, 345; 35 the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

The first thing to note is that the returned exiles decide that Israel will be a truly unmixed Israel and that this must be tested. The existence of a list, preserved by God's care, shows the importance that God attaches to origin. Here the work of the Spirit becomes clear in people whose names are recorded. They are known to God. He makes the names known to encourage all who also want to go His way in faithfulness in times of decay and apostasy (Rev 3:5).

What also stands out in the counting is that it is a remnant. There can be no full restoration of Israel. This will only happen, also according to the testimony of the prophets, when not only the two, but also the ten tribes return to the land. Anything that happens during "the times of the Gentiles" (Lk

21:24), i.e. in the time in which we live, is therefore not a fulfillment of the prophecy.

Everyone returns “to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city” (verse 1; verse 70). Cyrus has called for a return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-3). Now we see that the returnees are also going to live in their own cities. Jerusalem is the great center of the people. The people themselves live in their own cities.

We can apply Jerusalem to the church as a whole. We can see the cities as a picture of the local churches where the general principles that apply to the whole church need to be worked out. We are all placed in local churches to maintain with our fellow saints what is in accordance with the thoughts of God.

Every believer should know where his own place of dwelling is. He must test against God’s Word whether the place where he is corresponds to what God says of the church. He should not be there because, for example, his parents are there, or certain people appeal to him. Also, the blessing that is found there should not be a criterion. God also blesses in places that have deviated from God’s Word when it comes to being a church. It is about maintaining what is in God’s mind in the local church (1Cor 1:2; 4:17b; 7:17).

The return from exile is very different from the departure of God’s people from slavery in Egypt. Out of Egypt the whole people leave. There God acts as the redeeming God. From Babylon He also calls. Yet here we see that not all the people leave Babylon. Only those who are attracted by Jerusalem go back to the land of Israel. This call is related to responsibility.

In this revival we can see the following characteristics:

1. One goes back to God’s original center, here, Jerusalem.
2. There is no presumption to possess something that one no longer has, because one has lost it through previous failures. Here we can think of the pillar of cloud and the ark.
3. A spirit of dedication is revealed (verse 68).
4. There is obedience to the Word of God (Ezra 3:2,4).
5. A position of separation from the world is taken, resulting in

6. that there will be resistance from the world.

In verses 3-20 the exiles are mentioned with the name of their fathers. In verses 21-35 the exiles are mentioned with the name of the cities where they used to live, to live there again and to populate those cities again.

This list of names is an example of the book of eternity. We also find such a list in other parts of God's Word. The two enumerations of David's heroes are of the same character (2Sam 23:8-38; 1Chr 11:10-46). Paul also mentions a list of names (Rom 16:1-15; Heb 11:1-40). Such lists of names are lists of honor that will be consulted before the judgment seat of Christ. With them God shows how carefully He takes note of every person and every family who lives for Him and every work that is done for Him. We do not have such a list of all those who stayed behind in Babylon.

A particular place name that stands out in the list is Anathoth (verse 23). This place recalls the purchase of Jeremiah of the field of Anathoth so long ago. The field was bought for the purpose of restoration (Jer 32:6-15), which had been expected for so long and has now come. The sealed scroll now proves its worth.

The attentive reader will certainly notice more than this statement to which attention has now been drawn.

Ezra 2:36-58 | Several Returned Groups

36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; 37 the sons of Immer, 1,052; 38 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; 39 the sons of Harim, 1,017. 40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. 41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. 42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139. 43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, 44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, 45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, 46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan, 47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, 48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, 49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, 50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim, 51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,

52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 54 the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. 55 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, 56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami. 58 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392.

In this section several classes are mentioned. These different classes represent different services necessary for the house of God to function according to the Divine order. Each must be exercised to see what he or she is called to do and not do anything else for which he or she is not suited. Every believer has his or her own gifts. No one has all the gifts. Believers need each other. That is how God wanted it. This is contained in the apostle Paul's question to the Corinthians: "All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they?" etcetera (1Cor 12:29-30)?

Only from one house do priests return to the land (verse 36). For us it means the indication that the general priesthood of the New Testament believers is also practiced by few in connection with the heavenly land. Levites, too, are few (verse 40). We can compare this with the exercising of the gifts in the church.

Every believer has a gift. Unfortunately, many believers are not aware of this. Gifts are hardly exercised. This is also due to the fact that in many cases in professing Christianity much is done by people who have been appointed for this purpose through human ways. They are paid for this. There is a great danger that the responsibility for the exercise of one's own gift will be bought off.

Singers (verse 41) are many more than Levites. It is good to sing and praise the Lord. The spirit of praise supports the soul and makes it easier to go on rough roads. We are all singers, just as we are all Levites. Singing is easier than serving. This is noticeable in the meetings. Meetings in which the Lord is praised are often better attended than meetings in which the Lord speaks through His Word by means of His gifts. It is not only about serving, it is also about our interest.

The origin of “the sons of Solomon’s servants” (verse 55) can probably be found in 1 Kings 9 (1Kgs 9:21). Although the bond between “the temple servants and the sons of Solomon’s servants” (verse 58) and Israel is very small, it is there. They also have the blessing of it which they appreciate and what brought them back to the land.

Ezra 2:59-63 | Those Who Could Not Prove Their Ancestry

59 Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan [and] Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households and their descendants, whether they were of Israel: 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652. 61 Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name. 62 These searched [among] their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean [and excluded] from the priesthood. 63 The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

Seventy years of Babylon has weakened the thought of inheritance and priestly privileges in the hearts of some. If we don't appreciate both, we lose the right to it in a practical sense. God knows who belongs to Him. He knows His own. But we must prove “our genealogy” by abstaining from wickedness and pursuing ... (2Tim 2:19-22).

In the land of exile, not much care has been taken about claims and privileges. Some are now paying for this. Those who cannot show their genealogy cannot participate in the work and priests cannot perform their service. They are not told that they are not priests, but they must wait until it is proved, that is, until the time that God can make it clear.

For us, it means that a certain confession alone is not enough. At a time when Babylon rules and deliverance from it takes place, it is important that God's Word shows us the way in receiving believers as priests at 'the altar', which is the Table of the Lord. Any danger of mixing with the (Christian) world must be recognized and must not take place.

In the first days of the church no one dared to join the church that did not belong to it (Acts 5:13). Then the Spirit can still work powerfully. It is not

necessary to prove that someone belongs to the church in that good condition. However, that time is long gone.

What was neglected in Babylon is now necessary to maintain. They want to remain unmixed Israel, now that they have felt what it means to have to do with the nations. They have experienced the anger and power of those from whom they previously sought help.

“The most holy things” of which may be eaten (verse 63) are the meat offering (Lev 6:17), the sin offering (Lev 6:25-26) and the trespass offering (Lev 7:6). That there is no priest with Urim (Urim means “lights”) and Thummim (Thummim means “perfections”) is weakness. There is also no moderation of a power they do not possess. There is faithfulness to wait for that priest to come.

For us, that priest, the Lord Jesus, has already acted. In the future, if God’s people are utterly incapable of asserting any right to the blessing, He will be there. Now there are no priests except those who are acknowledged as such by Christ (Rev 1:6a). Any uncertainty is solved by going to Christ.

We show our genealogy among believers through our walk, the ways we go, the spirit we reveal and by serving in love. Demetrius has such a testimony, Diotrephes does not (3Jn 1:9-10,12). When the brothers and sisters see spiritual features in us, we prove our genealogy. Young people show their genealogy when they enjoy being with the saints, show interest in the meetings and what they hear there, read what builds them up spiritually and are not ashamed to confess Christ.

Ezra 2:64-67 | Total of the Returned

64 *The whole assembly numbered 42,360, 65 besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women. 66 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245; 67 their camels, 435; [their] donkeys, 6,720.*

The 42,360 returned are but a handful, and possess no strength whatsoever. Nor have they any external signs of God’s presence. There is only faith, but that is sufficient.

What is mentioned in verses 66-67 shows that God is attentive to all that is connected with His people, albeit only in a temporal sense.

Ezra 2:68-69 | Voluntary gifts

68 Some of the heads of fathers' [households], when they arrived at the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments.

Whatever the condition of the house, they arrive at “the house of the LORD,” for it still exists in the eye of God. At the sight of the ruin the heads of the family voluntarily give their gifts for the house of God, stirred up by the Spirit of God. The building of the house of God is not without sacrifice from our side. Our spiritual contribution is that God and His house have a great place in our hearts.

The contribution is made “according to their ability” (verse 69; cf. 1Cor 16:2). What they give is little compared to what David and the rulers gave (1Chr 29:1-9). But God sees the heart. The “priestly tunics”, as it also can be translated, speak of the invisible motives by which priestly service is performed. Our motives for priestly service are formed in part by our relationships with others. This is also something the heads of families think of.

Ezra 2:70 | The Cities Inhabited

70 Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

They all go to the cities where they originally came from, where their ancestors lived. There is talk here of “their cities”, that is, the cities of the two tribes, and of “all Israel in their cities”, that is, the cities of the ten tribes. They live there, despite the fact that the city will have looked dead and ruined and there will have been a lot of work to be done. To live means to have come to rest. If we, as a local church, live together in accordance with our God-given blessings, we will also live in rest, peace and harmony, despite the decay in professing Christianity.

Ezra 3

Ezra 3:1-5 | Restoration of the Altar

1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel [were] in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. 2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. 3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and [offered] the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required; 5 and afterward [there was] a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.

The returned remnant begins with the rebuilding of the altar. They do not act on a command that the LORD would have given, but in faith that feels what is most important to Him. We see such a sense of faith also in Noah, who brings a sacrifice immediately after he has come upon the cleansed earth, and in David, whose heart goes out to the ark, as soon as he has ascended the throne.

The time when the rebuilding of the altar begins is the beginning of the seventh month (verse 1). That is the month of the Feast of the trumpet (Lev 23:24; Num 10:10; 29:1; Psalms 81:4). In the cycle of the feasts of the LORD in Leviticus 23, this feast is a picture of the restoration of Israel in the last days. In that month “the people gathered together as one man in Jerusalem”. When the altar or ‘The table of the Lord’ (Mal 1:7) becomes central again to God’s people, unity is experienced (1Cor 10:16-18). The unity that is expressed here does not come about by mutual agreement, by appointment, but by the working of God’s Spirit.

In this work of rebuilding the altar, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, the priest and the king, work together (verse 2). In their union we see the Lord Jesus as

the true King-Priest (Zec 6:9-15). These priestly and royal features are important to us as believers in order to build the altar (cf. 1Pet 2:5,9-10). The rebuilding of the altar speaks for us of a renewed appreciation of Christ, which is expressed in a special way during the celebration of the Lord's Supper at the Lord's Table.

So the first thing the people who have returned do is to build the altar, not the temple or the wall around Jerusalem. The altar is the link between them and God. Christ is our altar. Any true restoration, worked by the Spirit, will always be about the glorification of Christ and His work. At the altar the people come together with God around the sacrifice. It is "the altar of the God of Israel", not the altar of men, nor of the few who have returned.

The altar belongs to the land of God. In Babylon the people have no altar. Abraham has an altar in Canaan, not in Egypt. The altar serves "to offer burnt offerings on it". A burnt offering is the offering offered in its entirety to God (Lev 1:6-9). The burnt offering speaks of Christ and His work on the cross, all of which is for the glorification of God. When we speak about this with God, we bring a burnt offering in a spiritual sense. The heart is then filled with worship.

In bringing the burnt offerings they are guided by what "is written in the law of Moses" (verse 2). There is no enquiry to provide ideas or suggestions about the most appropriate way to act in their circumstances, which are so very different from what they used to be. Habits and traditions are lost, they are left behind in Babylon. They are left with nothing but the Word. In their condition the Word is given all its power.

The same goes for us. It is only possible to return to Scriptural worship if we do as God's Word tells us. In accordance with this principle, many left numerous national churches at the beginning of the nineteenth century in order to come together according to the will of the Lord. Everything is tested against the teachings of the apostles (cf. Jude 1:17). Believing that the will of God will be done is seen in obeying the Word, although far from all things being ordered.

The altar is placed "on its foundation" (verse 3). The foundations are still there, they seek them out. They build in that place and not in a place of

their own choosing, as is often the case in professing Christianity today. This foundation lies on the threshing floor of Ornan (1Chr 21:21-26; 22:1). For us, the foundation lies in Christ and His work (1Cor 3:11).

Because they act out of love for God, they do not allow themselves to be terrified by the peoples of the lands around them. On the contrary, their fear of the nations brings them to God. The altar is built because there is fear of the nations around them. This is how they make God their refuge. Surrounded by enemies, Jerusalem, a city without walls, is protected by the altar of its God which was erected by the faith of the people of God. Without delay, they offered burnt offerings (no sin offerings) "morning and evening. In so doing they act in accordance with the precept of the law of Moses (Exo 29:38-46). The power of the burnt offering is the best protection the people can wish for.

Making Christ great in our hearts and constantly presenting Him to God in the "burnt offering" character is the best defense against the enemy. Bringing a burnt offering means that we realize, and also say to God, that God is glorified through Christ and that we are pleasing to God in Christ. The awareness of the burnt offering has also disappeared in Babylon.

The celebration of the Feast of Booths also happens "as it is written" (verse 4), i.e. according to the Word of God (Lev 23:33-36). There is a Godly enthusiasm in offering and celebrating according to the will of God. There is no legalism of any kind. There is a holy desire to go the old paths. Offerings are brought "according to the ordinance, as each day required" (cf. Num 29:12-38).

The offering on the altar is not limited to this one time at the beginning of the seventh month. From now on it is done regularly, even at the other feast times of the LORD (verse 5). Offerings are brought at the beginning of each new month and at the appointed times which the LORD has sanctified for Himself, that is, the annual feasts.

In addition to all the offerings of the people as a whole, there is also the offering of a sacrifice by every one who has it in his heart. The offering by the people as a whole does not mean that the individual offering disappears. God sees both the whole and the individual in that whole. It is the same when the church comes together. The church as a whole brings spiritual

sacrifices to God, while at the same time every believer has personal worship in his heart for God and Christ.

Ezra 3:6-7 | Concern for the Foundation of the Temple

6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid. 7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

The foregoing takes place before the house of God is built (verse 6). This indicates that there must always first be the appreciation of Christ Himself and the joy in His work, before anyone gets attention and insight into the truth of the church as the house of God. Altar and temple do belong together. What is represented in the burnt offering is that the people realize that they have been accepted by God as His people. What is also necessary, however, is that the truth of the church as the house of God be established in the hearts. It is important that everyone with insight learns to take his place in the house of God. That is what God is going to bring about now.

God is now beginning to work the awareness of the importance of His house in the hearts of His people. This work is reflected in the returned people by giving money to be able to pay suitable workers and to be able to buy the necessary materials (verse 7).

When we translate this into our time, we can think of supporting all kinds of work done for the Lord. We can think of preaching the gospel. We can also think of teaching in the church through which babies in the faith receive food and the believers are brought to dedication to Christ in a place of separation from the (Christian) world.

Ezra 3:8-11 | The Foundation of the Temple Is Laid

8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began [the work] and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. 9 Then

Jeshua [with] his sons and brothers stood united [with] Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah [and] the sons of Henadad [with] their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God. 10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel. 11 They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, [saying], "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." 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.

In the second year after their return to the land a start is made with the building of the temple (verse 8). However, it does not say "of their coming into the land", but "of their coming to the house of God". That shows two things. First, it shows that the very purpose of their return to the land is the house of God at Jerusalem. In the second place we see that, although there is nothing but a ruin of that house, for faith the house is already there – or: is still there.

The truth of the house of God is lost as far as the appreciation of man is concerned. That does not mean, however, that the church as a house and body would no longer exist. Whatever man may forget, for God and faith the house of God exists on earth. When faithful people return from human traditions to Christ and from human authority to the Word of God alone, this truth takes shape again in His eyes.

For the work of rebuilding the temple, Levites of twenty years of age and older are appointed (1Chr 23:24). In the wilderness, 8,580 Levites are available for the work, here they are only 74 (Ezra 2:40). Few Levites have returned from Babylon. The rest have found their home in Babylon and stayed there. Convenience has taken away their longing for a service in Jerusalem and made them inactive.

Even today there are comparatively few believers who take their task as Levites seriously. Many believers sit in the church Sunday after Sunday just to listen, without wondering whether they can also contribute. Often it is impossible because of the church structure. But even where it is possible, many sit in a church only to consume. They cannot bear the thought that a

contribution to the service would be expected of them as well! Because of this attitude, sometimes too much has to be done by too few.

Various persons are appointed to oversee the work, acting “united” (verse 9; cf. verse 1). They are co-workers of each other. This supervision is necessary so that there will be no innovations through human consultations. No new house will be built. There has always been only one house of God. It is always the same temple, but with a different glory. So it is with the church.

The laying of the foundation (verse 10) is the beginning of the building of the temple and also the guarantee of its completion. When the builders are finished with it, the priests are set, “in their apparel”, that is to say in pictures in the value of what Christ has accomplished. There is no waiting for the house to be finished. When a place for the service of God has begun to be prepared, the Spirit leads us to think of Christ, of whom David is a picture, in connection with that service.

There is also a singing “alternately together” [Darby Translation] (verse 11). Singing alternately together demonstrates that there is an interaction in the services of the believers. What one speaks out is answered and supplemented by another. Joy and thankfulness are expressed in the presence of the LORD and are pleasing to Him. For those who have known nothing but captivity, it is a great joy to come into contact with what is of God.

When God gives His church a time of reformation and revival, it is because there is a return to what Scripture says. Then, in doctrine and in worship, there comes a release from what people have come up with. The result can only be joy among the believers. Then, in the power of the Spirit, their hearts flow with praise and thanks to Him Who opened their eyes and broke their bonds.

In the praise it is sung that the LORD is “good” and that “His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever”. This praise will sound again and again during the thousand years of peace (Psa 136:1-26). Then everything will be in accordance with God’s will, because then the Lord Jesus will reign. We can already experience this now, when Christ as Lord reigns in our hearts.

The reaction of the whole people to the singing alternately together in which the LORD is praised is a shouting “with a great shout”. The reason for this is “because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid”.

This laying of the foundation is of great significance for the people. Now there really can be building. For faith Christ is the foundation. When we see this, we will rejoice in Him and joyfully set to work to make our contribution to the building of God's house.

Ezra 3:12-13 | Mixed Feelings

12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' [households], the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Those who today think of the church of God in the beginning can understand the weeping of the elders (verse 12). This is the case with those who have been more deeply introduced to the truth of the Scriptures about the church. They see how far one is from the ideal church life, that many believers live on in the old routine of what has been handed down by the fathers. With the young people there is another expression. They experience for the first time that something of the church as the house of God becomes visible, even in a time of weakness and decay.

Youth is a period of enthusiasm and exuberance of spirit, while old age is a time of reflection. Both are necessary. The danger of the youth is to see the future too carelessly, to make plans too enthusiastically, while the elderly are in danger of clinging too much to the past. It is important that they both understand each other. Young people would do well to ask the advice of older people when they are looking for a new work. For the elderly it is sometimes difficult to recognize a special work that God has entrusted to young people and in which they will not be able to share for long. Sometimes they also forget their own youth. Elderly people who rejoice in what God works in young people will be able to make their indispensable contribution.

God rejoices in the joy of His people and understands the tears of the elderly. There is room for both expressions of feeling. They merge together in one big sound (verse 13). This is the true expression of the state of affairs.

Both feelings express the reality that is within them. The Spirit approves of this. This is harmony and not discord. It must have made an overwhelming impression. A whole people, one part of which loudly expresses their sorrow and the other part loudly expresses their joy, on the same occasion and with a commitment that is equally great to both sides.

The number that can remember the glory of the first or previous house, that is the temple of Solomon, is small. Their crying must have been irresistible and loud if it can mingle so well with the cheers of the majority. We must not regard them as ungrateful and melancholic, as if they would spoil the enjoyment of the others because of this great event. It shows us the other side that cannot be missed. However blessed a revival may be, our joy is tempered by the remembrance of the grace and power revealed under the apostolic energy, as we see in the beginning of the book of Acts.

Ezra 4

Introduction

When the people start building the temple, the enemy comes into action. God does not intervene. He acknowledges the reign of the nations, which has come because of the unfaithfulness of His people. Although He does not intervene, He is not indifferent to what His people do and what happens to them. He waits until the time is ripe for His people to be stirred back into action.

Ezra 4:1-5 | Enemies Want to Cooperate

1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel, 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' [households], and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here." 3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' [households] of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us." 4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, 5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

As soon as the foundation is laid, the enemies appear on the scene, as they did at the beginning of the church (verses 1-2). The first attack does not come from the inside, but from the outside. As soon as there is a blessing from God somewhere on earth, the devil with his trickery and enmity immediately comes. The Spirit of God calls the men who wish to help build the temple, "enemies". Their words sound friendly, but the Spirit immediately shows their true character. They are enemies. They seek the destruction of the few who have returned.

Their tactics are those of the devil trying to gain influence through wiles. Once they had gained a foothold in the city of God, their trickery would have succeeded and they would be able to carry out their pernicious work. Their plan is not to build, but to demolish. For the small and weak remnant, it is a temptation. The offer increases the number of hands for building. The building would be easier and faster. At least it would seem that way. The reality, however, is that their strength would diminish. The security and strength of the people lie in their separation to God. If that is forgotten, Christians will engage in worldly issues, which will be at the expense of building God's house.

The enemies claim that they call upon the same God and have also brought sacrifices (verse 2). They take a friendly attitude, they want to make friendship. Here comes Satan "as an angel of light" (2Cor 11:14), while in verse 4 we see him "as a roaring lion" (1Pet 5:8).

Esarhaddon is the son of Sennacherib and has taken away the rebellious tribes of Israel (2Kgs 17:6-8). Through him other nations were brought to Samaria. A mixture of religions has arisen, in which they worship the LORD and also serve their idols (2Kgs 17:41). According to their own confession, the adversaries do not belong to the people of God, even though they are in the land. They also know nothing of salvation through blood, they do not know God's mighty deeds for His people. What they know they have heard of.

The offer to work together is a trap. The remnant sees through the trick and unmasks them as false workers (cf. Rev 2:2; 2Cor 11:13). The building of the temple should not be done by anyone but members of God's people. Their answer is: "We ourselves" (verse 3). This is not a narrow-mindedness, but faithfulness to the LORD.

The church has forgotten that. Her history shows that she even consciously has been seeking the help of the world. We should not give up the special place of the church of God because we are only a weak remnant. We must never give up the principle that only those who are members of the body of Christ can take their place of responsibility in the work of the Lord. We must not give in to the spirit of our time.

The last words of verse 3 are a humbling confession of their position of bondage among the nations. Enclosed in them is the lack of former glory and the presence of weakness, both as a result of their failure and the judgment of God on it. Faith, however, counts on the grace that is present in God and that has made a new beginning possible. That is why there is also a courageous action and a refusal to connect with those who do not belong to God's people. They speak in the spirit of what God says to the ungodly in Psalm 50 (Psa 50:16).

After the refusal, the true nature of the enemies reveals itself (verse 4). The flesh hates not to be counted in the work of God. Now the adversaries try through intimidation to disturb the work. The adversary does not consist of an incident, but persists as long as Cyrus lives (verse 5).

Ezra 4:6-16 | Accusations Against the Jews

6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. 7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated [from] Aramaic. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows— 9 then [wrote] Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River. Now 11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: “To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now 12 let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings. 14 Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king, 15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record

books and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste. 16 We inform the king that if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in [the province] beyond the River."

Verses 6-23 describe how the enemies are successful in stopping the work of the building of the temple. In the days of Ahasuerus or Arthahsasta, they write a letter to him in which they accuse the Jews. They do this as soon as he is king (verse 6). So they don't waste any time.

In order to carry out their purpose to stop the building of the temple the enemies join forces. From the enumeration of who these enemies are (verses 7-10), it becomes clear that all nations commit themselves in their purpose to stop the building of the temple. However much they may differ from each other, they are one in their striving against what is from and for God. In their enmity they unite (Psa 2:2). Thus Herod and Pilate become "friends with one another" in their rejection of the Lord Jesus, "for before they had been enemies with each other" (Lk 23:12).

In their accusation, a copy of which has been preserved and is now quoted (verse 11), they mention several things that are intended to convince the king that construction should be stopped. In doing so, they use the necessary lies. The accusation that the Jews are rebuilding the city (verse 12) is a lie. It is about the temple and for that Cyrus has precisely given the order. Also the financial disadvantage that the king would suffer because the people "will not pay tribute, custom or toll" any longer (verse 13), is a lie.

As for themselves, the enemies praise themselves at Ahasuerus as loyal subjects (verse 14). They pretend to care about the honor and the importance of his reign. Saying that they "are in the service of the palace" they say that they are paid by the king's court and that without what they get from the palace they would not be able to live. They pretend that they are so grateful to the king that they now warn him about what the Jews are doing, because that is to "the king's dishonor" and it is not fitting for them to see that .

Similarly, enmity against Christ is often wrapped up in a hypocritical love for worldly rulers. The Jews hate the Roman regime but, because it serves

their evil plans to kill Christ, they can shout: “We have no king but Caesar” (Jn 19:15).

Unfortunately, the accusation of a black past (verse 15) is partly true. The last kings of the two tribes, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, rebelled against their rulers to whom the LORD has surrendered them. The danger of loss of territory the enemies write about (verse 16), has also been made up again. They pull out all the stops to get the king to issue the commandment that the building of the temple should be stopped.

Ezra 4:17-22 | The King’s Answer

17 [Then] the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of [the provinces] beyond the River: “Peace. And now 18 the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me. 19 A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it, 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all [the provinces] beyond the River, and that tribute, custom and toll were paid to them. 21 So, now issue a decree to make these men stop [work], that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. 22 Beware of being negligent in carrying out this [matter]; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?”

The answer comes (verse 17). After the usual introduction the king announces that the document has been read before him (verse 18). Then the king mentions that he has issued a decree to investigate the matter (verse 19). The findings of that investigation (verse 20) and the decree he gives (verse 21) show that he was misled by the deceit and lies of the writers of the document.

He did not carefully examine their statements about the Jews and what they are doing now. He has accepted the accusations as proven. As a result, he is prepared to send them a decree to stop the work. He urges the enemies to carry out his command quickly. He motivates the command with the words the enemies have used to incite him to act (verse 22; verse

13). Kings are extremely sensitive to loss of income. The enemies have used this sensitive point cunningly and successfully.

Ezra 4:23-24 | The Work Stopped

23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms. 24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The enemies immediately go to work with the king's answer (verse 23). They go in haste to Jerusalem, to the Jews, and force them to stop building the temple in a harsh way. The Jews let themselves be forced to do so, though the desire of the LORD must prevail over the command of this king. The deceit succeeds because the first workings of God's Spirit are no longer present through the seeking of one's own interest (Hag 1:2-4,9). They have also forgotten the command of Cyrus, which is according to the will of God. Love has cooled down, the first love has been left.

Thus the building comes to a standstill for a period that will last around fifteen years. In the time that the building stops, the people must have occupied themselves with something else. What else will it be but with their own interests (Hag 1:4; Phil 2:21)? The work is stopped because of a lack of faith and trust in God, instead of the opposition bringing them to prayer.

The fact that the people finally put the work down is therefore not the result of the king's command, but the result of a lack of faith. Perhaps they blamed the circumstances. If their faith had been directed toward God, He would have been with them. Spiritual prosperity, the power of faith, incites the (Christian) world to enmity. When searching for its own interests, the (Christian) world does not care about us. The light through which they are discovered in their true nature does not shine.

From Haggai it becomes clear that it is not only the opposition of the enemy that makes them lay down the work. In Haggai the enemies are not active, but God speaks to them. Their fear of the enemies is greater than their faith in God. Because they lose courage and think of themselves, they

start looking for their own interests and start building and decorating their own houses.

God, in accordance with the times of the Gentiles, does not rise up in strength for His people, but He is going to do His work in the heart and conscience of the people (Zec 4:6). Likewise, we too have no position of power or means of power. Our power is: faith.

Ezra 5

Introduction

It's one thing to be in the right position, it's another thing to be in the right condition. The remnant is in the right place, where the Name dwells. But they have come into a state where they are easily discouraged and stop building the temple. In such a situation, the solution is not to give up everything and return to where they came from. The solution is to listen to the Word of God and trust in God to send the appropriate service.

It often happens that people see certain truths and seek grace to walk in them. Over time, the first freshness disappears and there comes a period of laxity and indifference. The love of the many cools and the dew of youth disappears. What then? Return to what they once left for Christ's sake? No! What must be done is to call to God in that position that there may be revival and blessing through the service of the Spirit.

Ezra 5:1-2 | The Building of the Temple Resumed

1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

The effects of the first revival have largely disappeared. Those who have experienced a prior revival need a new revival. It is easier to gain a victory than to take advantage of it. We can conquer in battle, but we can perish as a result of victory. God gives precious encouragement to the children of Israel from a different direction. Though the people are also subject to the nations, God always remains sovereign. His Word is always of absolute authority to His people if He deigns to speak to them.

Haggai and Zechariah are sent to His people and prophesy in the midst of the people (verse 1). These messages from God are particularly valuable, as His Word always is. Although this does not change the position of the

people in relation to the nations, it is nevertheless a striking proof that God is interested in His people. It shows that whatever their difficulties may be the God of Israel is exalted above all that has power to oppress the children of Israel. God intervenes, not through an act of power by King Darius, but through the word of prophecy. The power of His Spirit works through the prophets to awaken the conscience of the people.

Prophets are used by God when His people are in a bad condition and the responsible leaders fail. Haggai (meaning “the festive one”) and Zechariah (meaning “Yahweh remembers”) reveal the condition of the people. Haggai does not speak about the external difficulties, but about the condition of the people. He speaks more to the conscience. Zechariah speaks more to the heart of the people. The service of Zechariah is generally appreciated more than that of Haggai, but both are necessary.

The prophets not only stir up the work, but continue to support and encourage the workers with their words (verse 2). As a result of the God-given service of the Spirit, first of all the spirit of the leaders of the people is awakened. They set a good example. The prophets will have proposed to the workers the future glory of the house, the establishment of the Messianic kingdom and the blessing for the people. Returning to the Lord gives strength for the work and confidence that God will overcome difficulties for them.

Ezra 5:3-5 | Again Resistance

*3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of [the province] beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, “Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?”
4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building. 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.*

As soon as the people become active again before the LORD, and the building of his house is taken up again, the enemies also come again (verses 3-4). We don’t hear from them when Israel is busy with their own houses. Because there is faith again, they dare to build again, although there is a

prohibition (verse 5). The result of this faith is that the intervention of their enemies even leads to a commandment in favor of them.

Ezra 5:6-17 | Letter to Darius About the Rebuilding

6 [This is] the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of [the province] beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. 7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace. 8 Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands. 9 Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?' 10 We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head. 11 Thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. 12 But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, [who] destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. 13 However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. 14 Also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor. 15 He said to him, "Take these utensils, go [and] deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place." 16 Then that Sheshbazzar came [and] laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction and it is not [yet] completed.' 17 "Now if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this [matter]."

The letter sent by the enemies gives an honest account of the work and differs from the letter in the previous chapter. The letter begins by naming

the senders (verse 6) and the addressee (verse 7). The first communication is a testimony to the diligence and devotion of the builders (verse 8). The world sees how the believers are busy for the dwelling place of God, the church. When they see that they are committed to it, they are impressed by it. They see the zeal and prosperity.

Then the senders mention what they have asked the builders and why (verses 9-10). The answer of the builders to their interrogators is also shown. That answer is a beautiful testimony of who they are: "Servants of the God of heaven and earth" (verse 11). It is a testimony of His supreme authority. He is not a local deity. They are in connection with the God on whom all creation depends. That consciousness ensures that they are without fear of humans.

They also honestly acknowledge that they are now in the power of the nations because of their unfaithfulness and the wrath of God (verse 12). That unfaithfulness is also the cause of God's surrender of His house to destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. Further they answer that they are rebuilding the house of the LORD which is called "this house" (verses 12-13). It is the same house as the one that "a great king" (verse 11), that is Solomon, built. It is no other house. We too may rebuild it and are encouraged to do so.

The builders also appeal to the command of Cyrus (verse 13). Here Cyrus is called "the king of Babylon", because Babylon was conquered by him. From there the Jews also left for Jerusalem. At their departure, Cyrus also took all the utensils that Nebuchadnezzar brought from Jerusalem to Babylon from the temple in Babylon and gave them to the Jews (verse 14) to be placed back in God's temple (verse 15).

After that they talk about the foundation of the temple and that they have built the temple "from then until now" and that the building of the house of God has not yet been completed (verse 16). They don't talk about their slackening in the building so that the temple hasn't been worked on for twenty years. The delay is a matter between them and their God.

The senders conclude their letter with a request to Darius to investigate whether there really was a decree by Cyrus to "rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem" (verse 17). They also indicate the 'place of search', which is "in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon". They conclude

their letter with the request that the king have his decision sent to them as a result of the search.

Ezra 6

Introduction

In this chapter we have proof that God never leaves an obedient and trusting people to themselves. Darius' investigation and command make it clear to faith that God is working behind the scenes. We also see that He uses the power of the enemy to advance His purposes. It is an example of how for those who love God, "all things ... work together for good" (Rom 8:28; Phil 1:12).

Ezra 6:1-15 | Darius' Investigation and Command

1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. 2 In Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum— 3 In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: '[Concerning] the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits; 4 with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 Also let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put [them] in the house of God.' 6 "Now [therefore], Tattenai, governor of [the province] beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and your colleagues, the officials of [the provinces] beyond the River, keep away from there. 7 Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. 8 Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of [the provinces] beyond the River, and that without delay. 9 Whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, [it] is to be given to them daily without fail, 10 that they may offer ac-

ceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. 11 And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this. 12 May the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change [it], so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued [this] decree, let [it] be carried out with all diligence!" 13 Then Tattenai, the governor of [the province] beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out [the decree] with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent. 14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

When Darius has received the letter, he gives a decree to search (verse 1). Then a scroll is found which reveals the truth of the events (verse 2; cf. Est 6:1-2). Darius is a great liquidator of Cyrus, the founder of the realm. This explains his willingness to act in this way without taking any notice of what Arthahsasta has commanded. By the way, the latter has changed a law that should not be changed (Dan 6:16).

What the returned Jews have claimed has been searched and found to be correct (verse 3). Details are even given regarding the purpose of the house, the dimensions of the foundation and the materials. The purpose of the house is to offer sacrifices. The "height" of the foundation speaks of the lofty, heavenly character that is known there – far above the level of the world and the thoughts of man. The "breadth" speaks of the fact that every part of the truth must have its place there.

The materials are "huge stones" and "timbers" (verse 4). They speak of the believers who are on the one hand living stones (1Pet 2:5) and on the other hand a new creation (2Cor 5:17). Everything must be paid out of the royal treasury, which means that man cannot contribute anything to God's building. Placing the utensils back in the house of God (verse 5) reminds us that it is not enough to know the truth of 'the house', but that we must also be utensils of honor ourselves. We must take our place in the house

of God, the church, and make ourselves available to Him to do what He made us capable of doing.

What is written in the found scroll is clear. Darius gives a direct order to the people who wrote to him not to bother the Jews anymore and not to stand in their way (verses 6-7). Instead of preventing the building, the enemies are ordered by Darius to help the Jews with the building by providing them with what they need (verse 8). This involves reimbursement of expenses and providing sacrifices (verse 9). Here we see that “out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet” (Jdg 14:14a).

Everything that is necessary for our sacrificial service is made fully available to us by God “daily”, i.e. every day. He has it ready for us in His Word. In His Word, the treasure of Christ for God is unfolded to us on every page, so that we may examine it and rejoice in it. For those who are interested in it, immeasurable facilities for worship are available.

Darius appreciates the intercession of this despised company (verse 10). He knows that these people are praying and that God hears the prayer of His people. When someone prays or intercedes, it means that such a person knows the value of prayer (cf. Col 4:2-4). The first task of the house of God is that it is a house of prayer “on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority” (1Tim 2:1-2a; Isa 56:7b).

Darius concludes his letter with some penalty provisions for those who violate his decree regarding the building of God’s house. He himself sets a measure of punishment. He determines that whoever turns against God’s house “a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this” (verse 11). He desires that God let His judgment come to anyone who damages the house in which He has made His Name dwell (verse 12). This shows that Darius has known that Jerusalem is the city of the “God Who made His Name dwell there” (cf. Deu 12:5,10-11).

When the adversaries have received the message from Darius, they act in “with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent” (verse 13). Thus the opposition ends. Under the influence of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, the house is completed (verse 14). Only Haggai is called prophet,

although Zechariah may just as rightly be called so. However, in this case it is mainly a word for the conscience of the people. That is what the people need and that comes from Haggai.

The work has been stopped until the second year of Darius (Ezra 4:24). In the sixth year they are finished with it (verse 15). When the foundations have been laid cannot be said with certainty, because we do not know the elapsed time between Cyrus and Darius, but it is estimated to be more than fifteen years earlier.

Ezra 6:16-18 | Dedication of the House of God

16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

After there had been no more temple service for ninety years, the temple was again consecrated (verse 16). At this dedication there is no fire of heaven as in the days of Solomon (2Chr 7:1). Also the number of sacrifices contrasts sharply with the amount that Solomon brought (verse 17). The house does not have the first glory, the sacrifices are less and they themselves are a miserable remnant, under the dominion of the nations. But God is for them the Same, and He is for faith the source of joy. He desires His people to come to Him with the sacrifices they have.

A “sin offering for all Israel” is brought. Not that all Israel is present, but in faith the whole is seen. So it is with making the church visible as the one body. If we don’t do it this way, then we are a sect. The sacrifice does not have the size of Solomon’s, but it does speak of the same Christ.

In connection with the sacrifices the priests and Levites are given their place for the service of God in Jerusalem (verse 18). Today all believers are priests and Levites. Every believer has the privilege to sacrifice to God, that is, to worship God. This is what God longs for.

Anything the remnant does, it does in obedience to “as it is written in the book of Moses”, that is, in obedience to the Scriptures. This is the only way of blessing. They act entirely in the spirit of Scripture. A prescription, for example, to bring twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel on this special occasion is nowhere in Scripture. Yet it is entirely in accordance with God’s thoughts. The Spirit brings the returned remnant to the realization that a sin offering is for the whole people and that the sin offering is the basis on which God can forgive the whole people. The sin offering speaks of Christ and His atoning work on the cross.

Ezra 6:19-22 | Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread

19 The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover [lamb] for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves. 21 The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to [join] them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate [the Passover]. 22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

After the dedication of the house the Passover is celebrated (verse 19). The people celebrate the remembrance of their redemption from Egypt. They realize that the foundation on which they stand is the blood of the lamb. The blood of the Lamb is also the foundation for us. They celebrate the Passover, despite their small number. They celebrate it in the realization that they have been in exile.

Their whole history of deviation and restoration by grace give this Passover something they have never known. The priests and Levites have “purified themselves together” (verse 20). It is emphasized again: “All of them were pure.” Under the grace of God we find more faithfulness here than in the best days of kings (cf. 2Chr 29:34). There is no selfishness. The Passover lamb is slaughtered “for all the exiles” and further for their brethren, the priests. Finally we read that they also slaughter it for themselves. This is the true spirit of unity, with an eye for the whole and the other.

This spirit of unity is also expressed by the eating of the Passover lamb by all those who have joined them and separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land. They are people who “seek the LORD God of Israel”. They understand that the LORD is a holy God, a God who cannot have any connection with impurity and cannot allow it with His people. They have, to say it for the present time, withdrawn from iniquity and want to call upon the Lord with others who are pure in heart (2Tim 2:19-22).

For us, celebrating the Passover can be compared to celebrating the Lord’s Supper. This should always be done in self-judgment (1Cor 11:28). No one who is unclean is allowed to eat it.

After the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is celebrated (Exo 12:17-20; 13:6-7). Our salvation is followed by a life of separation from evil, sanctified to God (1Cor 5:7-8). The feast lasts for seven days. This means for us that our whole life should be in the sign of the slaughtered Christ.

Ezra 7

Introduction

Here the second part of the book begins. The first part is about the rebuilding of the altar and the temple. The second part is about the mission and the work of Ezra personally. After the service of Jeshua and Zerubbabel for the building, now the service of Ezra is needed. His concern is for the “adornment” of the house of the LORD (verse 27). For this it is necessary that the Word of God be laid upon the heart and conscience of the people. That is what Ezra is going to do.

We are here about sixty years after the dedication of the temple in Ezra 6 and about eighty years after the proclamation of Cyrus in Ezra 1. We are in the midst of a new generation. Here begins a new awakening. God stirs the spirits of a number of Israelites who have stayed in Babylon until now and fills their hearts with the desire to go to Jerusalem. Ezra is their leader as a direct descendant from the line of Pinehas, to whom an eternal priesthood has been promised. Ezra is proof of this (Num 25:7-13).

There are two parts in the history of Ezra. The first part describes his journey from Babylon (Ezra 7-8). The second part is about his work in Jerusalem (Ezra 9-10). The circumstances under which he travels and works are normal. He is not accompanied by miracles. We see no unfolding of strength. His sources are the same as we have: the Word of God and the presence of God.

Ezra 7:1-10 | Ezra Goes Up to Jerusalem

1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, [there went up] Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the

LORD his God [was] upon him. 7 Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God [was] upon him. 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice [it], and to teach [His] statutes and ordinances in Israel.

The chapter begins with “now after these things” (verse 1). These are the things that happened in connection with the completion and dedication of the temple in the previous chapter. The book of Ezra does not end with Ezra 6. Darius, who is mentioned in Ezra 5-6, was succeeded by his son Ahasuerus. This is the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. Ahasuerus was succeeded again by his son Artaxerxes. We also meet him in Nehemiah 2, about thirteen years later (Neh 2:1).

God continues in His goodness to watch over His people in spite of their unfaithfulness and failure. He does so even if they are only a small remnant that has escaped decay by His grace, but forgets that grace and becomes unfaithful again. He stirs Ezra’s heart to think of the remnant in Jerusalem. The people have no need of power, for that power has been given by God to others. They need the knowledge of His will and ordinances, of His thoughts in His Word (verse 25).

The genealogy of Ezra, with its length of sixteen ancestors, is unique in the Old Testament. A number of names are known from the history of Israel. “Zadok” (verse 2) is praised for his faithfulness, “Pinehas” (verse 5) for his zeal. “Aaron” (verse 5) is a type of Christ, the source of true service.

This Ezra (meaning ‘help’), whose genealogy shows that he is a priest, goes up from Babylon (verse 6). Apart from being a priest – which he is by birth – he is also “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses”. This is not by birth, but by diligent study of the Scriptures. He is skilled in the law of Moses, from which the people have deviated. The law must now be brought back into the light. His study of the Scriptures has awakened in him the desire to serve God’s people with it.

Ezra has asked the king to go to Jerusalem. With this he has acknowledged the authority of the king as given to him by God. The fact that God has laid down the authority there is also evident from the year counting. There is counted according to the gentile rulers of God's people. They go up "in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes" (verse 7; verse 8). It affirms that Israel lives in "the times of the Gentiles" (Lk 21:24) that came when God gave Nebuchadnezzar dominion over the world (Dan 2:37-38).

The king has allowed Ezra to go to Israel, for God has worked his heart because Ezra's desire matches His desires. It is good to entrust ourselves to God's hands. We tend to jump over barriers placed by people on our way. We must learn to wait for God to take away those barriers. The king doesn't just give him permission to go, but everything he has asked for – see the decree the king gives to Ezra (verses 11-26).

Ezra is not alone in going up from Babylon. There are other members of God's people going with him. They are "some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants" (verse 7). This group longs for the land and the city and the house of God. It is possible that through the teaching of Ezra from the Scriptures they have all gotten this longing. They will have become aware by God's Spirit that in Babylon they cannot be what they are in God's eyes: His people whom He has chosen to serve Him in the land and in the place He has chosen.

The journey to Jerusalem takes four months (verses 8-9). That Ezra arrives safely in Jerusalem is thanks to "the good hand of his God upon him" (verse 9). To this only he attributes every step he is allowed to take forward. This is mentioned a few more times (verse 28; Ezra 8:18,22,31).

Then we see a beautiful and instructive order for being busy with God's Word (verse 10). Bible study is not an intellectual, mental activity, but a personal study for one's own life and to teach the church:

1. It begins in the heart. Ezra has first of all "set his heart to study the law of the LORD". Setting his heart on it means that he knows spiritual exercise, like a Timothy (1Tim 4:16).
2. The second is that he also directed his heart "to practice [it]". What we have learned from God's Word, we must first put into practice ourselves.

3. Only then can the third come: “To teach [God’s] statutes and ordinances in Israel”. A good teacher should always be able to point to his own example, as Paul does several times (Acts 20:20,35; Phil 3:17; 1Thes 1:5-6).

Ezra’s service is a service that the returnees need right now. He is not an intellectual investigator of the Scriptures. He is not one who teaches what has not touched his own heart and does not determine his own ways. For example, we can talk about the coming of the Lord without our own lives being shaped by it. Or we may speak of the unity of the body of Christ while in practice acting in a sectarian manner.

Ezra 7:11-26 | The Decree of King Artaxerxes

11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel: 12 “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect [peace]. And now 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. 19 Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. 20 The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide [for it] from the royal treasury. 21 “I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are [in the provinces] beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently, 22 [even] up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100

baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. 23 Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. 24 We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll [on] any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God. 25 "You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in [the province] beyond the River, [even] all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant [of them]. 26 Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

The king gives a decree to Ezra (verse 11). It will open the necessary doors for Ezra in Israel to do his service. As an introduction to the decree we read the testimony of the Holy Spirit about Ezra. The Holy Spirit testifies that Ezra has a thorough knowledge of God's Word. God's Word is indicated here in two ways. They are "the words of the commandments of the LORD" and they are "His statutes to Israel". The first emphasizes Him from Whom the words originate and that they are commandments, which requires obedience. The second indicates what their purpose is and for whom they are meant. They are statutes or rules for life given for the good of Israel.

After the testimony of the Holy Spirit the king gives a similar testimony in the opening of his decree (verse 12). This shows what kind of testimony has gone forth from Ezra in the midst of the heathen world (cf. 1Thes 4:12a; Col 4:5). This is how the king knows him. Artaxerxes seems to have a certain knowledge of God. He calls Him "the God of heaven" (verses 12,21,23), "your God", i.e. the God of Ezra (verses 14,25,26), "the God of Israel" (verse 15) and "the God of Jerusalem" (verse 19).

Ezra is granted the same kind of favor (verse 13) as before by Cyrus to God's people in Babylon (Ezra 1:1-4). In this way the Spirit of God once more works a deliverance from a number of members of His people. Here, too, everyone is allowed to go to Jerusalem voluntarily. Whoever wishes to do so, may know that he or she is supported by a command of the king, through which no one will dare to raise obstacles for anyone who wants

to go. The opportunity to go is offered, while there is also protection for everyone who goes.

Arthahsasta then turns to Ezra. He points out to Ezra that he and his “seven counselors” (cf. Est 1:14) send him to Jerusalem “to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God” (verse 14). Ezra does not go to Judea and Jerusalem to see whether things there correspond to his ideas, but whether the people live in accordance with God’s Word. That Word “is in his hand” and he can hold that up to the people as the norm. How important it is for us that we test everything in God’s church against God’s Word that we possess. Having it in our possession is something more than merely applying it to all situations of our own life and the life of the church.

The king and his counselors also voluntarily give Ezra silver and gold (verse 15). They give it to Ezra, but it is meant for “the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem”. In addition, Ezra has to add all the silver and gold he can find in the whole region of Babylon, along with the voluntary gifts of the people and the priests (verse 16). It is all intended “for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem”. It is remarkable how often is spoken about their acting voluntarily in these verses. Any thought of coercion is absent here (cf. 2Cor 9:5-7).

Artaxerxes tells Ezra what to do with the money. He must buy various kinds of offerings with that money “and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem” (verse 17; cf. Deu 14:24-26). Each time it is emphasized that God desires His people to offer Him offerings in His house. These are now spiritual sacrifices, sacrifices of praise and thanks of which Christ and His work are the contents and which are brought to Him in His spiritual home, the church.

In addition to the prescribed destination of money for offerings, Ezra is free to do with the rest of the money as he sees fit (verse 18). This does not mean that he can act outside the will of God, for the king adds that it must be “according to the will of your God”. Nor is it prescribed for us in all cases how we should serve God. General rules are given, while there is often individual freedom to give thanks and perform our service after spiritual exercise and testing against God’s Word.

Ezra also has to ensure that everything that has been given to him for the service of God's house actually ends up there (verse 19). It determines that what has been given to us is meant to serve God in His house. Our whole life with all that we possess belongs to Him. Everything is available to Him and the service in His house.

It is good to be reminded of this in our time of individualism, in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes. The importance of the house of God, the church of God, must again be seen by us. If the house of God becomes important to us again, we may call upon the unlimited supplies of "royal treasury". This speaks to us of Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). In Him we find everything we need for our service in the house of God, the church of the living God.

Artaxerxes further commands all treasurers in the decree that they must "diligently" do everything Ezra asks of them (verse 21). He makes clear to the treasurers what kind of man Ezra is by presenting him to them as "Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven". Also, Artaxerxes indicates what means and in what quantities can be delivered to him at the request of Ezra (verse 22).

Artaxerxes tells why everything he has prescribed must be done (verse 23). For there is a God of heaven Who has a home on earth. Everything that the God of heaven commands with respect to His house must be done accurately. Remarkably, Artaxerxes calls the house of God "the house of the God of heaven". He thereby acknowledges the exaltedness of God Who dwells on earth. By taking Him into account and honoring Him he ensures "that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons". If we do as God pleases, God will not only withhold His wrath, but He will bless us.

The king also forbids all those involved in the service in God's house to "impose tax, tribute or toll" (verse 24). This means that he makes them protectors of His throne. All that the servants of the house of God receive for their sustenance, the tithes they receive from God's people, is tax-free. It is entirely for them.

Finally the king says to Ezra that he must "appoint magistrates and judges" (verse 25). They are to judge "judge all the people ... [even] all those who

know the laws of your God". This means so much that the whole people of God are supposed to know God's laws. The same is true for God's people now, for they are also supposed to know God's Word. God's Word must be revealed to those who do not know it.

Although the people are supposed to know God's Word, situations may occur that are contrary to God's Word. Then justice must be done and an explanation must be given as to why something is contrary to God's Word. In fact, it is the task of every believer to judge when he sees that something is happening that is contrary to what God has said (cf. 1Cor 6:1-7).

In addition to God's law, there is also the law of the king (verse 26). The people not only owe obedience to God, but also to the government placed over them by God on earth. This also applies to us: Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Rom 13:1). Government is also set to exercise punishment when one does not keep the law. Artaxerxes points this out to Ezra and Paul points it out to us (Rom 13:2-4).

Ezra 7:27-28 | Ezra's Reaction

27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put [such a thing] as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, 28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

What the king wrote in the decree fills the heart of Ezra with worship (verse 27). He is impressed that God shows Himself the faithful God, both in the past – He is "the God of our fathers" – and in the present in relation to His house. God has so worked the heart of Artaxerxes (Pro 21:1), that he wants to contribute to the "adornment", the splendor, the glory of "the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem". We hear in the thanksgiving a man who is not satisfied that the house of the LORD has been rebuilt and that its appearance is in order. He is concerned about Him Whom this house belongs to and why He had this house built.

We can apply this to the church, God's house at this time. Are we satisfied that we come together as a church? Maybe we admit that it is not always as it should be. But what does an outer form say if the hearts are not close to the Lord? All service of the Word should be aimed "to adorn" the house of God or making it glorious, adorning it, increasing the service in it. Spiritual struggles that have arisen, difficulties that have arisen, have given rise to an increase in the knowledge of God, and that decorates His house and supports the service in it.

Ezra is aware that everything comes from God. God has worked the heart of the king (verse 27) and He has "extended lovingkindness to" Ezra "before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes" (verse 28). It is impossible for so many hearts to be influenced by a political lobby. No, God works mightily for His people and uses whomever He wills for that purpose.

After these encouragements Ezra takes courage. He sees "the hand of the LORD my God" upon him. That brings him into action. He calls the heads of the family together to go up with him. What these men say and do will be decisive for the families of which they are the heads. If they go up, their families will also go up. We will hear more about them in the next chapter, where they are mentioned by name.

Ezra 8

Introduction

All work that is truly God's must be put to the test. For the man of faith, taught in the thoughts of God, difficulties are never invincible. Such a man of faith is Ezra, as this chapter shows.

Although the work of God in which Ezra and the others are involved is different from that of Zerubbabel and the others, no new principles are introduced. They apply the same principles as those who have come to the land before. They adhere to what they have learned from the Word of God. No new center is invented or a new place of worship chosen. That is why Ezra goes to Jerusalem.

They will soon see that those who have gone before them have failed in what has been entrusted to them. Failure requires appropriate service, admonition and correction to righteousness. False principles and a false position are not a basis for restoration, but must be given up.

Ezra 8:1-14 | List of Ezra's Travel Companions

1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' [households] and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes: 2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush; 3 of the sons of Shecaniah [who was] of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males [who were] in the genealogical list; 4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah and 200 males with him; 5 of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him; 6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him; 7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him; 8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him; 9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him; 10 and of the sons of Bani, Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him; 11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him; 12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan

and 110 males with him; 13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jewel and Shemaiah, and 60 males with them; 14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and 70 males with them.

Verse 1 immediately connects to the last verse of the preceding chapter. Among the heads of families there is grave concern for the house of God, and this at a time when they, who had previously been delivered from Babylon by God, have become unfaithful. What this unfaithfulness consists of we will see in Ezra 9.

The genealogy (verses 2-14) shows how valuable to God are the names of those who now answer His call and go up to Jerusalem. He always attributes to His people what He Himself works in grace in their hearts. He never forgets what has happened in faith and submission to His Word.

Some descendants of Adonikam, the last ones, receive a separate mention (verse 13). At the first return a part, that is the older generation, has already gone along with it (Ezra 2:13). Now the youngest offspring go back with Ezra. God's appreciation for their return can be seen in the mention of their names. God wishes that whole generations take their place in the land.

Ezra 8:15-20 | Call to Levites

15 Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there. 16 So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers. 17 I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia; and I told them what to say to Iddo [and] his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, [that is], to bring ministers to us for the house of our God. 18 According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men; 19 and Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men; 20 and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.

Ezra and his company stay "three days" at the river (verse 15a). "Three days" makes us think of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The

Lord Jesus was three days in death and rose from the grave on the third day (cf. Jn 3:1-2). The spiritual meaning of these three days is that any return to the principles of Scripture can only take place in the awareness of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Through His death and resurrection another world, the world of the Father, has been opened up for the believer. This is where the believer finds himself in faith and where the spiritual realities are experienced.

At the river Ezra notices that there are no Levites (verse 15b). The absence of Levites is a sad feature of the situation of decay. The Levites have not responded to the call to return. They do not see it as a privilege to be able to serve again in God's presence, but feel at home in Babel, the place where they ended up by God's judgment.

Where are the servants of God's people today? We shall experience the same if we start thinking on earthly things instead of "seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1-2). We then become indifferent to our spiritual prerogatives and may even be "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil 3:18). No child of God who understands his heavenly calling can be content to live in 'Babylon'.

Ezra is not satisfied that the Levites are staying behind and is taking action. He sends out nine leaders and two men who are "teachers" (verse 16) to persuade Levites to go up with him to Jerusalem. The family leaders are important because of their position, and the two men are important because of their understanding the Word of God. It is a privilege to have such people in a time of decay. The nine heads of the family have a sense of responsibility and the two with insight complement this. If shortages are observed in the church, it is important that those who notice these shortages or are made aware of them help each other to provide for these shortages.

Ezra orders the eleven men to go to Iddo (verse 17). Iddo holds a position of authority in Casiphia. How the men should speak to Iddo and those who are with him, they are told by Ezra. They must ask them to "to bring ministers to us for the house of our God". Ezra is not concerned with his own interests, but those of God. He knows the needs of God's house and that is what matters to him. He is like Him Who was consumed by zeal for

the house of God (Psa 69:10; Jn 2:17). It is painful for Ezra to see that no one had come forward to do the service in connection with the sanctuary.

Through God's blessing and protection, "according to the good hand of our God upon us" (verse 18), his action is successful. "A man of insight", Sherebiah is brought to him, "and his sons and brothers", a total of eighteen men. The word "brought" gives the impression that it took some encouragement to get these Levites to join Ezra. Sherebiah is "the son of Israel". The fact that he is called like this shows something of God's appreciation for his coming, even though he has to be awakened, as it were, and his joining Ezra is at the last minute. Though late, his coming is 'princely' (Israel means 'prince of God').

Two more descendants of Merari with brothers and sons, a total of twenty men, are brought to Ezra. This means that only thirty-eight Levites in total will go with Ezra. The rest remain in their pleasantly built up existence in Babel. The prerogatives of God's service no longer exert any power on their hearts and consciences.

Where are the gifts that the Lord has given to the church today? Who still exercises his gift? Many believers feel comfortable in a system where everything is arranged and where they can come and go without obligation whenever they feel like it. It is good to exhort believers to fulfil the task given to them, as Paul says to the Colossians that they should exhort Archippus: "Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (Col 4:17).

The temple servants are more in number (verse 20). They are also "all of them designated by name". This underlines God's approval of their willingness. Temple servants are not as prominent as Levites. They work more in the background. However, their service is indispensable, because they ensure that the Levites can do their service. In the same way, there are many tasks to be performed today that may not be so conspicuous, but that are important for others to do their service well. Here, too, God's appreciation is evident. Temple servants are first and foremost gifts "whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites". In the second place they are "all of them designated by name". They may not be known to men, but God knows each of them personally by their name.

Ezra 8:21-23 | Fasting and Prayer

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. 22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him." 23 So we fasted and sought our God concerning this [matter], and He listened to our entreaty.

When everything seems ready to go up to the house of God in Jerusalem, Ezra proclaims a fast (verse 21). No matter how much prosperity they have had so far, it doesn't make Ezra independent of God. He also wants to ensure the further course of the journey under the protection of God. Ezra knows that the road is full of dangers. The company is complete, but now they all have to come into the right relationship with God. That is why they seek His presence in fasting and prayer.

A work for Him requires spiritual exercise; it is not a matter that can be started lightly. Humility is the right starting attitude and the right mind to persevere. By humility we allow God to search our hearts and consciences and test our motives. We should not ask for power, but humble ourselves, that's what matters. Again, there is no ark that goes before them, no pillar of cloud that leads them. They know, however, that He Who used to lead His people through the wilderness has not changed. It is important that all have the same goal and that there are no people who have joined the company with other intentions. It must also be clear that for the journey they can entrust themselves to nothing but the good hand of God.

Ezra is ashamed to deviate in practice from what he has confessed (verse 22). Instead of relying on a troop of soldiers to protect them, he relies on God to protect them, which is much better. This is how they get through all their enemies. How little the spirit of Ezra is found today. For much of what is called a work for God, support is sought from people. This is done through letters asking for money, or asking people if they want to stand guarantor, or asking men of name if they want to exert influence. These are all methods the world uses for the sake of success.

It is a joy for God to answer the trust of His people with the promise and proof of His help. He comes to the aid of those who bear witness to what He is to them in the midst of trials and dangers. We sometimes say things in sincere faith. That trust is not in vain, but reality is tested. In view of this, we must seek God's presence. That is what Ezra and those who travel with him do.

They refrain from food in order to focus entirely on God in view of the way ahead (verse 23; cf. Acts 13:2-3). Specifically, they ask God, "our God", the God they know through their personal dealings with Him, "concerning this [matter]", that is, whether He wants to protect them. It is important to ask the Lord concrete things. He desires to give us things that increase our trust in Him. He lets Himself be entreated. We read this here and six more times in the Old Testament (Gen 25:21; 2Sam 21:14; 24:25; 1Chr 5:20; 2Chr 33:13; Isa 19:22).

Ezra 8:24-30 | Taking Care of Silver, Gold, and Utensils

24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers; 25 and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes and all Israel present [there] had offered. 26 Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils [worth] 100 talents, [and] 100 gold talents, 27 and 20 gold bowls [worth] 1,000 darics, and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold. 28 Then I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers. 29 Watch and keep [them] until you weigh [them] before the leading priests, the Levites and the heads of the fathers' [households] of Israel at Jerusalem, [in] the chambers of the house of the LORD." 30 So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring [them] to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

Ezra separated twelve men from the leaders of the priests to charge them with the care of silver and gold and certain utensils (verses 24-27). They are set apart for a special work. The separation of some priests has nothing to do with separating a group of people into a clergy.

We read a peculiarity at the end of verse 27, where there is talk of “two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold”. Here we see bronze with the characteristic of gold. Bronze is a picture of God’s righteousness that can withstand judgment. Gold is a picture of God’s glory. We see both in the Lord Jesus on the cross.

Ezra says that they are “holy to the LORD” (verse 28). Holy’ means separated for a purpose. The utensils entrusted to them are also holy. This sanctification, this separation, is for “the LORD God of your fathers”. Everything is consecrated to Him. People and means must be sanctified and pure if they are to be able to connect with God in order to be used by Him (Isa 52:11).

Here we see that this remnant, like the remnant that has returned before, brings silver and gold. We can apply this in such a way that from time to time God renews His work of revival and complements the previous one. Each time, something is added to what is already known. For example, we can think of the letters of correction to the Corinthians and Galatians, in which things are written that add to what is already known by the saints.

What has been entrusted to them to take with them (verse 29), they must deliver in the same weight and number (verses 33-34) upon their arrival in Jerusalem. This is not a matter of mistrust, but of accountability (cf. 2Cor 8:21). The command in the last days is: “Guard, ... the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (2Tim 1:14; cf. 2Tim 4:7).

Everything entrusted to the care of the priests is weighed out (verse 30). It is to be taken to Jerusalem, with “the house of our God” as its final destination. What has been entrusted to us has also been carefully weighed up and must be preserved and protected within the church, God’s house in this day. We are stewards of what has been entrusted to us as spiritual goods. We must hold on to the whole of the truth and not lose any of it. Ezra has lost nothing of what he took along the way, just as everything that went into the ark with Noah came out safe and sound.

Ezra 8:31-36 | Come to Jerusalem

31 Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us

from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way. 32 Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days. 33 On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him [was] Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them [were] the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. 34 Everything [was] numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time. 35 The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the LORD. 36 Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps and to the governors [in the provinces] beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

Then the time of departure has come. There is no detailed account of the journey of about four months. On that journey Ezra and the ones who went with him have often been in danger. We hear nothing more about this. Ezra describes no heroic deeds and no fears. He honors God and summarizes the journey in such a way that the company is protected under the "hand of our God" who delivered them from "the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way" (verse 31). He left with prayer. He arrived in peace with thankfulness, for God delivered them and brought them safely to Jerusalem.

God acts for us according to the degree of our trust in Him. Too often we limit Him, because we think so little of Him. He is "able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20). This is the infinite source of faith.

When they have arrived in Jerusalem, they first come to rest and reflect for three days. Again, there are three days (verse 32; verse 15). For us this means that everything is again considered in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ. There is also talk of "the fourth day" (verse 33). On the fourth day the reckoning takes place in front of four men. Four is the number of the earth, of the walk on earth. Of all that has been entrusted to us and how we have dealt with it on earth, we will have to account for before the judgment seat of Christ (2Cor 5:10; cf. Mt 25:14-30).

Everything is checked according to number and weight (verse 34). Faithful servants of God will take great care that not one part of the precious truth is lost or weighed down. In professing Christianity, more and more truths are no longer proclaimed, and more and more truths lose weight, i.e. importance. Some truths have been abandoned because they are no longer of our time. Other truths are deprived of their power by giving them another meaning. Often there are still the form and the words, but their true spiritual weight is no longer on the hearts.

After the delivery of all treasures, the people bring burnt offerings to the LORD (verse 35). The remnant that has just returned becomes a people of worshipers. In bringing the offerings they also give thanks to God for His preservation during the journey.

As with the dedication of God's house (Ezra 6:17), the weak remnant sees "all Israel" represented there. We also see this thought in the recurring number twelve or a multiple thereof. It means that all those who stayed behind in Babylon are also involved in the burnt offering. A constant remembrance of the whole people of God saves us from sectarian thinking and acting.

Only after they have introduced themselves to God on the basis of their sacrifices do they go to the king's servants (verse 36). God always has the first rights and must first be given what is due to Him. Then it is the turn of others. They deliver the king's edicts to the king's satraps and to the governors. The king's officers act according to what the king has commanded them (Ezra 7:21-24) and "support the people and the house of God". Ezra thus fulfills the purpose of the enterprise. What he does in the two following chapters is not a goal of his journey, but a consequence of his main goal.

Ezra 9

Introduction

He who seeks the welfare of God's people must expect trial and sorrow on his way. In those who have just returned to Jerusalem there is humility, fasting, and supplication. In Jerusalem, however, they find a very different mind. Their coming is the occasion of the revelation of sin that has found entrance. This is what we see in this chapter.

Believers may look for a place where the church gathers as Scripture indicates. When they have found such a place, it may sometimes turn out that there is the confession and the outer form, but that the hearts are not turned toward the Lord Jesus. Sometimes they have to notice that there are those who are less spiritual and less zealous for the Lord than some of those they have had to leave behind.

Then the test of the truth of God's Word must be applied. When the truth is ministered, it will become clear whether there is only a confession or whether there really is a desire to come together as a church according to Scripture. In this and the next chapter we see that Ezra applies the truth of God's Word to the situation that has arisen.

Ezra 9:1-5 | Ezra Hears of Mixed Marriages

1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, [those] of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters [as wives] for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." 3 When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness

of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering. 5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

As soon as Ezra has arrived in Jerusalem, he is confronted with the evil that has entered. He is told how things are with the people (cf. 1Cor 1:11). The arrival and actions of the new remnant bring the evil to light. The law has been broken by entering into marriages forbidden by law (Exo 34:12-16). These forbidden marriages are a picture of friendship with the world (Jam 4:4; cf. 2Cor 6:14-15).

The nations mentioned are all nations that should have been conquered in the days of Joshua (Deu 7:1-6). The people are outwardly close to God, but inwardly they are far from Him. Not only the common people, but even priests and Levites have sinned. This evil will only be unmasked as evil when faithful people come who have God's Word as their standard. Among those who confess to come together in the Name of the Lord Jesus, the greatest evil can manifest itself if there is no walk with Him. Faithful people in the local church will expose that evil.

The princes and rulers have even been the first in unfaithfulness (verse 2). By their bad example they have brought many on the path of sin. Those who are very conscientious not to connect with the world as a church, sometimes do so in their business or even in their marriage. The present remnant has gone out of Babylon with their bodies, but the spirit of Babylon is still in them.

Their connections do not directly represent personal connections for us, but mainly principles that are opposed to the "holy race". Legalism, for example, is such a strange wife. The Galatians have made such connections, as many Christians still do today. Through his letter to them, Paul wants to persuade them to expel this strange wife. In the letter to the Corinthians we see these 'strange women' for example in the use of wrong building materials (1Cor 3:12-17), in which we can see the use of strange methods in the (re)building of the church.

Ezra is appalled (verse 3). Is it possible that this remnant, torn from the fire by God, has forgotten the hand of Him Who set them free, that they

marry daughters of strange gods? Ezra is a man who lives in fellowship with God. He feels like no other the seriousness and depth of sin. He alone can identify with the sin of others, as we also see with Daniel, Nehemiah, Moses.

Ezra humbles himself personally, carrying the sin of the people as his own. When sin becomes manifest in the midst of God's people, we are called upon not primarily to act, but to humble ourselves. Ezra expresses his humility by tearing his garment and robe and pulling hair from his head and beard. He beats himself first instead of going directly to the guilty to punish them. So, he sits down.

Through Ezra's behavior the conscience of others is exercised. After the personal humiliation of Ezra more people join him in this (verse 4). They "tremble at the words of the God of Israel" (cf. Isa 66:2b), which indicates that they too mourn about the condition of the people. Through the open horror and grief at sin shown by Ezra, others come to him. The grief over "the unfaithfulness of the exiles" unites them in humility before the LORD. A breach in the faithfulness to the LORD is a great evil. Unfaithfulness in a relationship is extremely painful and hurtful to the person being harmed. Ezra and the others feel this with God's grief. They also acknowledge that God's wrath must come upon them for this.

At the time of the evening offering, Ezra pours out the deep sadness of his heart before God. On the one hand he is deeply saddened by the sin of the people. On the other hand, he seizes the power of the evening offering – that is, the daily evening burnt offering – to approach God in view of the committed sins (cf. 1Sam 7:9; 1Kgs 18:36; Dan 9:21; Acts 10:3). This shows us in the picture that one is lifted above the failure of the whole when Christ and His work for God are placed before the heart. Confession of sin in the light of Christ's offering is the basis for God to pass over the sin of His people.

By the time the evening sacrifice is brought, Ezra rises up out of humiliation (verse 5). He has a broken heart because of the sin of the people. He also knows where only help can be found. The evening offering is the only ground on which God can endure the unfaithfulness of His people. The evening offering speaks of the offering of Christ, Who at the time of the

evening offering, the third hour, received no answer from God because He was made sin (2Cor 5:21). Because He received no answer, God can answer Elijah and Daniel and Ezra to their prayers.

The noun “humiliation” appears in the Bible only here with Ezra. It is the expression of experiencing evil in God’s people in a way that is consistent with Who God is. Someone who feels evil in this way can be used by God as His instrument for the benefit of His people. In that mind Ezra bows his knees and spreads his hands unto the LORD his God to pray for the people. What a moving example for us! How far we often are from that. May it be our desire to become more like Ezra in this.

Ezra 9:6-15 | Prayer of Ezra

6 and I said, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers to this day we [have been] in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings [and] our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as [it is] this day. 8 But now for a brief moment grace has been [shown] from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. 9 For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. 10 “Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, 11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end [and] with their impurity. 12 So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good [things] of the land and leave [it] as an inheritance to your sons forever.’ 13 After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited [us] less than our iniquities [deserve], and have given us an escaped remnant as this, 14 shall we again break Your com-

mandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? 15 O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as [it is] this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

Ezra unites with the people and speaks of "our iniquities" and "our guilt" (verse 6), despite the fact that he has only been with them for about a week. Therein lies the secret of his spiritual power and is he a true priest before God for the benefit of God's people. By making himself one with the sins of the people, he eats, as it were, the sin offering (Lev 6:26). Only in this way can we also come before God with the things that are not good in the midst of the believers with whom we meet.

Ezra goes far back to find the root of present sin (verse 7). The whole history of God's people is a history of sin. The kings and the priests have played a great, negative role in it. They have preceded the people on that path of sin. Think of Solomon with his many wives and their idols he lovingly clung to. With him we see how much loving strange women also means love for the idols of these women (1Kgs 11:1-2,4a).

Often the people were given into the hands of hostile kings, who brought sword, imprisonment, looting, and open disgrace upon them. This is still the case when Ezra humbles himself and makes his confession. The same is true for the church. In the beginning, the first love was left and the church as a whole never returned to it.

After the acknowledgment of God's discipline because of the sins of the people, Ezra speaks about the grace of God (verse 8). That grace is clearly present in the revival that God has given His people. In the way Ezra speaks to the LORD about it, we hear great modesty. There is no sense of pride, as if the revival was deserved or due to one's own efforts. No, God has given the opportunity for "escape". He has given His people a peg in His holy place. The "revival," which Ezra says is "a little revival," is the result of God's gracious work. This modesty can be heard here.

If we are allowed to experience a revival in the local church, it will, if it is good, also be experienced by us as a great grace that God gives. There is no right to another revival. However, we may pray that we experience more

revival in our personal life of faith. This will go hand in hand with diligent study of God's Word and a life in which Christ and His will are central. If this happens in our personal lives, it will undoubtedly have an impact on the local church.

Ezra is aware that he and God's people are slaves of the nations (verse 9). God had to give them that position because of their unfaithfulness. Ezra does not rebel against this, but acknowledges its righteousness and bows down to it. It is good that he can also say that God did not leave them in that position of slavery. We cannot change the circumstances, but we can involve God in our circumstances so that we can go through them with Him.

With gratitude he reminds us of the lovingkindness of God that He has shown His people with the pagan rulers. This mercy is not that God freed His people from slavery, but that He gave a little revival "to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem". Ezra's heart is full of God's house, God's land and God's city, despite the wretched circumstances.

After speaking of God's grace, he speaks again of the sin of the people, which is all the more serious against the background of the grace shown. He does not know what to say (verse 10). He can only mention concretely what he and the people have sinned in. The summary is that the people have forsaken the commandments of God. Disobedience to what God has said is the origin of sin. Through disobedience to God's commandment, sin came into the world (Gen 2:17; 3:6; Rom 5:19a).

Unfamiliarity with God's commandments cannot be used as an excuse. God, through His servants, the prophets, warned the people of the dangers of the land they were about to take possession of (verse 11). The emphasis is on uncleanness. The word 'unclean' or impurity is mentioned several times in this one verse. Uncleanness by dealing with the world and taking possession of the ideas of the world causes a diminishing awareness of God's holiness. If we do not keep ourselves pure from the world (Jam 1:27), we will adapt to the world and become friends with the world.

God has told His people not to marry the Gentiles (verse 12). They are never even allowed to seek their peace or their prosperity. There is an eternal

separation between God's people and the world. Only by maintaining that separation will we receive three glorious blessings:

1. We will be strong,
2. eat the good things of the land and
3. leave it as an inheritance to our children forever.

Unfortunately, God's people then and many of God's people now have lost their spiritual power through wrong connections – for us: with the world. They no longer enjoy the good food of the land and also lose possession of the land for their descendants. Their children have no appreciation for an inheritance, a stay in the land.

Ezra acknowledges once again that the great guilt that has come upon them has been caused by their evil deeds (verse 13). At the same time, he sees the great grace of God, that He has not completely given them up to their iniquities. God in His wrath has remembered mercy (Hab 3:2). He has given a possibility of “escape” from captivity, which has been used by a remnant. By this Ezra means both the first exodus from Babylon and his own exodus from Babylon.

The light of that great mercy that God has shown in spite of all and ever recurring unfaithfulness of His people shines into the soul of Ezra. In that light, shouldn't it be impossible, says Ezra, to break God's commandments again and again by intermarrying with the peoples who commit these abominations (verse 14)? That's sinning against grace. When that happens, God's judgment must come to its full extent over the remnant, without there being any escape for a few.

Ezra justifies God in His dealings with His people (verse 15). He expresses it in this verse, but his whole prayer breathes that spirit. God's righteous action also includes allowing the opportunity for escape, as in the case of Ezra and his people. God's grace is always based on righteousness. He does not condone sin, but forgives and justifies it on the basis of the work of His Son.

The place of confession is always the place both of spiritual strength and of restoration. Ezra is not only impressed by the sin of the people, but also by the great grace and mercy of God. We listen to both aspects in the question

to the “LORD the God of Israel” to see them in their guilt before Him. That only says someone who is fully convinced of his guilt and at the same time is fully convinced that he is dealing with a God of complete forgiveness. No sinner can stand or exist before God, except he who comes to Him with a confession of guilt (Psa 130:3-4).

Ezra 10

Introduction

The humiliation of the previous chapter must lead to the removal of evil. That happens in this chapter.

Ezra 10:1-4 | Confessing the Unfaithfulness

1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. 2 Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Arise! For [this] matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act."

Ezra confesses his guilt in public (verse 1). Thus, it will be known for whom he pleads. Those people come to him weeping bitterly. After the confession there is no prophet, as so often has happened, but there is an answer from God in the hearts of the guilty (verse 2). The faithfulness of one man is used by the LORD to awaken others, so that they may see their condition.

Before the arrival of Ezra, the conscience of all seems to have been numb. Even Jeshua and Zerubbabel do not seem to have cared about the prevailing sin. Possibly family interests played a role in this. In any case, it seems that family interests have not been subordinated to God's interests. We see that later in this chapter, when Sechanja takes a stand against his father Jehiel, who is one of the transgressors (verse 26).

The work of God's Spirit and His intervention in the midst of His people are marked by the removal of all those who do not belong, as they do, to the people of God (verse 3). This can already be seen at the priesthood

in Ezra 2. Those who cannot prove it are excluded. It can also be seen at the temple building in Ezra 4. He who does not belong to God's people is not allowed to help build. Here even women and children who are not of God's people are to be put away.

One must at all costs separate oneself from that which does not belong to Israel. There must be radical action concerning the workings of the flesh and the worldly influences that hinder us spiritually. It is hard to come back from steps of unfaithfulness and sin. Sometimes bitter fruits of sin remain for the rest of our lives.

The situation and course of action described here applies under the law. Under grace there is no sending away. If in a marriage of unbelievers one of the two comes to repentance and faith, the unbeliever should not be sent away, but is sanctified by the believer (1Cor 7:10-16). This only applies if the marriage has been made, while both partners were still unbelievers. It does not apply to the case where a believer marries an unbeliever. Even then the believer should not be sent away, but the believer commits a sin which he or she must confess (2Cor 6:14).

Shecaniah acknowledges the authority of the Word when he says: "let it be done according to the law". Only by giving room to God's Word will what is a blessing be worked out. Then he addresses the word to Ezra, that he shall do what must be done (verse 4). These words must have been beneficial to Ezra. It is an answer to his prayer.

Ezra 10:5-11 | Ezra Calls the People to Confession

5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath. 6 Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. 7 They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles. 9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within

the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the open square [before] the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain. 10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. 11 Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."

Humanly speaking, Ezra is almost alone. But God is with him, and so it happens that the hearts of the people bow down before him (verse 5). Then Ezra responds by standing up out of his humiliation (verse 6). His sadness lasts as long as sin remains, because deep within his heart he feels the dishonor that the Name of God has been done to. The secret of spiritual power is to be alone with God.

The work of God's Spirit also becomes public in the actions of the people. They call on all exiles to come to Jerusalem to discuss the situation that has arisen (verse 7). Discipline, which has been completely neglected and neglected by the spiritual laxity of the people, is now exercised again according to God's thoughts. Refusal now to listen to God's Word would prove a hardness of heart and a self-willed spirit that cannot be maintained among the assembly of the exiles (verse 8).

The call finds hearing. All the men of Judah and Jerusalem come to Jerusalem within the appointed time (verse 9). There they gather in the open square before the house of God. They tremble both because of their conscience and the pain and sorrow of having to break the blood ties that have arisen as well as because of the heavy rain. The heavy rain gave them an extra feeling of divine dissatisfaction about their unfaithfulness.

Ezra speaks to the assembled people (verse 10). In his confession in Ezra 9 he has united himself with the sin of the people. There he speaks to God about "we". This is the true place in relation to God. When he speaks to the people here, he speaks about "you". Here he speaks in this way, because he wants to touch their hearts and consciences.

There is only one way to prove the sincerity of a confession and that is to get rid of evil. Confession alone is not enough, they must also submit to God's will. Confession without judging sin is self-deception. Self-judg-

ment and separation from evil are necessary (Pro 28:13). They must abandon their relationship with the nations of the land and send the strange women away. The second is a consequence of the first, therefore this order must be followed. The root of evil must first be judged.

The sending away of women and children will have been a very moving thing, which has been accompanied by a lot of grief and begging. Real repentance is always accompanied by grief and pain over the sin that has been committed.

Ezra 10:12-15 | The People Are Willing to Act

12 Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do. 13 But there are many people; it is the rainy season and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor [can] the task [be done] in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter. 14 Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us." 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.

Without contradiction or bargaining to get rid of the consequences or soften them, the whole people fully agree with what has been said (verse 12). There is a willingness to live up to the decision of obedience to God's Word with all their hearts at all costs. If conscience had been so conscientious a few years earlier, what pain and sorrow would they have spared themselves.

Now that the heart is willing to do what is necessary, it is also important to face the actual circumstances. Circumstances appear to be present that stand in the way of an immediate sending away (verse 13). Also, the transgression is too great to get rid of in one day. God is patient and merciful and takes into account what has been decided in the heart. He knows that the guilty do not seek an excuse, but wish to obey.

We must take Ezra's patience as an example, so that our brothers who have sinned and repented do not lose courage. Evil is too serious to be dealt

with in a general way, or lightly and quickly. Each case must be judged independently and thoroughly.

The people suggest that the leasers will accompany the sending away and carry it out step by step (verse 14). They should appoint times when all who have taken foreign women to live with them can come to them. The elders and judges of the city of origin should be present. Unfair treatment should not be given a chance. Any semblance of partiality must be avoided. Everything must be verifiable and recorded so that later claims or objections can be refuted. If they will act in this way, they will ward off the fierce anger of God that lies upon them on account of this matter.

In verse 15 there are four names of men who oppose the exercises of the assembly. Their names are a warning to all. Paul also mentions, in order to warn Timothy against them, some names of opponents of the truth (2Tim 2:17; 4:14). Satan will always make sure that there is opposition to a work of God, but this must not be admitted.

Ezra 10:16-44 | Who Had Foreign Wives

16 But the exiles did so. And Ezra the priest selected men [who were] heads of fathers' [households] for [each of] their father's households, all of them by name. So they convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter. 17 They finished [investigating] all the men who had married foreign wives by the first day of the first month. 18 Among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah. 19 They pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, [they offered] a ram of the flock for their offense. 20 Of the sons of Immer [there were] Hanani and Zebadiah; 21 and of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uziah; 22 and of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah. 23 Of Levites [there were] Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers [there was] Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem and Uri. 25 Of Israel, of the sons of Parosh [there were] Ramiah, Iziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah and Benaiah; 26 and of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth and Elijah; 27 and of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza; 28 and of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai

[and] Athlai; 29 and of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal [and] Jeremoth; 30 and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh; 31 and [of] the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch [and] Shemariah; 33 of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh [and] Shimei; 34 of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu, 38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah [and] Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo [there were] Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel [and] Benaiah. 44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives [by whom] they had children.

The opposition of Jonathan and others (verse 15) has no effect on the people. The exiles do not let themselves be stopped by them and do as they promised (verse 16). A commission is formed and a session is organized to investigate the matter. As a result, the sending away must take place in good order. The sending away is not done without an investigation. Everything is done thoroughly, carefully, and without haste. Discipline in the church, too, may only take place after investigation by reliable people.

When it is clear which men have brought foreign women to live with them, they will proceed to send them away. Sending them away must have resulted in heartbreaking scenes. It is all the fruit of abandoning God and acting willfully. After three months – from the first day of the tenth month to the first day of the first month – the matter is settled and the cleansing is completed (verse 17). When finished, it heralds a new period of spiritual prosperity, as we can see from the expression “the first day of the first month”.

The first to be mentioned of those who have transgressed in this matter are the priests (verse 18). Even descendants of Jeshua, who came with the first group out of Babylon, have taken foreign wives. They are most guilty. As priests they have not obeyed the commission as it is written in Malachi 2 (Mal 2:7). However, they confess their sin and promise to cleanse themselves by sending their wives away.

It is a sad and humbling fact that many faithful and devoted servants of the LORD had sons who did not walk in the footsteps of their father. We see this for example with Aaron and two of his sons, with Samuel and his sons, with some of David's sons, with Hezekiah and his son. This should bring us to much prayer for the families of those who serve the Lord.

The transgressing priests bring a ram as a guilt offering (verse 19). A ram is the animal used in the ordination of a priest when he takes up the priestly ministry (Lev 8:22). By offering a ram as a trespass offering, the priests again consecrate themselves to the LORD. Bringing a trespass offering (Lev 5:14-19; 6:1-7) means that not only sin is acknowledged, but also made good.

We are only free from our guilt when we see that the Lord Jesus is the true trespass offering, Who has put in order with God what we have been guilty of. He has been completely devoted to God in everything on earth (ram) and has always given to God what is His due and much more besides (trespass offering).

The list of names (verses 20-43) is this time very different from previous lists. Earlier lists contained names as an honorable mention for going a way of faith. This list contains names that evoke embarrassment, although these are people who want to submit to God again and therefore appear to be victorious over sin.

On this list are the names of people whose names are to be said: "All these had married foreign wives" (verse 44). Not only were wrong marriages entered into, but "some of them had wives [by whom] they had children". Those children also have to be sent away. We see here that the more serious the deviation is, the more fruits of that deviation there are, and that as a result of the self-judgment the deeper the grief is.

Nothing and no one escapes God's eye. "We must all be revealed before the judgment seat of Christ" (2Cor 5:10). It is to be hoped that the last chapter of our lives will also be the best in our history. That means there will be more self-judgment than ever, more appreciation of Christ, more separation to God, more priestly feelings, more suitability for the service of God. Whatever has happened in history, let's make sure we end up as victors.

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