

# Ezra

F. B. Hole.

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## Ezra 1

THE CLOSING VISION, granted to the prophet Daniel, was given to him in the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia. If now we open our Bibles at the book of Ezra, we are carried back to the first year of that great monarch, whom the prophet Isaiah mentioned by name some two centuries before he ascended the throne. If we turn to Isaiah 44: 28, we read the prediction of what he would do. Ezra 1: 2 records his doing what Isaiah foretold.

The opening verse of the chapter refers to the prophecy of Jeremiah, which so stirred the spirit of Daniel, as he recorded in his ninth chapter. The prediction is found in Jeremiah 25: 11-14. Daniel saw that its fulfilment must be near, and it moved him to the remarkable prayer that is recorded. Ezra has placed on record the exact way in which it was fulfilled.

The word 'Lord' in verse 2 is of course Jehovah, and Cyrus recognised Him as the 'God of Heaven', and not merely of the kingdoms of the earth. Nebuchadnezzar had been brought to a similar confession, as we saw in Daniel 4: 37. As one reads the summary of the proclamation that Cyrus issued, recorded in verses 2 and 3, one cannot but think that he must have been informed of the prophecy, recorded in the opening verses of Isaiah 45, as well as the closing verse of the preceding chapter. It was no small thing that Cyrus should acknowledge the supreme glory and power of God in this striking way, and act in obedience to what God had commanded. It is not surprising that God should have spoken of him as, 'His anointed'.

The proclamation did not name any person or persons who were to go to Jerusalem and build the house, but rather threw the door open for any Jew to go, whose heart stirred him up to do so, giving him the assurance that he was to be liberally helped in the project before him. Being thus worded it meant that those who responded would be in the main men of piety, whose hearts were alive to the glory of God and to the place of His Name, while the more worldly-minded and selfish would be inclined to remain in their comfortable homes, established during the seventy years of captivity, and leave the task to others who were prepared to face the difficulties and privations.

It is to be noted that what Cyrus had in view was the building of 'the house of the Lord', and he was not concerned with the desolate state of the city. It was Nehemiah who, at a later date, became so concerned about the waste and desolate condition of Jerusalem that he obtained the permission of Artaxerxes to restore and to build the city. The decree granted to Nehemiah is the starting point of the prophecy of the 'seventy weeks', as noted in Daniel 9: 25. It was a case of God's house, first; the city where men dwelt, second. This is a principle of abiding significance.

Yet the tendency to forget it is very strong. Those who answered to the proclamation of Cyrus soon forget it, as we discover when we read Haggai's prophecy. Very soon they were building their 'ceiled houses', while the house of God was lying 'waste'. The same tendency is strongly at work amongst the people of God today.

So let us carefully observe the analogy that exists between what happened in the history of Judaism and what has happened in the history of Christendom.

In Judaism the law given through Moses was largely ignored, and the kingly authority, established in David, so corrupted that the Babylonian captivity fell upon them. In Christendom the purity of the Gospel was soon lost, and the rule of the Spirit, through the Word, was perverted and corrupted into the carnal rule of men, called 'popes' in Rome, many of whom were leaders in iniquity. This corruption reached a climax in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Now, just as a revival of an outward and geographical sort began under Cyrus — though a number of men of true piety were engaged in it — so in the sixteenth century God granted the beginning of a revival of a more inward and spiritual sort in the history of Christendom; and out of the spiritual 'Babylon', an emergence began, which has continued to our day. In the light of this, let us see what lessons we may learn from the opening chapters of the book of Ezra.

Verse 5 of the first chapter shows that there was a real work of God in the souls of many, including leaders both civil and religious, which led them to embrace at once the opportunity that was given for a return to the land of their fathers, to re-establish the worship of God by rebuilding His house. In the providence of God this was actively promoted by Cyrus, in addition to vessels of value, given by Jews who did not participate in the expedition to Jerusalem, he restored all the holy vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had placed in the house of his gods. The spiritual work of God in the souls of His people was matched by a providential work of God in the surrounding world. Thus it has been again in more recent times.

## Ezra 2

CHAPTER TWO, with the exception of the last three verses, is taken up with details as to the number of those who answered to the proclamation, named under the heads of **their families. The heads are** named and the families counted. God took note of them and put their names into His record, while those, whose hearts did not stir them up to go, are passed over in silence. Let us take note of this.

The first name mentioned is Zerubbabel, who became the 'Tirshatha', or civil Governor: the second, that of Jeshua, the priest called Joshua in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. These were the leaders in the migration of 42,360 people, besides some servants and other possessions. There was no re-establishment of the kingdom, as though the times of the Gentiles had ceased. They were still under Gentile suzerainty.

Still there was a definite revival, and the first mark of it was this: they got back to God's original centre. Compared with the total number of dispersed Jews they were but few, and many of the worldly

sort may have nicknamed them 'Zerubbabelites', still they were not that, but simply a few who cared for their God, and sought His original centre.

In the second place, there was no claim to powers they did not possess, since they had been forfeited by previous failure, as we see in verses 59-63. Awkward questions arose, as to whether some were truly children of Israel, and whether others were really children of priests, their genealogies being lost. In earlier days these points might have been settled by an appeal to God through the 'Urim and Thummim'. This had been lost and they were humble enough to acknowledge it. When God grants a revival after grievous failure. He may not be pleased to restore everything — especially as to outward manifestations of power — just as things were at the first. Let us take note of this — we again would say. Certain manifestations of power, that were seen in apostolic days, are not in evidence today.

A third mark of true revival is seen in the spirit of devotion, that marked some of the 'chief fathers' of the people, when back in the land, as recorded in the closing verses of chapter 2. This spirit may not have continued for long, but it was evidently there at the start. When God begins to work there is always a devoted response on the part of some of His people.

### **Ezra 3**

As WE BEGIN to read the third chapter, a fourth feature of true revival is plainly manifested: obedience to the Word of God. In verse 2, and again in verse 4, we find the words, 'as it is written'. Their first recorded action, when back in their land, was to approach their God in the manner He had laid down at the first. There was a very great contrast between their present humble circumstances and the great days when the law was given and the tabernacle constructed under Moses, or the palmy days of Solomon, when the first temple was built, yet they recognized that what God may lay down at the start of His dispensations stands unchanged to the finish.

So they did not attempt innovations, according to their own ideas of what might be suitable, but just reverted to God's original Word. They began with the burnt offering, which lay at the basis of all God's dealings with them; and the seventh month being come, they observed the feast of tabernacles, which fell at that time. This they did though the foundation of the temple had not been laid. The burnt offerings very rightly preceded the 'house'. That, however was not forgotten, as verse 7 shows. The necessary preparations for it were started, for it was the prime object of their return to the land.

Reaching verse 8, we pass on to the second year of their return and find them setting forward this work, so that the foundations of the house were actually laid. This provoked a very moving scene, in which both joy and sorrow were mingled. There was joyful praise and thanksgiving to God, according to the 'ordinance of David king of Israel', as was indeed fitting. In Psalm 136 it is stated of God twenty-six times that 'His mercy endureth for ever', and this they now acknowledged in regard to themselves as representing Israel. It was the confession that no merit on their side had led to the revival in which they had part. It was all on the ground of God's mercy. Every revival, granted by God, in the sad history of Christendom, has been based upon the mercy of God, without merit on our side. Let us never forget this.

There was another side to this great occasion, for there were present 'ancient men', who had seen the first house in all its magnificence, and the sound of their weeping matched the shouting of those who rejoiced, so that the two sounds were indistinguishable. The number of men, so ancient that they saw the first temple still standing, must have been small compared with the total number present, so their weeping must have been unrestrained and loud. Do we feel inclined to regard them as unthankful

and melancholy, marring the brightness of a great occasion?

No, we do not. We regard them as expressing another side of things, which should ever be present, when we are able to rejoice in some time of revival, granted in the mercy of God. However blessed the revival granted, our rejoicing is tempered by the remembrance of the grace and power that characterized the beginning of things under apostolic energy, as shown in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. We become conscious how small and imperfect is anything we may experience compared with that; and this, though it may not bring tears to our eyes, will have a very sobering effect upon us for our good.

## Ezra 4

IN THE OPENING verses of chapter 4, another striking feature comes into view. As is always the case when a work of God takes place, there were adversaries, and their first move had in it a strong element of flattery, and was therefore a very seductive one. They came with the profession of seeking and serving the true God, and so they offered to assist in the building of the house, as being partners in the work. This brought to light a fifth feature marking this revival — a feature of great importance: Zerubbabel and Jeshua and other chief men refused the alliance they proposed, and maintained a position of separation from the surrounding world. Had they acquiesced, the work would have been ruined from the outset.

If we read the last chapter of the book of Nehemiah, we discover there was failure on this very point, to the marring of the work, and similarly revivals in the history of Christendom have too often been spoiled in the same way. Take the Reformation for instance: it fell very short of what it might have been as the result of many of its leaders getting into alliance with secular and worldly persons and powers, so that even religious wars were fought. That having come to pass, the power and spirituality of the revival rapidly evaporated.

Under Zerubbabel and Jeshua, however, the line of demarcation between the returned remnant of Israel and the mixed multitude that dwelt around them, was faithfully maintained, and the result of this is at once manifested. Points of dispute, which might easily lead to strife and warfare, are frequently solved, at least for a time, by a spirit of compromise. Each side yields a few points and peace is patched up; but it was not so here.

Instead of the watchword being compromise it was separation, and the result was strenuous opposition; not only weakening their hands in various ways, but also hiring counsellors against them at headquarters in a most persistent way. Here is a sixth feature that we must note. If true saints maintain separation from the world, they will have to face opposition from the world. This is as true today as at any other time in history. If we compromise we may avoid it in large measure and lose our power. If we maintain separation, we must face it in some way, for as the Scripture itself says, 'all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution' (2 Tim. 3: 12). It may not take the form of outward violence, as it did in the case of the Apostle Paul, but be exerted in more indirect and subtle ways. The absence of it would not commend us but the reverse. It would mean that the great adversary knows that as regards his designs we are innocuous, and so he wastes no energy over us.

Here it was far otherwise, and the adversary pitted his strength against those who without compromise were bent on rebuilding the house of God, as had been prophesied. The opposition was most persistent, for no less than four kings are mentioned in verses 5-7. It began at once in the days of Cyrus, and continued until the time of Darius, as stated in verse 5, who is identified as the one

surnamed Hystaspes in secular history. In between these kings came Ahasuerus, not the one mentioned in the book of Esther, but the one known as Cambyses. During his reign the opponents were very active, writing up an accusation against the Jews in Jerusalem, but apparently without any definite effect.

Then came the Artaxerxes of verse 7, who is identified with the usurper, known as Smerdis in profane history, who only held dominion for a very short time. Being a usurper, he was of course disposed to upset and annul decrees of his predecessors, in order to establish, if possible, his own position. The opponents saw that this man furnished them with an excellent chance of succeeding in their petition, so once more they sent up a letter.

The opposition had not diminished by the lapse of time or by the earlier lack of success. It had rather increased, as is clear if we read verses 7-9. The letter went up in the names of certain men who were eminent amongst the inhabitants of the land, backed by no less than nine of the tribes or citizens or peoples, who then had their dwelling in the surrounding country of Palestine. It was evidently a very imposing document.

A copy of this letter is given to us in verses 11-16, that we may see how skillfully the adversary can mix lies with facts, and thus garble and misrepresent the case in question.

The first thing that strikes us is that there is no mention of the thing the Jews had come to do under the decree of Cyrus — the rebuilding of the house of God. They have much to say about the building of the city and its walls. It is possible of course that some little work of this sort had been done, which furnished them with a pretext, but we know that nothing serious of this sort was accomplished until Nehemiah's day. Their assertion of this to the king was simply a lie.

Then, assuming that the city was being rebuilt, they denounced it as a bad and rebellious place. It was true that the last few kings, and especially Zedekiah, had been bad men and unreliable, breaking their word in a rebellious spirit, and this gave some support to their accusation. The city, however, had originally been chosen of God and for a brief time held dominion from Him. They gained their opportunity to besmirch the whole history of Jerusalem by the bad behaviour of the last kings that reigned there: a striking example of how the whole of God's work may be dishonoured by unfaithful servants, and give the opportunity the adversary desires.

A third thing that strikes us is the way they presented the matter; as if their whole concern was for the king's advantage and reputation, and they had themselves but little interest in it. This Artaxerxes being, we understand, a usurper, he would specially fear anything that might challenge his authority. The great spiritual adversary, who lay behind these human adversaries, is not lacking in skill!

The closing verses of our chapter show that their letter had the desired effect. In those early days careful records were kept, and search being made, the unfaithful doings of Zedekiah and others were revealed, as well as records of the great dominion once exerted by such as David and Solomon. Armed with the official edict that was issued, the adversaries, 'by force and power', made the work on the house of God to cease. It seemed as if what God had purposed in this matter was effectually frustrated.

Thus it has been again and again in the sad history of the world. It appeared at the outset that God's purpose in creating Adam was defeated by the introduction of sin. It appeared as if God's call of Abram to go forth to the land of promise was defeated by his descendants going down into Egypt. It now appeared as if the establishment of God's house on earth through David and Solomon had been defeated. And so it has been in the history of Christendom, when God has intervened in reviving mercy. Always the adversary has been at work and has found human instruments available to his hand.

This has been the case in our own day. We have only to consider the history of the past one hundred years — and more particularly perhaps the history of the English-speaking world — to see it all too plainly.

But does the adversary finally prevail? In the history before us the answer is found in chapters 5 and 6. When God intervenes everything is reversed. And ultimately God always does intervene. Let us take comfort and encouragement from that.

## Ezra 5

IN CONSIDERING THE first four chapters we noted six things that marked the revival granted to the Jews, as recorded by Ezra. Let us briefly recapitulate them. There was: —

1. A return to God's original centre.
2. No claim to powers they had forfeited by previous failure.
3. A spirit of devotedness and self-sacrifice.
4. Obedience to the word of God.
5. A position of separation from the surrounding world, and consequently,
6. Opposition from the world.

We now begin to read chapter 5, and at once there meets us a seventh feature, which completes the picture immediately before us. The work on the house of God having ceased, because of the contrary edict from the Persian usurper, God's Word was found in power amongst them, through the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. The result of this prophetic ministry was that once more the Jews began to build the house, in spite of the contrary edict.

We have the words of these two prophets preserved for us in the books that bear their names, and if we now glance for a moment at these two prophecies, we may readily perceive their general drift or scope.

Haggai's message was a very plain word of rebuke, of instruction, of encouragement. They had stopped building the house and were engaged in building nice houses for themselves all too willingly. He told them to recommence work on the house of God, and encouraged them by predictions of future glory, though warning them that they must not imagine that anything they did was perfect. The searching eye of God could perceive uncleanness in all the works of their hands.

Zechariah's message also encouraged but had in it more of visions and symbolic instruction. He foretold the advent of the Messiah, though He would be sold for thirty pieces of silver and rejected, and the sword of Jehovah would awake against Him, so that His hand might turn in blessing upon the 'little ones', who would be marked by deep repentance. Nevertheless the Messiah would return in glory as being Jehovah Himself, and Jerusalem would ultimately become Holiness unto Jehovah.

Immediately the building of the house recommenced the adversaries were up in arms. Behind these human adversaries lay the great adversary, who does not mind God's people 'feathering their own nests', but opposes all that is for God. We may wonder perhaps that the prophets incited the people to disobey the edict against the building of the house, but God knew that the usurper being dispossessed and a king of the ancient dynasty being on the throne, the way would be clear. The Darius of verse 6 who was mentioned in verse 5 of the previous chapter. was now on the throne; and just as Artaxerxes,

or Smerdis, being a usurper, was inclined to reverse the edicts of his predecessors, the new king, of the ancient line, was inclined to confirm them, and reverse the decrees of the usurper.

Hence, when fresh complaint was sent up to Darius against the Jews, now again working on the temple, he caused search to be made in the records to discover the truth of the matter. This we see in the opening verse of chapter 6, but we shall do well to take note of the ground taken by the leaders of the Jews, when confronted again by their adversaries, as recorded in the latter part of chapter 5.

Their opponents put on record that when challenged their answer was twofold; both religious and political; and they put the religious reason in the first place, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth', and are building under His command. In the second place they quoted the original authorization they had received from Cyrus.

Their position was indeed a strong one. Centuries later Peter and the other apostles were challenged by the Jewish council in the effort to stop them preaching the risen Christ, and thus working in the spiritual building, that started on the day when the Spirit was poured forth, as narrated in Acts 2. Their answer was, 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (Acts 5: 29); and so they continued to preach the Gospel in spite of the prohibition issued by: the religious authorities. Here, however, the verdict of Darius was entirely favourable. He cancelled the adverse command and confirmed the original edict of Cyrus. Thus God caused the wrath of men to praise Him, and fulfil His word.

## Ezra 6

THE ORIGINAL DECREE of Cyrus having been discovered, it was found to be more full in its details and more favourable to the Jews than their adversaries had imagined. It demanded not only that they be left unhindered, but rather actively helped in their work, and be supplied with things needed; and that all who set themselves to hinder or destroy should themselves be destroyed and their houses made a dunghill.

So it came to pass that the house was built in the course of a good many years, for it was not finished until the sixth year of Darius, as verse 15 tells us. When completed there was a season of much joy, sacrifices were offered and the Passover was observed, as recorded in the closing verses of chapter 6. Two things marked the people, which we shall do well to note. First, the Passover was eaten not only by the children of Israel, who had come out of captivity, but also by 'all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel'. We learn from Jeremiah 52: 16, that when the great captivity took place, 'certain of the poor of the land' were left unremoved, that they might be husbandmen and carry on cultivation. Some of these, or their descendants, cleansed themselves from evils in which they had become involved, and joined in this time of revival and blessing, and so could take part in the feast of unleavened bread.

A second thing, which points in the same direction, we see in an earlier verse. They rightly discerned that, in view of the sad and sinful history of the nation a sin offering was necessary, if they were solemnly to place themselves thus before the God of their fathers; but this they offered in twelve he goats, 'according to the number of the tribes of Israel, though the mass of those who had come out of captivity were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

By this time five or six centuries had elapsed since the rending of the nation and the secession of the ten tribes under Jeroboam, but the returned remnant recognized that God had called the whole nation out of Egypt, that the division that had ensued was their failure and not God's purpose, and that God never swerves from His original thought and call. Hence they still had all twelve tribes on their

hearts. Though they were but a remnant, they held to God's thought and purpose for the whole nation.

This has a very distinct voice to us today. The divisions of Christendom are multiplied, but if saints are found, bearing a remnant character, in keeping with what we are seeing in the book of Ezra, they must ever keep in view the whole Church of God, and not become wrapped up in themselves, as though others did not count before God. Every available Israelite, who was clean, by having separated himself from the filthiness of the surrounding heathen, was to benefit by the sacrifices offered, and participate in the feasts of the Passover and of Unleavened Bread.

## Ezra 7

IT WAS AFTER these things, as the first verse of chapter 7 tells us, that Ezra the priest with Levitical companions left Babylon and went up to Jerusalem. It was in the seventh year of that Artaxerxes, under whom thirteen years later Nehemiah went up. Ezra's genealogy was clearly known, and it is given in the first 5 verses, showing him to be truly descended from Aaron, the first high priest. **This fact** qualified him for the place he was about to take. He had the further qualification of being, 'a ready scribe in the law of Moses', which indicates that he was fully acquainted with the original word of God, which still had authority over the lives of the people.

But he had a third qualification of even greater importance, and this is stated in verse 10. He was a man who 'prepared his heart', which indicates that he was a man of spiritual exercise, something like Timothy of New Testament days, who was to meditate upon the things of God and give himself wholly to them. As a scribe he must have had a good knowledge of the words he had often written, and this must have prepared his head. The preparing of his heart went much deeper than this, for it led him to 'seek the law of the Lord'. He really wanted to be instructed of God.

The next statement of verse 10 still further deepens his qualifications. He was a seeker after the law in order that he might 'do it'. This was the crowning feature that marked him. Let us pause and consider this.

Ezra lived under the law of Moses, in regard to which our Lord said, 'This do, and thou shalt live' (Luke 10: 28), and he knew well that to do it was the great thing. We are not under the law but under grace, yet we have the apostolic injunction, 'Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves' (James 1: 22). In this Paul does indeed agree with James, for in all his epistles he first expounds doctrine and then enforces the practical living and behaviour that the doctrine demands. Under the law men were to do in order to live. Under the Gospel we are brought into life in order that we may do the will of God. It is easy to forget this, and treat Christianity as though it were simply an exalted philosophy to entertain our minds.

Having prepared his heart to seek the law, so that he might do it, and thus exemplify its demands to some degree, he was now in the right state to 'teach in Israel statutes and judgments'. We all can see the point of this, and we trust we may realize its implications in regard to ourselves. We only effectually teach if our own lives are in accordance with what we say. How well the Apostle Paul illustrated this, for twice he alluded to it. When speaking to the elders of Ephesus: I 'have shewed you, and have taught you', and again, 'I have shewed you all things' (Acts 20: 20, 35). He illustrated in his life what he taught with his mouth. This is the effective way of teaching, whether it be in Ezra's day, or Paul's, or our own.

Following this statement of the piety and zeal that marked Ezra, we have given us a full account of the letter given by Artaxerxes to Ezra, amounting to a decree, under the authority of which he journeyed to Jerusalem and acted when he got there. It occupies verses 11-26. As one reads through

these verses, one cannot but be struck with the wonderful work of God in the mind of a heathen king, which led him to grant such powers, order such assistance to be given and express such a recognition of the claims and greatness of 'the God of heaven'. We also see the over ruling wisdom of God controlling the mind of the king so that His servant was given liberty and even commanded to do, what God proposed.

Ezra, we see, was given remarkable authority, it being assumed that he would act, as the king said, 'after the wisdom of thy God'; and he and his helpers were exempted from every form of tax or exaction, and also given power to punish all evildoers, whether they transgressed the law of God or 'the law of the king'. Ezra was to teach the laws of God to those who were ignorant of them. So Ezra was commissioned to go up to the land armed with remarkable powers in the providence of God.

The two verses that close this chapter record Ezra's thanksgiving as he recognized how God had put His good hand upon him and moved the king's heart to grant all this. All was 'to beautify the house of the Lord'. The silver and gold and other gifts out of the treasuries would doubtless be used to increase the natural beauty of the house that was being constructed, but we venture to think that the teaching of the law, which Ezra purposed to do, would produce in the people, if they received it, a piety, which is a greater adornment to any house than can be conferred by any amount of silver and gold. The piety that marked Ezra himself can be plainly seen in these two verses.

## Ezra 8

THE FIRST FOURTEEN verses are occupied with the names of those who accompanied Ezra according to their genealogies, and with the number of the males in each family. God has seen to it that the names of those who bestirred themselves to answer to His call to return to the land, should be placed on record in a very permanent way, while the names of those who did not bestir themselves are almost entirely lost.

With verse fifteen we resume the history of the migration; how again, as is confessed, 'by the good hand of our God upon us', there was brought to them the 'man of understanding' that they needed, so that all together they were gathered at the river of Ahava, ready to set forth. Ezra recognized, however, that the fact that they had very definitely received help of God in the past did not exempt them from the need of dependence on Him for the present, hence His face must again be sought before they started; so according to the customs of the law a fast was proclaimed that they might afflict their souls before God, and seek of Him the right way for their journey.

Journeying in those days was not particularly safe or easy, so worldly prudence would have dictated the request of an armed escort. This Ezra did not do, and in verse 22 we have his touching confession in the matter. He had spoken in very definite fashion to the king as to the care of his God on behalf of His people and His wrath against those who forsake Him, so he was ashamed to depart in practice from what he had professed. This frank confession on Ezra's part sets before us a very good example. He was on God's business, and so did not need to rely on worldly support.

Let us consider how easy it is for us in our day to profess much confidence in God as to how we carry on His work, and yet to fail when the test comes, and we are faced with some very practical questions. We may well be ashamed when some adversary can reproach us by calling upon us to practise what we preach. If we take the Apostle Paul as an example, as well as Ezra, it is quite plain that in carrying on the work of God we do not need the support nor the patronage of the world.

Being assured that God had heard their entreaty, Ezra gave into the hands of trusted helpers the gold

and silver treasures they had with them, and they started on their journey from Ahava, and safely arrived at Jerusalem with everything intact. Those to whom the treasure had been entrusted had proved faithful, and they returned thanks to God by their burnt offerings. Thus far all was well.

## Ezra 9

THE HISTORY OF all the revivals, that God grants in His mercy, seems to be the same: a bright beginning, followed by declension more or less rapid. There is this constant tendency to forsake the fountain of living waters, and hew ourselves out broken cisterns that can hold no water (see Jer. 2: 13). Thus it has been from ancient times to our own day. Many of us may have inherited good things from more recent revivals, granted in the mercy of God; but how are we holding and profiting by these things? Or, are we neglecting them and letting them slip away?

Ezra had been so prospered of God in the enterprise he had undertaken that he may well have arrived in Jerusalem with high hopes. If so, the information he at once received must have come to him with very painful force. Among the people then in the land, there were certain princes who realized the sad declension that had taken place. That which had started so brightly under Zerubbabel and Jeshua had been gravely marred. Not only the com. mon people, but also priests, Levites, and even princes and rulers, had been involved in the trespass. They had failed to maintain the necessary separation from the varied heathen nations that surrounded them. Intermarrying with them, they had learned their customs and had practised their abominable sacrifices and ways.

If we read the first six verses of Deuteronomy 7, we find that seven nations, who were greater and mightier than Israel, were in the land that God had given to them; they were to destroy them and contract no marriages with them, so that they might not be perverted to their ways. Even under the faithful Joshua this was only partially done, and now many centuries later we see the effects of their failure. In the first verse of our chapter the nations mentioned are almost the same as those we find in Deuteronomy 7, and to them the Egyptians are added, making eight in all.

The people had been warned through Moses of the disastrous effects that would flow from alliance with these peoples, and those effects had come to pass in the history of both the ten tribes and the two, and had led to the scattering and the captivity. Now once again the same snare had entangled the returned remnant, in spite of a bright start, and hearing of it, Ezra was overwhelmed.

And we have painfully to reflect that the same snare, though it is mainly exercised in a rather different way, underlies much of the almost apostate conditions that prevail in Christendom today. The evil set in when there was the merging of the Church and the world under the Roman Emperor Constantine, which in the course of a few centuries led to the rise of the Papacy as a great world-power. And later again, after the Reformation, state churches came into existence, in which those truly converted and the unconverted are mixed together, and so on. The damaging effect of this is all too evident on every hand.

Have our eyes been opened to see the terrible failure that has marked the church in this thing? And if we have seen it, have our reactions been at all similar to that displayed by Ezra? We fear it has not been so. We shall do well to take very careful notice of the effect which the sad discovery had upon him.

Here was a man singularly free from the evil that was uncovered before him, yet he smote himself, instead of starting to smite the guilty parties. According to the customs of those days, he rent his clothes, but not content with this he smote himself, by plucking out hair from his head and beard — a

painful process. Having done so, he sat down 'astonied', or 'overwhelmed'. He began with himself in humiliation before God.

Starting thus, the effect was immediate. Amongst the returned remnant there were those who were conscious of the widespread transgression of the law in this matter, but who had not the energy, and perhaps not the position among the people, to do anything about it. These were at once stirred up by Ezra's drastic action, and identified themselves with him, as verse 4 records. They were those who 'trembled at the words of the God of Israel', and these, being like Ezra, are just the people to whom God will look in His mercy, as stated in Isaiah 66: 2.

At the time of the evening sacrifice, when there was a small typical representation of the sacrifice of Christ, Ezra arose with his rent garments and fell on his knees to approach God in the remarkable prayer, which is recorded in verses 6-15; a prayer in which no actual request was made; consisting as it did from first to last in humble and heartbroken confession of sins, in which he personally had not shared.

One remarkable feature, characterizing the whole confession, is that he identified himself with the people, and confessed the evils as though they were his own. From beginning to end he uses 'we' and 'us', where we might have expected 'they' and 'them' to appear. Moreover he acknowledged that the evils that had confronted him were a reviving of the sins that had defiled his people from the **outset, or as he put it, 'since the days of our fathers', but** aggravated by the fact that **they were being repeated after** God had shown such mercy in relieving them of the governmental consequences of their former sins.

This prayer of Ezra contains admonition for ourselves of a solemnizing kind, so we do well to consider it. In the history of Christendom great mercy has been shown, and from the time of the Reformation revivings have taken place, but only to be marked by this same tendency to revert to former evils. It would indeed be well if every true saint today was on his or her knees before God with words like Ezra's, springing from convictions and a heart like his. And all too often we should have to make our confession as having been involved in the sin and defilement, and not, like Ezra, as identifying ourselves with those who have done so.

## Ezra 10

IN VERSE 1, we see Ezra on his knees, and as he confessed, moved by deep emotion that revealed itself in weeping. Some of us are so constituted that we dislike anything emotional, but we must recognize that truly deep conviction, whether as to things good or things evil, is bound to produce emotion — an example of emotion in both directions is found in 2 Timothy 1: 4. Paul was not a mere theologian, propounding Christian doctrine in a philosophical way, but an ardent servant of Christ, moved in his spirit by what he preached and by the needs of both saints and sinners. Timothy too he commended as one who would 'care with genuine feeling how ye get on' (Phil. 2: 20. New Trans.). Let us cultivate today a similar tenderness of feeling.

We should then be more likely to see our attitude and words having real effect upon others, as is recorded in the case of Ezra. The fact was quickly revealed that in Israel there were a large number who were aware of the sin and departure but had not the faith and spiritual energy to act as he did. Awakened to the sin and need by him, they also assembled and wept as he did. And further than this, a leader amongst them declared that the only hope lay in putting away the evils in which they had been involved and obeying the instructions they had been given from the outset. He reminded them in effect

of what the Lord had said through Jeremiah, recorded in verse 16 of his sixth chapter. The principle there stated stands good today. At the beginning of each dispensation God makes known the 'paths' that suit what He has introduced and established. These remain unchanged throughout the dispensation, and to revert to them after a season of departure is always right. Let us see that we do so today.

A special responsibility rested upon Ezra in this matter, since as we saw in the early part of Ezra 7, he had prepared his heart to seek, and do, and teach the law of the Lord. This was recognized by Shechaniah, so that he said to him, 'Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee'; and he assured him he would have the support of those who feared God in the action that he had to take.

Thus God wrought in that day, and it does seem to be His normal way of working. Not every Christian is qualified and called to initiate some work of God, not even in the early days. Hence that word, 'Remember your leaders who have spoken to you the word of God' (Heb. 13: 7). The word to be emphasized here is 'Leaders', for they not only expounded the way, and enforced it by word of mouth, but walked in it themselves.

In the case before us Ezra's action and words had a remarkable and immediate effect, for God was with him. On a large scale the people were moved and trembled as they realized how they had disobeyed the law, and a Breat rain from heaven heightened their distress. The resolution was made to confess their trespass and to put away their connections with the heathen women, in which they had been entangled.

These two things appear in verse 11. It is sadly possible to make confession of wrong-doing, and yet continue in it in more subtle and unseen ways. It is also possible to realize that wrong-doing of a certain sort is not profit able and to forsake it, but without any confession of wrong in the matter. But when the conviction of sin is genuine, there is first confession of the sin, and then a forsaking of it, as is plainly intimated in Proverbs 28: 13.

The rest of this chapter, and indeed of the book, is taken up with two things. First, we are told of the careful and orderly way in which was effected the difficult and distressing work of putting away the strange wives, and thus delivering themselves from this worldly and sinful entanglement. Had it been done in an impulsive and reckless way, it might have brought further dishonour on the name of the Lord. This too may have a voice for us. As we grow in grace and our understanding of the will of God is enlarged, we may become aware that something, that we thought little of, is really a spiritual entanglement and hindrance. Let us get out of it in a way that is worthy of the Lord whom we serve and obey. If, for instance, it means loss being incurred somewhere, let us accept the loss ourselves, instead of imposing it upon others.

The second thing, with which the book closes, is a lengthy list of those who had been involved in the trespass. It may surprise us to see that the first names mentioned in verse 18, were sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, the man whose name follows that of Zerubbabel in Ezra 2: 2; the priest who is mentioned in the prophecy of Haggai, and again in Zechariah 3. Some, if not all his sons, had taken part in this sin. But really, this should not surprise us, for similar tragedies have been all too frequent. We have only to cite the cases of Aaron and his two sons, of Samuel and his sons, of Eli and his sons, of David and his sons, of Hezekiah and his son Manasseh. And so we might continue even to recent times. It is a sad and humbling fact that many true and devoted servants of our Lord have had sons who have not followed in their father's footsteps. The recognition of this fact should lead us to be much in prayer for the families of those who serve the Lord Jesus.

Lastly, notice that the names given are of those who put away the strange wives, and offered a trespass offering. It was surely to their discredit that they had taken these wives, but the putting away of

them was to their credit, and so their names appear in the record. They were, as we might now put it, backsliders restored, as the result of the faithful ministry and action of Ezra. He had indeed been, 'a ready scribe in the law of Moses'.