

EZRA

THE LORD HELPS

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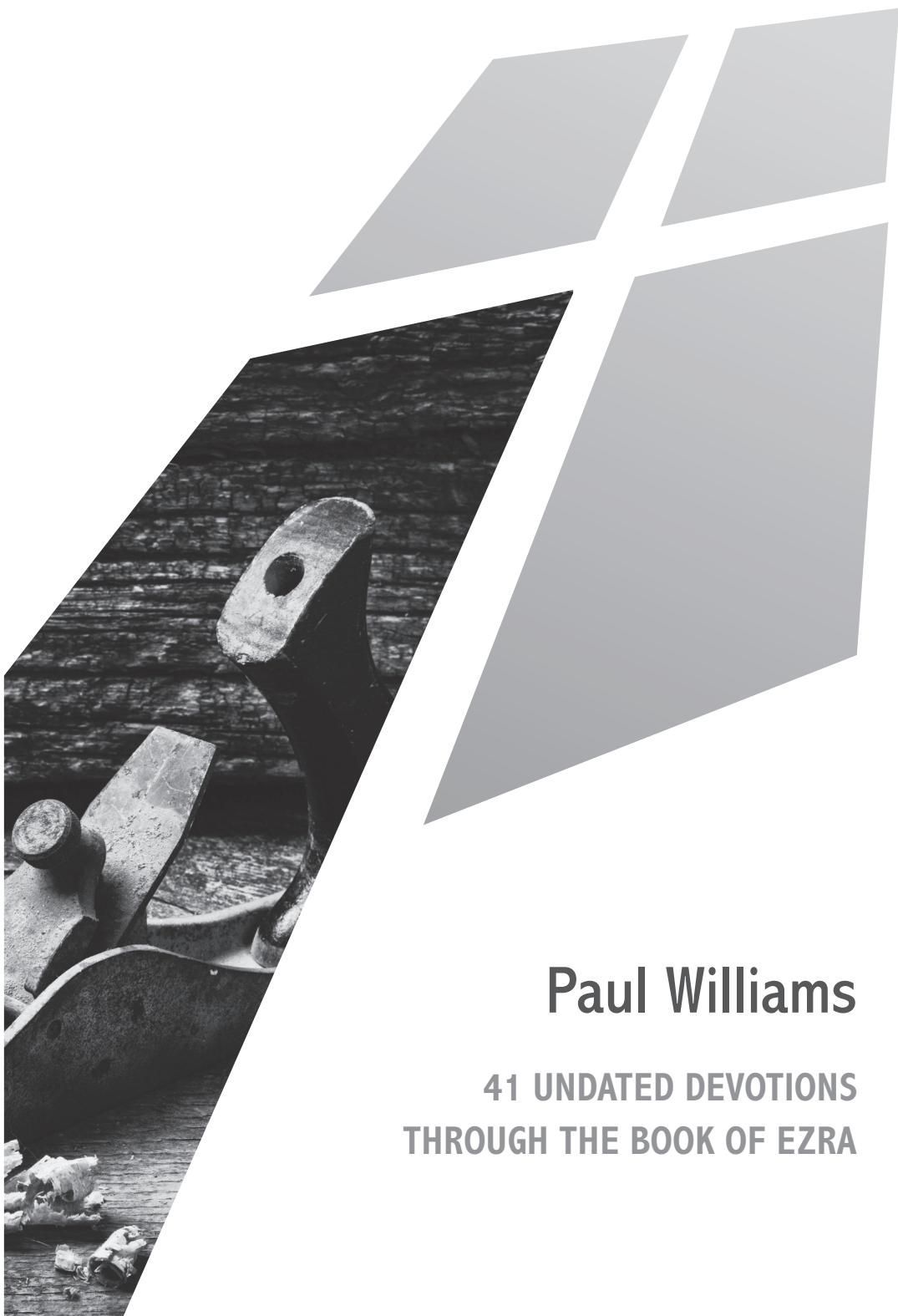
10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com

Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

Email: info@10ofthose.com

Website: www.10ofthose.com





Paul Williams

**41 UNDATED DEVOTIONS
THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA**



INTRODUCTION

Throughout history there are times when, somewhere in the world, God's church experiences a great revival. A phenomenal numerical growth occurs together with new depths of commitment to God from His people.

I love hearing stories from these times. During the Welsh revival at the beginning of the twentieth century, God did a mighty work that resulted in churches being packed to the rafters for years. The revival had an impact throughout Welsh society. For example, the Welsh police force formed a male voice choir and spent their time travelling around Wales performing concerts. As crime rates fell so dramatically, they had nothing else to do! I'm also told that even the pit ponies down the coal mines were affected by the revival. As miners were converted to Christ, they stopped swearing, meaning the ponies no longer understood their commands without any expletives thrown in!

The Welsh revival is one of those times when a great work of God has transformed not just the church but whole communities. Those times in history are few and far between, but that doesn't mean that we have to wait for revival before we become what we should be.

Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, was convinced that the church must continually re-examine itself. Borrowing St Augustine's phrase 'ecclesia semper reformanda', Latin for 'the church is always to be reformed', he urged two things. First, that we should continually check that what we believe lines up with what the Bible teaches. Second, that we should always ensure how we live squares up with a biblical lifestyle. Individual lives should be constantly changing and transforming into the likeness of Christ.

We see that happening when people are converted to Christ; when the Holy Spirit changes nominal Christians; and when spiritually sleepy Christians are awakened to give themselves wholeheartedly to Christ. When that happens to a whole church family, or to the church across a city or a nation, it has a spectacular impact in the community and on society.

As we open the pages of Ezra, we read a book which is all about realising a reformation among the people of God. From chapters 1 to 10 we see God bringing about the most remarkable change among His people.

Ezra's name means 'the Lord helps'. Only with the Lord's help is this spectacular transformation and reformation possible. We can't do so in our own strength. Programmes and strategies won't bring it about. But when the Lord moves His people, truly wonderful things happen. Studying the book of Ezra should leave us amazed at all that the Lord does to reform His people. This then should give us a hunger for the Lord to do mighty things in us and our own church family, and across our nation.

It's 539 BC. Cyrus has just become king of Persia (v. 1), the world superpower of the day. The Persian Empire rules over God's people, Judah, who have been in exile for nearly 70 years now. They were taken captive by the Babylonians, unceremoniously dragged out of Jerusalem and forcibly relocated in Babylon. Since then the Persians have taken control of the Babylonian Empire.

But now something is about to change. The Lord is moving the heart of King Cyrus (v. 1). That in itself is an arresting start. Cyrus is not a believer; he is personally nowhere with God. And geographically Cyrus is in Babylon, nowhere near Jerusalem. This shouts loud and clear, 'The Lord is supremely powerful over all'.

It is the Lord who reigns, not Cyrus. The Lord reigns all over the whole world, calling the shots and changing hearts – even of those who do not acknowledge Him as God; even of the most powerful man on the planet. How encouraging is that?! As the first chapter unfolds, we'll see that the Lord is also moving to bring about a reformation among His people.

This sensational beginning shouldn't be a surprise though. It's exactly what the Lord said would happen (v. 1). The events of the book of Ezra are a fulfilment of the Lord's Word written in the book of Jeremiah: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place' (Jer. 29:10).

God said those words at a low point in Judah's history: as His people were being carted off to Babylon and into exile. Now, against all the apparent odds, that promise – to take his people out of exile and back home to Jerusalem after 70 years – is being fulfilled.

So accurate is biblical prophecy that through another prophet, Isaiah, the Lord said that this return would come about through Cyrus. This was years before Cyrus existed! Now that is precisely what is happening (v. 1).

The fulfilment of prophecy is such an encouragement for us who too are not home. We are foreigners and exiles in this world (1 Pet. 2:11). Following Jesus is tough. At times we're sure to question whether God will keep His promises, specifically to keep His church. Yet, through Jesus Christ, the Lord today is bringing us out of exile and back into relationship with Him.

REFLECTION

When you are tempted to question whether the Lord keeps His promises to keep His people, how does this verse encourage you to continue trusting Him? When you look around at the world and wonder who is in control, what does this verse tell you?

We have seen the historical setting of the book of Ezra: God's people are in exile, but the Lord has moved the heart of Cyrus (v. 1). In verses 2–4 we read what happens as a result: Cyrus makes a proclamation throughout his realm (v. 1), telling God's people that they could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (vv. 2–3).

When the temple was first built by King Solomon, it was a most glorious structure. It wasn't ever listed as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but it might well have made the top 10! But at the time of Ezra, the temple was like a bomb site. After years of neglect, it was in ruins. This really mattered, not because it was a monument to be preserved for historical and architectural reasons but because of its theological significance.

The temple was the only place where people could go to meet God. At its centre was the altar because sinners could only meet Him through sacrifice. Understanding that helps us to see the significance of the book of Ezra for Christians. It points us towards Jesus: today the one way God can be met is through Jesus' sacrifice of Himself on the cross.

That's why the Jewish temple, having been raised to the ground in AD 70, was never rebuilt. It's no longer needed. Jesus said that His body was the temple

(John 2:21). He is the one we go to in order to meet God.

But there's a second New Testament understanding of the temple. Paul's letters to the Corinthians teach that the church, God's people, is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16). By His Spirit, God dwells in us (individually) and among us (corporately). We also act as a temple as we proclaim Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross, enabling others to come to know God too.

The book of Ezra speaks so powerfully to us here. Then the physical temple (its bricks and mortar) was in ruins and needing to be rebuilt. Today the church (the people of God) is too a building project. *'Ecclesia semper reformanda'* – we need to be continually reformed, to be built into the people we should be. We can see that very clearly in the West, where very often the church is in ruins.

REFLECTION

Consider how the church needs to be rebuilt. Pray that God would move to do that work, first in you, then in your church family and throughout the church in your nation, and even in the hearts of powerful, unbelieving rulers.

The Church of England’s old Book of Common Prayer contains a wonderful prayer for those in authority. Penned by Archbishop Cranmer, it asks that those who rule this land would ‘truly and indifferently [impartially] minister justice, to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue.’ It is a prayer for those in government to pass laws that would both bring about justice and preserve Christianity in the land.

To pray that you have to believe that God is very powerful indeed – able to influence and guide unbelievers. That is precisely what we’ve seen in these explosive opening verses of Ezra. God moves in the heart of Cyrus (v. 1) – the unbelieving leader of the Persian superpower. So powerful is this work of God that Cyrus not only permits but positively promotes and encourages God’s people to be released from exile – in order to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (vv. 2–4). This was, as Archbishop Cranmer would put it, for ‘the maintenance of ... true religion’.

That is quite remarkable in itself, but it doesn’t end there. Cyrus even urges people in his realm to give large sums of money to enable the rebuilding of the temple (v. 4). You can imagine a ‘Children in Need’ appeal on state television, but for the children of God who are in financial need.

The Lord moved in the heart of Cyrus to begin a work of reformation. He can do the same again today. We are threatened by significant changes to the law which could easily hamper our efforts to proclaim the gospel. Persecution won’t ultimately stop the spread of the gospel – it never has. But we should pray for the Lord to so work in the hearts of those in authority – even unbelievers – that we would be able to press on with gospel ministry, unhindered and unhampered. We could pray for more than that: for the government to promote and even fund the cause of the gospel. That’s what happened in 539 BC!

REFLECTION

How often do you pray for the government? Do you pray that authorities would pass laws and act in ways that do not hinder church growth and even promote gospel growth? Read 1 Timothy 2:1–4, then pray for leaders to create a peaceful environment where the gospel can be freely proclaimed to everyone.

I begin many days looking at my diary and thinking that I have an impossible task ahead of me. I wonder how meetings with people about tough situations could ever turn out well. I'm not a pessimist; in fact I'm quite an optimistic person. My despair comes from a realistic assessment of the human heart. As most of the time I struggle to live the way I should, how will I ever persuade someone else to do so?! The answer is here in verses 5 and 6.

A significant change in the hearts of people requires a mighty work of God. In verse 5 God moves in the hearts of His people so that they are prepared to make huge sacrifices for Him.

It's the second time in this chapter that we have read of God moving hearts. First God moved the heart of Cyrus (v. 1). Now God is moving the hearts of His people to get them literally moving.

When the people of Judah were first carted off to Babylon in 605 BC, far from home and against their will, it would have been agony for them. But now, 70 years later, Babylon has become home. Cyrus is promoting religious tolerance and has an excellent human rights record. Living in Babylon is a very comfortable option.

So to leave Babylon in order to relocate in Jerusalem is a really big ask. It means uprooting family; sorting out school places; getting to know new neighbours; leaving behind everything that is familiar.

On top of all that, when they arrive in Jerusalem, they will be faced with the really hard work of rebuilding the temple. For God's people to be prepared to do that, God must move their hearts.

But repairing the temple was crucial because it was the only means, through sacrifice, that people could meet God. When God moves our hearts and impresses upon us the gospel, we too will see the importance of building the church. The sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus Christ is the only way through which people can know Him. The church is the primary vehicle through which the gospel is to be proclaimed.

Christians are needed to go to other parts of the world, to the tough areas of their own nation and into their neighbourhood in order to build the church. But giving yourself to that work is costly. It will mean personal sacrifice. We'll only live a life of costly sacrifice if God moves our hearts.

REFLECTION

Pray that the Lord would move in your heart, giving you a desire to see the church built. Ask that you would be prepared to go wherever needed, no matter what the personal cost and sacrifice.

At first these verses seem to be no more than a list of the family silver. If you like the *Antiques Roadshow*, you might find a catalogue of gold and silver pots and pans interesting, but otherwise this appears to be little more than a record of expensive bowls and dishes. Don't be fooled: it is so much more than that.

In verse 7 Cyrus is returning all the temple articles that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who took the people of Judah into exile (see Is. 39 and Dan. 1:1–2; 5:4). What looks like nothing more than an inventory of costly artefacts is in fact a powerful demonstration of the reversal of the exile, and with it a powerful declaration that the Lord is God.

When Nebuchadnezzar first took the people from Jerusalem to Babylon, he quite deliberately deposited items from the Jewish temple into the 'treasure-house of his god' (Dan. 1:2). Doing so was a provocative proclamation that the Lord was weak and that He had been defeated by the gods of Babylon.

But now, at the end of Ezra 1, Babylon no longer exists and the articles belonging to the Lord's temple are being returned there. So who's in charge now? This inventory speaks powerfully of the Lord's ultimate authority. It declares the end of the exile and the fulfilment of God's promise to his people – they are on their way home.

As the Bible unfolds, we discover that exile from God doesn't end by moving dishes and pans to Jerusalem, or by any kind of return to an earthly city. The exile is ended in Christ. In Christ we discover all God's promises are fulfilled. As we come to Christ, we are brought back into relationship with the one true, living God. In Christ a true reformation of God's people begins. Today we declare that the Lord is King by proclaiming the gospel and ensuring the church is all that she should be.

Then when Christ returns, God will finally and fully end the exile of His people as He ushers in the heavenly new creation. He will show Himself indisputably to be God over all.

REFLECTION

Consider the circumstances that cause people to suggest the Lord is not God. Think about the times when we appear to be far from the Lord. Ask the Lord to give you the faith to believe that He is indeed in charge, and has shown His sovereign rule in history.

I love the words often attributed to D.L. Moody, the nineteenth-century American evangelist: ‘The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to Him.’

God can powerfully use individuals who are wholeheartedly devoted to Christ. Indeed, later we see how important the one man Ezra was to realising a remarkable transformation among the people of Judah. But for God’s church to experience a reformation it requires more than just one person to be fully consecrated to God. We see that very clearly here in Ezra 2.

Throughout Ezra 1 God moved hearts so that His people could move from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. First, in 1:1, God moved in the heart of King Cyrus, an unbeliever, to create a mandate for the people of Judah to leave, laden with valuable materials, livestock and the temple articles. Second, in 1:5, God moved in the hearts of His people so that many were prepared to make the move. Chapter 2 is that movement.

Verses 2–61 lists all those who make the hugely sacrificial move from Babylon to Jerusalem. We might try and imagine the personal stories behind each name, but initially it’s important to see a whole people moving together. Yes, God uses individuals, and one person fully consecrated to Him can be mightily

used by Him. But what a difference when God’s people move together.

Imagine a group of people encouraging each other to move together to a new region to plant a new church. None of them feel strong enough to do it on their own, but together! Picture the majority in a church family obeying an inspiring sermon. One or two being changed would be significant, but when a whole church family is transformed through obedience!

In Ezra 2 we see a people obediently moving. The list begins in verse 2 by naming the leaders. This is godly leadership: leading from the front and by example. And what follows are many people, thousands of them, ‘upping and leaving’ to work towards God’s temple being restored.

REFLECTION

Ask the Lord to put godly people around you so that together you can spur each other on, in love and obedience. Pray that the Lord would make you an inspiration to others. Ask the Lord to raise up godly leaders who will lead His people with their example of sacrificial living.

I know the chances that you actually read through this list of names is very slim. If you did, well done! To read Ezra 2 seems about as interesting as reading through the telephone directory! It's about as enthralling a way to pass the time as watching paint dry. But stay with it because Ezra 2 is thrilling.

In the next studies we'll look at the details – and they are fascinating. But first, look at the sheer numbers of people who travel from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is just under 50,000 (vv. 64–65). That's quite a migration. I live in Sheffield, the fourth largest city in England. What happened in Ezra 2 would amount to almost one tenth of the population of Sheffield moving out of the city, en masse, in one day. The motorways would be clogged up beyond anything we experience on a busy Bank Holiday getaway!

To get a picture in your mind, think of the devastating images of refugees migrating in mass from the world's war-torn areas. What's happening here in Ezra is like that, with one very significant difference: here the people of Judah are travelling *from* a safe haven. They are moving from a well-established and secure home in Babylon, and travelling to somewhere that is in ruins, looking like a bomb site. Yes, in one sense they are returning home, but none of them has ever known Jerusalem as their home and it is now a pile of rubble.

They are also returning to embark upon months and months of hard manual labour to rebuild the temple. The task ahead is colossal, so necessitates huge numbers: 42,360 people plus 7,337 servants to be precise. It is a mighty work of God that sees so many people move (1:5).

They go because they want to see the temple built. Today God's building project is His church. While godly men need to lead in that task (as we saw in v. 2), what a difference it would make if hundreds of God's people were so dedicated to the work of building the church that they would go anywhere and do anything for Jesus. When God moves thousands of 'ordinary' Christians like that, we see a reformation.

REFLECTION

Ask the Lord to expand your horizons so that you are ready to go anywhere and do anything for Him.

Pray for the Lord to work in the hearts of huge numbers of Christians – in your church family, region and elsewhere – to be willing to make significant sacrifices to build God's church.

Previously we saw the huge numbers of people who made the move from Babylon to Jerusalem. In the next few devotions we're going to look at the different groups listed in this chapter. After the family groups listed in verses 3–35, we next read of the priests.

Four clans of priests are named, who together add up to nearly 4,300. It's a huge number of priests. Why so many? Dale Ralph Davis writes, 'Doubtless because they longed to serve at the altar in a restored temple, which they could not do in exile. Their desire was to rebuild the altar and the temple, to restore the public worship of God so they could serve where they were meant to serve.'¹

Reading that explanation begs the question, 'Do we have the same desire to serve the Lord with the gifts and talents we've been given?' The Lord gives us gifts for the building up of His church. We should long to use our gifts in His service. That longing to see the church built up should drive us to go to extraordinary lengths, to make remarkable sacrifices and to work incredibly hard. That's what we see in these priests.

We can become unhelpfully self-obsessed in spending time focussing on the gifts we have. What is helpful is asking, 'How can I serve the Lord in order to build His church?' When that's our attitude, we take the focus off ourselves and onto the Lord's purposes and how we can serve others.

I can think of a number of people like that. They long to serve God so that the church will be built up numerically and spiritually. These people don't talk about how God has gifted them; prepared to go to great lengths to serve God and His church, they get on with that task by using their gifts.

REFLECTION

Ask God to help you to use your gifts to serve Him and others so that the church is built up.

A few months back I needed to go into Christ Church Fulwood early in the morning before heading off to catch a train. I thought the building would be empty and shrouded in darkness. But when I arrived, I saw a couple of lights on, then met a member of the church family cleaning the toilets. It turns out she does that every week. It's a wonderful thing to see people ready to do the most menial tasks in order to serve the Lord and His people.

In verses 36–39 we saw the huge number of priests who went to Jerusalem: 4,289 of them. In verse 40 we meet the Levites, who are the priests' assistants. There are just 74 Levites who return to Jerusalem. Do the maths and it works out at a ratio of one Levite to every 58 priests. With so few of them, they know there'll be tons to do, but these 74 are still willing to work. Here are servant-hearted people, ready to do all manner of jobs behind the scenes.

We can see that same servant-heartedness again and again as we look at the lists of temple servants (vv. 43–54) and the servants of Solomon (vv. 55–57). Verse 58 tells us there are 392 of them. The temple servants assist the Levites (as we know from Ezra 8:20), doing the most menial tasks around the temple.

In my book it is the Levites – who serve the priests – and the temple servants – who assist the Levites – that are the

unsung heroes of this chapter. We don't know their names – just the families they came from. Everything they did was out of public view. They were prepared to do the most ordinary tasks, behind the scenes. They weren't after status or recognition. They weren't out to promote themselves or push themselves forward. They were just happy to serve – even by cleaning the toilets!

The church needs people like that if she is to be reformed how she should. Indeed, it's such people who model what everyone in the church should be like. This includes church leaders because *the* leader of the church, the Lord Jesus, is a servant. He came to serve us by dying on the cross. In following Him we too should be willing to be servant-hearted in the building up of the church.

REFLECTION

Reflect on how the Lord Jesus served us by dying on a cross. Ask the Lord to give you a servant-heartedness that will see you ready to do the most menial tasks to build up His church. Ask yourself how exactly you can serve others to do that.

Debbie's life had been easy. She had two beautiful girls, lived in a substantial house in a very pleasant part of the country, and had no real financial worries. Then, one day, everything changed. She discovered her husband had been unfaithful. If that wasn't devastating enough, within weeks she was diagnosed with significant health problems.

It was a dreadful time for her, but it was precisely through these circumstances that she met some Christians. She had no previous connection with Christianity, nor had she ever been to Sunday school as a child. But when someone invited her to church, she accepted. There she met people who cared for her. In time she heard the gospel. Months later she turned to the Lord, who became everything to her. Years later it is wonderful to watch her serve the Lord. Her priority is to see God's church built. What's more, her daughters and her parents have also turned to the Lord.

Edwin Yamauchi says that 68% of the names listed in verses 43–59 are of foreign origin.² It's therefore likely that two thirds of these people were descendants of prisoners of war taken captive during King David's reign, who were then pressed into slavery (1 Kgs. 9:20–21). Once slaves taken against their will, now, years later, they are listed among God's people.

A possible scenario is that these people from other countries had been pressed into service around the temple. There they heard the truth about the one

true God. At some point they embraced the truth for themselves, becoming followers of the Lord. Out of their own free will they wanted to serve Him. Then their children and their children's children followed the Lord.

That scenario often happens. Circumstances change and we find ourselves plunged into a devastating situation that we would have never chosen for ourselves. But it turns out to be the very thing that brings us into contact with Christians or makes us open to hear the gospel, and we turn to Jesus.

Behind verses 43–58 we can imagine many wonderful stories like that. Real people, who were far from God, have been brought to the Lord through the most tragic circumstances. Now, years later, whole families have turned to the Lord. And, wonderfully, God has so moved in their hearts that they commit to putting the Lord and His kingdom first and wanting to serve Him in building the temple.

REFLECTION

Consider how the Lord uses difficult circumstances to bring people to Himself. Pray that He would fashion the circumstances of those you know who aren't part of His family so that they hear the gospel and become Christians.

We've already seen that buried in this chapter are wonderful stories of people being brought into God's family. But it's also a chapter of complex and difficult personal stories.

In verses 59–63 are a bunch of people who 'could not show that their families were descended from Israel' (v. 59). Even though they 'searched for their family records ... they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean' (v. 62).

These people wanted to serve as priests, but there was a question mark over their family line. God's Word is very clear that only those descended from the tribe of Levi could serve as priests. (Jeroboam made a mistake in this area, recorded in 1 Kgs. 12:31; 13:33–34.)

We may not understand the whys and wherefores of verses like this, but we can see that as God moved His people towards reformation, there was a serious commitment to obey His Word. Here this involved following God's way of sacrifice, which was to be performed only by those descended from Levi.

What does that mean for us? The Old Testament priesthood is always, in the first instance, fulfilled in the New Testament in Christ. He is the only one who can stand between God and people, and offer the one true sacrifice for sin.

This reminds us that for reformation to occur in the church, the priestly, sacrificial work of Christ must not be bypassed or substituted for anything else. This might seem obvious to us, but many today teach that it is possible to go directly to the Father without reference to the work of the Son. The interfaith movement is built on this wrong assumption.

We're not permitted to 'change the rules'. The Old Testament priest must come from the right family line. This points ultimately to Jesus, who came not only from the line of Judah but from an even greater family line as God's one and only Son. He and He alone can be our priest.

REFLECTION

When are you tempted to believe that there is a direct route to God that bypasses Jesus? Pray that you would not give into the temptation to ignore or compromise God's Word, even when you think your obedience may upset others.

Money has a strange hold on us. It promises to give so much and therefore it takes a mighty work of God moving in our hearts for us to part with it.

These verses summarise this remarkable chapter. Over 42,000 people – not to mention the horses, mules, camels and donkeys – are travelling from Babylon to Jerusalem (vv. 64–67). If there’s any doubt about their commitment to rebuild the temple, see how they put their money where their mouth is (vv. 68–69). The gold they give weighs 1133lbs. At today’s exchange rate that’s worth a staggering £15 million excluding the silver, which by my calculations is worth even more.

There are two expressions I love here. The first comes in verse 68: they ‘gave freewill offerings’. They don’t give out of duty, or to keep the Law, or just what they are told to give. This is freely given, such is their gratitude. Most of these exiled people had never seen Jerusalem before. Now they are there, they show their thankfulness in their giving.

The second expression I love is in verse 69: ‘According to their ability they gave’. Some are able to make a substantial contribution, others very little. But as they all give what they can, it adds up to a staggering amount of money that will be used to rebuild the temple.

Five centuries later, in Mark 12:41–44, Jesus is in the rebuilt temple. Many rich people are throwing large amounts of

money into the offertory plate, but a poor widow puts in just a couple of pennies. Jesus notices her and commends her to the disciples. The rich people give out of their wealth. She gives out of her poverty, putting in everything she has. While in worldly terms it amounts to nothing, in God’s economy she gives more than all the others.

Our giving shouldn’t be measured by what we put in, but by how much we have left. We are to give thankfully and sacrificially according to our ability to do so. That will happen when God moves in our hearts.

The whole of Ezra 2 leaves us in no doubt that these people make the building of God’s temple their priority. They are prepared: to leave comfortable Babylon to return to their ruined city; for hard work; to serve – using the gifts and abilities God has given them, and often for no recognition or status; to commit to obeying God’s Word; and to give money to see the temple built.

REFLECTION

Ask God to move in your heart that you too would be wholeheartedly committed to seeing His church built. Consider where God is challenging you to be sacrificial in your response to Him.

Some years back my wife and I embarked upon our own personal building project. It involved knocking down a wall in our house, moving doors, and tons of plumbing and rewiring. That work is way beyond anything I can do, so we hired builders who did a terrific job. As I watched them, one of the things that impressed me most was how they knew exactly what to do first.

Knowing where to start in a building project is no small thing. It was the same with rebuilding the temple. In verse 1 the people of Judah have arrived and settled in Jerusalem after their epic migration from Babylon. Now they need to start the work they've gone there to do.

On the first day you can imagine them getting up early, having a hearty breakfast and turning up at the building site keen as mustard and enthusiastic for the task ahead – all wearing their new overalls. The temple is in tatters and the city looks as if a bomb's hit it. What's the priority? What should they do first? Verse 2 tells us they start work on the altar.

The altar is at the heart of the temple. It's the one place – given by God Himself – where men and women can be put right with God through sacrifice for sin and therefore meet with Him. So they start rebuilding the altar first because their biggest need is to have their sin atoned for; to be forgiven.

Today our biggest need is the same as back then: to be put right with God. Likewise our priority in building the church is to be sure to point people to the cross of Christ. Jesus' cross is the only place where, through His sacrifice, we can meet and know God. If we're to see the church built up in this land, and reformed to be what she should be, the sacrificial death of Jesus needs to be given the central place. We need to keep the cross of Christ at the heart of everything we do. That's obvious when we think about it. The cross is *the* symbol of the Christian faith. While there are other symbols, the cross towers above them all.

That's why, hundreds of years before Christ, the people of Judah in Ezra's time began by building the altar – their place of sacrifice.

REFLECTION

Thank God for the cross of Jesus that brings us to God. Consider how often you think about the cross. Ask God to help you make the cross central to your Christian life and the life of your church family.

I hate camping. Once it was freezing cold; another time it was stifling hot. Neither experience was pleasant. I hate trudging across the campsite in the middle of the night to go to the loo; chilly shower blocks; cooking on a little stove; not having any decent light to read by at night; and noisy campsites. My last trip I returned home exhausted and in bad back pain because of an awful bed – after what was supposed to be a relaxing holiday!

I reckon the only good thing about living under canvas for a week is that it makes you long for your permanent home. It makes you look forward to your own bed and all your home comforts. Camping makes you want to be somewhere solid, secure and comfortable.

Having built the altar, the people of God in Ezra's day spend a week camping as they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (v. 4). Living in tents for a week was an annual reminder of the insecurity of life. It reminded them that nothing in this life is permanent but that there's something much better to come. The Feast of Tabernacles was designed to leave them looking forward to their future inheritance.

Once we've come to God through the place of sacrifice – the Lord Jesus and His cross – we can celebrate that our eternal home is sure and certain. Knowing that great home is to come motivates us to be focused on building the church.

It's no walk in the park being involved in gospel ministry. Giving our all to the work of God means sacrifices. We sacrifice our time, having less opportunities for all the things we might like to do here and now. It also involves sacrificing money, as we saw at the end of Ezra 2. Yet having our eternal home clearly in view persuades us that it is worth making all those sacrifices.

If there's nothing beyond this life, we really should just live life to the full now, embracing the attitude 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (1 Cor. 15:32). We'd have a blast while it lasts, thinking we're going to be dead for a very long time. But having an eternal perspective motivates us to give ourselves to the hard work of building God's church – just as celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles gave the people of Judah that eternal perspective and the motivation to work hard.

REFLECTION

Thank God that in and through Christ our eternal future is certain. Ask God to remind you that this life is not our permanent home, instead giving you an eternal perspective that motivates you to live sacrificially now to build the church.

I only know three dates in history: 1066 (the Battle of Hastings); 1666 (the Great Fire of London); and 1966 (when England won the Football World Cup)! When those years are mentioned, I know exactly why they were so significant. But give me any other date and it won't register with me at all.

Your interest and knowledge of history is likely to be greater than mine, but my guess is that as you read the first words in verse 8, you didn't give them a second thought: 'In the second month of the second year after their arrival'. It's just a date, but it's very important to note. It is now two years after the exiles had first arrived back in Jerusalem. It takes two years before they start rebuilding the temple.

They'd rebuilt the altar first and celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles. They now have the place where they can be made right with God. They know that they have a sure and certain eternal future. Then they set about rebuilding the temple (v. 8). I presume they paid for this work from the money given to them by their neighbours when they left Babylon (1:6) and from their own freewill offerings (2:68–69).

It is terrific that they've finally made a start on the temple, but the fact remains it has taken two years to get to this point. Then all they've managed to construct are the foundations (vv. 10–12).

It takes a long time to build the temple. It takes a long time to build God's church. Usually people are not converted when they first hear the gospel. Once converted, we're not changed into the people we should be through one Bible study. A church family doesn't become the people it should be through one cracking sermon. The nation is not going to be won for Christ in a year. Rome wasn't built in a day! Consider Jesus' agrarian parables in Mark 4. After sowing the seed of the Word, it takes time before there is growth.

As we read the Bible, we'd do well to note carefully the time markers. Otherwise we can be tempted to think that everything happened very quickly, and then wonder why it all takes so long today. It's helpful to see how things take time, or we'll be discouraged and impatient with the 'slow' progress we experience in gospel ministry now. Be in it for the long haul.

REFLECTION

How often do you get frustrated when gospel ministry doesn't move more quickly? Why is this the case? Ask the Lord to give you a godly patience and a realisation that genuine gospel ministry takes time.

Are you a glass half-full or a glass half-empty person? Some are incredibly optimistic, finding something positive to say in the most difficult of circumstances. Others are overwhelmingly pessimistic. Being around them can be wearing! As the foundations of the temple are laid, we find both optimists and pessimists among God's people.

The first response is full of optimism – people are praising God, full of joy (vv. 10–11). They are nowhere near completing the temple, but they've made a start and seen some progress.

I remember the thrill of first becoming involved in God's building work and seeing one, then another person becoming Christians. It is exciting when little, struggling churches are turned around to become vibrant places proclaiming the gospel. While most church families don't look that spectacular – they're not yet finished – great foundations have been laid; they are being built. That makes me want to praise God – as is happening in verses 10–11.

But there's another response in verse 12. It seems the pessimists have gathered together in their own little group. They think back to the days before the exile, when the temple stood resplendent in all its glory. Now, two years after their return, all they've achieved is to rebuild the altar and the foundations. They are distraught. The temple is a former shadow of itself (see Hag. 2:1–15). So they weep ... aloud (v. 12).

Some will keep harping back to the good old days when churches were fuller, people were more open to the gospel and the nation was more ready to engage with the gospel. But as someone said, 'That's the problem with nostalgia – it's not what it used to be!' Such nostalgia is discouraging and can kill a church. It can blind you even when progress is being made.

In verse 13 we read of both pessimistic and optimistic responses: 'No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping.' We're not told which response was right – I guess there's an element of truth in both. When we see people converted and churches planted and growing, rejoice that God is at work in building his church. While the church might not be what it used to be, don't despise the day of small beginnings (Zech. 4:10). But equally, see that the work is far from done – history sometimes shows us how far we've fallen, bringing tears to our eyes. There is a place for a godly dissatisfaction.

REFLECTION

Are you an optimist or a pessimist when it comes to building the church? Be sure to rejoice in the things God is doing, even if it isn't as great as it might be, or once was. Turn any disappointment into prayer.

Whenever we're building the church, we can expect opposition to come, and sometimes it's very subtle.

Ezra 3 ended with the people of Judah having rebuilt the altar and laid the foundations of the temple in Jerusalem. They have finally made some progress, only for opposition to come (vv. 1–2). But what happens next looks like a very gracious and magnanimous offer of help: 'Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God' (v. 2). Surely the people of God could do with any help offered them?

While they are called 'enemies' (v. 1), they certainly don't look like enemies. They speak as friends. They claim to be following the same God. That makes the response from Judah's leaders in verse 3 a real surprise.

Why do Judah's leaders see these people as enemies and so categorically reject their help? It's because they also say, 'we ... have been sacrificing to [God] since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here' (v. 2).

History tells us that Esarhaddon reigned from 681–669 BC. That means these people have not been sacrificing at the temple altar in Jerusalem, which has only just been rebuilt.

This really matters because the Lord made it very clear that there is only one place where sacrifice for sin could be made: at the temple altar in Jerusalem (see Josh. 22). In sacrificing somewhere

else they had been very significantly disobeying the Lord. They thought that they could come to God via a route other than the one designated by Him.

Fast forward hundreds of years to Jesus Christ and we see very clearly why this is such a serious issue. Jesus is the one person, and His cross is the one place, where we can go to be put right with God. Jesus Himself stated very clearly, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). If we think that there is another way to know God, then we are making at least two huge mistakes. First, we are arrogantly saying that we know better than God. Second, and perhaps most worrying of all, we are dismissing the necessity of the sacrifice for our sins that God Himself provided in Christ, which is highly offensive.

So anyone who states they can bypass Jesus and reach God by another route is an enemy of God, even if they claim otherwise. We must not join forces with them.

REFLECTION

Be sure you understand why Jesus is the only way to God. Be committed to never work in gospel ministry with anyone who does not unswervingly hold to the uniqueness of Christ and His cross.

It's fascinating how people show their true colours when we're definite about the gospel.

Ezra 4 began with people offering to help build the temple. When Zerubbabel rightly declines their offer and refuses to work with them because they do not believe in the one, unique way to God, they turn nasty. This is first through discouragement and trying to frighten gospel workers (v. 4), then finally by trying to get others to gang up and frustrate gospel ministry (v. 5).

When we refuse to compromise on the uniqueness of Christ and His cross, the very people who say they are with us declare their hand by working against us. We can expect this opposition to be relentless when we are pursuing gospel ministry. Rather than encourage us in our gospel building plans, they'll put obstacles in our way and frustrate plans to plant churches and train gospel leaders. They'll try to frighten us with all manner of threats. They'll get others to join in their opposition, which will keep coming.

In verses 4 and 5 there are three participles indicating continuing action. They could be translated that they kept on discouraging the people, they kept on frightening them and they kept on hiring counsellors to work against them.

But it's not just the grammar that tells us of the relentless nature of the opposition. The rest of the chapter does too: opposition successfully halted the building project for fifteen years – 'during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia' (v. 5).

REFLECTION

Think about the times when opposition has come your way because you've stood up for the gospel. Realise that's normal. Ask the Lord to strengthen you so that you do not cave in or compromise. Ask Him to give you the courage to stand against discouragement, threats and any number of people against you.

When I began full-time, paid ministry, I was rather taken aback by the opposition against the gospel. I was then given this wisdom: ‘Expect it, evaluate it, endure it.’ I’ve often recalled those words. Ezra 4 tells us the same.

Verses 6–23 give us a glimpse into history – imagine brackets around them. ‘At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes’ (v. 6) opposition continued through a complaint being lodged. There is even more opposition in the reign of Artaxerxes (v. 7). Verses 8–23 then record the correspondence to and from King Artaxerxes.

But the future events are inserted here to teach us that whenever we stand for the truth and get on with the building work of God, we will be opposed. Opposition persisted throughout the project to rebuild the temple, and we learn here three things about such opposition.

First, expect people who actually hate each other to unite in their opposition against God’s people. The people who add their signature to the letter to King Artaxerxes come from many different nations, including Samaria (vv. 9–10). That shouldn’t surprise us because the Pharisees and the Herodians, though enemies, united in their hatred against Jesus (Mark 3:6). It will happen to us too.

Second, expect inflammatory and exaggerated language to be used against God’s people. God’s holy city is described as ‘rebellious and wicked’ (v. 12).

Third, expect people to spread vicious rumours about you. The suggested

outcome in verse 3 has no substance but is put out there to worry the king.

Above all, expect opposition because it all comes from *the* opposition – Satan himself. He is the Father of Lies. We get a hint that he’s behind all this in verse 6, where the Hebrew word for ‘accusation’ is ‘*sitna*’, closely related to Satan – the accuser. He will do everything he can to stop the gospel spreading and the church growing.

At times it might look as if he’s successful. Artaxerxes replies to the scurrilous letter by ordering that the Jews’ work on rebuilding the temple be halted until he looks into these accusations (vv. 18–22). The chapter concludes, ‘Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill’ (v. 24).

It seems as if the opposition has won, but this is not the end of God’s building project any more than the death of Jesus was the end of God building His church. God’s purposes will be fulfilled, as we’ll see in the next chapters.

REFLECTION

How have you faced opposition in the past? How is your church experiencing opposition now? Pray the Lord would give you a right expectation and help you endure it, knowing that the opposition won’t win.

The majority of churches in my city – and maybe where you live – are declining, with congregations getting older and numbers fewer. It’s a desperate situation.

Ezra 4 ended with the building work on the temple coming to a halt. God’s people had encountered serious opposition. The authorities had insisted that the building work stop – for fifteen years. But in chapter 5 the work begins again.

In verse 1 we’re introduced to Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets (who each have a book of the Bible containing their own prophetic words). These authentic Old Testament prophets arrive in Jerusalem and proclaim the Word of God. This restarts the building work on the temple.

What was true then is true today. For the church to be built and reformed, the Word of God must be proclaimed. As God’s Word is taught, God’s people hear God’s voice and are inspired to get on with God’s work. Furthermore God’s Word is powerful. When God speaks, things happen. Think back to Genesis 1. God only had to speak and the universe was created! God’s Word is dynamic, powerful and has authority.

In Ezra 4 enemies of God’s people had discouraged them, frightened them and ganged up against them. Here the Word of God, proclaimed by the prophets of God, overcomes any opposition to God.

As we go about the work of the gospel, there will be opposition. We will

encounter enemies of the gospel. At times opposition will appear to frustrate gospel ministry. But when that happens, we must continually preach God’s Word; that’s what builds God’s church.

The church in our nation is in decline morally, aping the world. Again the answer is to proclaim the Word of God. We must flood the pulpits of this land with men who are able to teach the Bible in a clear, relevant and engaging way.

That’s why one of the key strands of Christ Church Fulwood’s vision is to train leaders for a lifetime of faithfully handling the Word of God. The Bible is outlawed in countries where Christianity is banned because those who oppose Jesus Christ know that when His Word gets into the hands and hearts of people, it brings change and the church is built. For the same reason Christians risk their lives to take the Bible into countries closed to the gospel. The desperate situation of churches declining is arrested by the Word of God being proclaimed.

REFLECTION

Pray for this land to be filled with men who will faithfully preach God’s Word. Pray for churches to be training people to correctly handle the Word of truth. Pray that as this happens the church would grow.

Groundhog Day, a film starring Bill Murray, is one of the most frustrating and maddening films I have ever watched. A cynical TV weatherman finds himself reliving the same day over and over again.

What happens in these verses feels a little bit like that film. No sooner does work on the temple begin again than opposition comes again. This is not the blatant opposition of Ezra 4 but officious, red-tape opposition. Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, along with other officials from Trans-Euphrates, want an authorisation code, planning permission, completed forms and the like.

As opposition goes, this seems a lot less menacing than the fear-inducing, threatening and bullying behaviour of chapter 4, but chapter 5 *is* intimidating. In verse 4 the officials want names, which is always threatening.

Think about encountering an awkward customer at work. They're complaining about something, the conversation gets a bit frosty and then they ask for your name and the name of your line manager. At that point you feel threatened. You know they haven't asked for your name because they're going to send you a personalised Christmas card from moonpig.com.

The officials here want names so that they can press charges once they've established that the building work is unauthorised. While this opposition is not life-threatening, be under no

illusions: officialdom is nonetheless an attempt to hamper and hinder the building work of God.

Christ Church Fulwood has experienced this in recent years with our schools work. People who don't want us going into schools to proclaim the gospel have cited rules, regulations and political correctness to close the door. University Christian Unions encounter the same situation when their Student Union insist that they go through official channels before they can hold meetings. They are blocked from hiring rooms and not allowed to have particular speakers on site. It happens in the institutional church too. Order and protocol are appealed to, hindering imaginative ideas to proclaim the gospel. Institutional rule keeping, while important, can be so overbearing that it stifles the work of God that has been inspired by the Word of God.

So when the church is growing and this sort of opposition comes and scuppers the work of the gospel, don't be surprised.

REFLECTION

Consider where red tape has hindered the work of building the church. Pray for people who are gospel-hearted, or at least friends of the gospel, to be placed in key positions of authority.

There have been many times through recent history when the death of the church has been predicted. But every such ‘prophesy’ has been proved wrong. God continues to rule and reign in His church and in the world.

Properly understood, the sovereign rule of God is a most comforting and reassuring truth. It doesn’t mean that everything will always work out the way we want it to, but it does mean that nothing in this universe can ultimately thwart God’s plans. Indeed, God is so supreme in the world that He can even use the attempts against Him for His purposes. We see that in Ezra 5 and 6.

Despite the meddling of the governor of Trans-Euphrates and his associates, we are told in verse 5, ‘But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped’ (in building the temple). There’s a similar phrase at the end of verse 1, where God is described as being ‘over them’, the Jews.

God is over His people, ruling over them. His watchful eye is on them, protecting them. Because of this, the work is not stopped while a report is sent to King Darius – and Darius’s reply received (v. 5).

God is sovereignly overruling to enable the work to continue. That’s what we see in the rest of this chapter and the

next – the sovereignty of God overruling the opposition in a most remarkable way. Jesus Himself said, ‘I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it’ (Matt. 16:18). It is deeply reassuring to know that the enemy will not defeat God’s purposes to build His church. But there’s even more to God’s sovereignty. As God is ruling, He not only overcomes the opposition but even uses the scurrilous attempts to stop the building work for the advancement of His kingdom.

This shouldn’t surprise us because that’s exactly what we saw at the cross of Christ. Satan did his worst. As he had the Son of God crucified, he thought he’d won. Game over, right? Wrong! God so ruled over that situation that He used the wicked actions of others to bring about His set purpose (see Acts 2:23).

REFLECTION

Consider how powerful God must be to use the worst efforts of His enemies to fulfil His good purposes for His people. Praise God that He is the Sovereign Lord. Marvel and wonder at how great our God is.

When my wife's dad died, she found letters he had sent and received from his wife when they were 'courting'. The letters told a story.

Ezra 5 and 6 are largely copies of the letter that the officials of Trans-Euphrates send to King Darius and then the king's reply. They too are letters that tell a story.

In the letter from the officials of Trans-Euphrates, who are opposing the building of the temple, we discover the building work is being carried out with diligence and is making rapid progress (v. 8). While it had previously come to a standstill, once the prophets Haggai and Zechariah proclaim God's Word, the building shoots up. Verses 9 and 10 remind us that the officials of Trans-Euphrates are demanding proof of planning permission for the work and taking note of the names of those leading the building project. But from verse 11 we gain new insights on the situation.

First, we learn the people of God define themselves as 'servants of God' (v. 11). How we define or think about ourselves will affect our actions. Defining myself as a doctor, an accountant, a mother or a student will in part determine where I put my energy and how I use my time. People who define themselves as God's servants will do just that – serve God. As a result of their efforts, these people are making huge progress in the building work of God.

Second, the people of God confess their sinfulness to God (v. 12). They know that they were rightly under the wrath of God because their forefathers had angered God. They are the last in line of generations of people who had disobeyed God (which in many ways is the story of the Old Testament). Whenever the church falls into a state of disrepair, it is because of the disobedience of His people. But God's people acknowledging their sinfulness and returning to God in repentance is a significant step in the church being restored.

As Christians we should define ourselves as servants of God, and as those who deserve only God's wrath but by grace have received His mercy. That will profoundly affect the way we live.

REFLECTION

Consider how you define yourself. Think about your place before God as a sinner deserving His wrath, then rejoice in God's grace and mercy. Next ask God to help you think of yourself as principally His servant.

God delights in turning around apparently ‘impossible’ situations. He loves to act when everything seems lost with no apparent way to change circumstances. It is then that God is glorified as the unmistakable architect of events. Knowing that should give us the determination to keep plodding away at building the kingdom of God, even when (and especially when) everything seems lost.

In Tattenai’s letter to King Darius (Ezra 5) we discovered that God’s people refused to stop rebuilding the temple because they had been given permission to do so by Cyrus, the previous king of Persia. Wanting to check out these claims, the officials of Trans-Euphrates asked King Darius to search his records (5:17). Now Darius does just that (v. 1).

Darius finds a scroll (v. 2), which confirms that King Cyrus had indeed authorised the building of the temple (vv. 3–5). But that’s not all he discovers in this ancient document. King Cyrus also decreed that the costs of rebuilding the temple were to be met by the royal treasury (v. 4). That is a game changer! King Darius writes back to the officials of Trans-Euphrates, telling them not to interfere with the building work (vv. 6–7). More than that, he decrees that they are to do whatever the Jews want (vv. 8–10).

See how the sovereignty of God is brilliantly at work. See God ruling over and watching over His people (5:1, 5).

The Trans-Euphrates officials were meddling and trying to stop the work of God, but the Lord wonderfully overrules their opposition. Not only is the work on the temple permitted to continue, but it is paid for by the royal treasury of an unbelieving king. Those who tried to stop the work end up funding it. The people of God are given not only state money to rebuild the temple but state protection as they rebuild it (vv. 11–12). The officials of Trans-Euphrates diligently obey King Darius’s decree (v. 13) and the work of rebuilding the temple is completed (vv. 14–15).

A previous vicar of mine used to say, ‘The devil always overstretchs himself.’ Here we see how God takes the evil schemes of men and uses them for His good purposes. He did that at the cross. We can be sure He can do it today.

REFLECTION

Ask God to give you a deep confidence in His sovereign ability to overturn attempts to block His work, and the determination to keep on building His kingdom. Pray about a situation where it seems impossible for gospel work to flourish, asking God to powerfully overrule for the glory and honour of His name.

Unbridled joy is a wonderful thing. Whether it lasts for just a few moments or much longer, there's nothing better than being full of delight and happiness. When it is a shared experience, it's even sweeter. The first half of the book of Ezra ends with God's people full of joy (vv. 16, 22). This originates from two circumstances.

First, they are joyful as they dedicate the temple at the completion of the building (v. 16). Their joy is expressed in them offering sacrifices (v. 17) and installing priests and Levites according to the Book of Moses (v. 18). Out of joy they sacrificially give and obey the Word of God.

Today, as we see the Lord build His church, it should fill us with joy. There is nothing more important in life than seeing people becoming Christians, and the local church growing numerically and spiritually. That joy should result in us offering ourselves as living sacrifices, dedicating ourselves and all that we have in our service of Him. Joy in the Lord should make us long to obey the Word of the Lord.

Second, the joy of God's people comes from seeing the Lord sovereignly overrule in changing the heart of the king of Assyria (v. 22). They know that the Lord has assisted them in the building work. They know they would

never have been able to complete the work without God's intervention. As a result they are full of joy from seeing God work so miraculously. They celebrate – with the Festival of Unleavened Bread (v. 22).

Today, when we see the Lord sovereignly overrule to bring about the building of His church, our joy should turn to celebration. It should be reflected in lives of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6–8). Seeing the greatness of our God at work motivates us to live a life of purity for Him.

REFLECTION

What brings you joy? Joyfully thank the Lord for His work in bringing people to Himself and growing the church. Ensure your joyful response is expressed in sacrificially living a life of sincerity, truth and purity.

You might have thought the book of Ezra would end at chapter 6. The temple has finally been built and God's people are celebrating – full of joy. But there's still a huge rebuilding work to be done to reform the people of God themselves.

7:1 takes place almost 60 years later. Artaxerxes is on the throne in Persia. The people of God are well established in Jerusalem. Then Ezra arrives on the scene (v. 1). Finally we meet the man after whom the book is named!

Verses 1–5 record Ezra's family tree. These names might seem a list of unpronounceable people we know nothing about, but this is no waste of ink and parchment. They assure us that Ezra's family line can be traced all the way back to Aaron the chief priest (v. 5), Moses' right-hand man. Ezra's pedigree is second to none. If he were a racehorse, he'd be a thoroughbred! Ezra is a bona fide priest. We're also to note one particular aspect of his priestly role: he is a teacher. This is repeatedly emphasised (vv. 6, 10, 11, 12, 21, 25).

God sent His people Ezra, a teacher of His Word, precisely because they need to be taught the Word of God in order to be reformed. Verse 10 tells us more about why Ezra is such a brilliant man for the job.

First, he is 'devoted' to God's Word. This strong word means to be single-minded and undistracted.

Second, Ezra is devoted to the 'study' of God's Word. Understanding God's Word takes dedication and hard work. A teacher must understand what God's Word says, rather than what they want it to say.

Third, he is devoted not only to studying God's Word but to 'observance' of it. Leaders must be personally committed to obeying God's Word to bring about change in a church. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were devoted to studying God's Word but didn't live it out. Ezra lived it.

Fourth, Ezra is devoted to 'teaching' God's Word. That's not easy; it means challenging error and impurity, and often results in being unpopular. But unless there is devotion to teaching the Word of God, compromise will soon occur.

Ezra's devotion to studying, living and teaching God's Word made him God's man for the job of bringing God's Word to God's people to effect God's outcome – the reformation of God's people.

REFLECTION

Consider how the people of God need to be reformed today. Pray for your leaders to be devoted to the study, observance and teaching of God's Word. Pray for more devoted teachers to be installed in church leadership in your nation and around the world.

Years ago our family set out on an epic journey, through the night, from Sheffield to the French Alps. Everything went perfectly. We made all our connections on time, with no road works or traffic jams to hold us up.

It seems Ezra has a similar experience on his epic journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (v. 9). But his travel story is recorded to tell us why he had such a smooth journey: because ‘the gracious hand of his God was on him’ (v. 9). It’s clearly something we’re to note because it’s stated three times in this chapter (see also vv. 6 and 28).

On each occasion the hand of the Lord being upon Ezra results in things going well for him in the work of the Lord. In verse 6 the king grants Ezra everything he requests. In verse 9 Ezra’s travel plans work out perfectly. In verse 28 the king helps Ezra. It is wonderful to see the Lord’s hand at work, as we’ve seen in previous chapters.

What is most striking here though is why the Lord’s hand is upon Ezra. Note the crucial linking word ‘For’ at the beginning of verse 10. It seems God’s gracious hand is upon Ezra because he is devoted to the study, observance and teaching of God’s Word.

If you are devoted to understanding, living and teaching God’s Word, you can be sure that God’s gracious hand will be upon you. It’s not a guarantee that everything will go well. In Ezra, both in previous chapters and in the chapters to come, we see that there is opposition to God’s building work. Enemies of God are committed to working against God. Life will not always be straightforward and uncomplicated, even when we wholeheartedly devote ourselves to His Word. But we can be sure that when we do devote ourselves to studying, observing and teaching God’s Word, the hand of the Lord will be upon us for the building up of His church.

REFLECTION

When have you seen the Lord’s gracious hand at work in your life or in the life of your church family? Pray that you and your church family would be devoted to God’s Word, knowing God’s gracious hand will therefore be upon you, whatever the circumstances of life.

Ezra 8 begins with another list of unpronounceable names. It's a parallel passage to Ezra 2, and is about as exciting as reading through a school register! Until we stop and think about it ... Then it's thrilling.

As Ezra knew the hand of the Lord was upon him, he had courage to gather people to accompany him to Jerusalem (7:28). Chapter 8 begins with those who are ready to do this: to leave their home in Babylon and put first God's kingdom. It is a list of people who are committed to realising a reformation.

The numbers involved are huge. If you find a calculator, you'll work out nearly 1,500 men register to make the move from Babylon to Jerusalem – and that's not mentioning the women and children.

It's a reminder that when many people respond together to the challenges of the gospel, great things are possible. In recent years Christ Church Fulwood has seen large groups leave to plant churches elsewhere in the city. Those churches are now established and themselves planting churches.

Also take note of the names in this list, comparing it with Ezra 2. You'll discover that of the 13 families mentioned here, 11 featured in chapter 2. That observation causes Dale Ralph Davis to write, 'Covenant fidelity tends to run in families.'³

When families are faithful in putting the Lord and His kingdom first in their lives, very often that has a positive impact on the next generation. In Ezra 2,

80 years earlier, families had made the sacrificial move to Jerusalem from Babylon. Now, when others are called to go to Jerusalem, the majority who respond are from those same families. A similar pattern happens every autumn when new students arrive in Sheffield to begin university. Most of those who know Jesus and come to our church are from Christian homes.

But the list in Ezra 8 also includes two new families. What an encouragement for those who are first-generation Christians – families like mine. Neither Caroline, my wife, nor I were raised in Christian families, but we can influence our children to be wholehearted followers of Jesus Christ themselves. When we seek first God's kingdom and put the Lord Jesus first in the big decisions of life, our children too are more likely to demonstrate that same kingdom priority in their families. Covenant fidelity does indeed run in families.

REFLECTION

If you were raised in a Christian family, thank God for those who taught you the gospel. If you are a first-generation Christian, pray you would be a positive influence for Christ to others in your family. Pray many in your church would encourage others by seeking first God's kingdom in everything.

Having people with different gifts and different abilities in any church family is crucial. Think of a talented football team without a goalkeeper, or gifted musicians in an orchestra without any violins.

Ezra gathers 1,500 men and their families together at the Ahava Canal. They set up camp to prepare for the long journey to Jerusalem. But despite the remarkable response, there is not one Levite among them (v. 15).

As the Temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt and operational, with plenty of Levites already assisting the priests there, Ezra doesn't need any extra Levites for the day-by-day running of it. But Ezra is returning to Jerusalem to bring about a reformation through all the people of Judah, so he does need some Levites – to understand and explain to others how and why Levites should live distinctively.

Interestingly there weren't many Levites who first returned to Jerusalem back in Ezra 2. Theirs was a mundane and lowly position. Levites would have found life in Babylon much more attractive than serving in the temple in Jerusalem. We can imagine them in exile in Babylon with professions that were respected and brought them social standing. Perhaps they'd acquired property, giving them independence and security.

Often that's how it is in the kingdom of God. In the world you might have a significant role; reach the top of the career ladder; be respected in your field; have people look up to you. But in

the church you're just a servant, even if you are an office holder. In the eyes of the world the work of the church seems insignificant and irrelevant.

So your standing and status in the world can adversely influence your decision whether or not to seek first God's Kingdom. But to grow the church and to see the church reformed in this land, we need people who will seek first God's kingdom, making costly moves to serve the Lord. Like any football team or orchestra, the church needs servants of Christ who are willing to 'play their part' by taking on even mundane, unglamorous roles.

Because the gracious hand of the Lord is upon Ezra (v. 18), a good number of Levites and temple servants join the group prepared to return to Jerusalem (vv. 18–20). They would be crucial in the reformation among God's people in Jerusalem that the Lord would bring about through Ezra.

REFLECTION

Give thanks for people who are prepared to serve the Lord in the most menial tasks. Pray that the Lord would grow in you a servant attitude so that you would serve Him in the church, seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness above any worldly position and status.

It seems to me that we Western Christians rarely find ourselves in situations where we have to rely entirely upon the Lord. Most of us have everything we need. If ever we do find ourselves in a tricky situation, we turn to all manner of solutions rather than rely upon the Lord.

Ezra, on the other hand, is a great example of total reliance on the Lord. Now 1,750 men, plus women and children, are camped by the Ahava Canal and about to embark upon a 900-mile journey, with vast quantities of cash. Verses 25–27 list the gold, silver and other articles they’ve been given by the king of Persia. In today’s money they have 25 tons of silver and three tons of gold – eye-watering quantities of precious metals.

As Ezra heads off on the epic journey to Jerusalem, we might expect him to hire the equivalent of an armoured vehicle and the services of G4S. He has access to the king’s army for protection. But Ezra writes, ‘I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him”’ (v. 22). Ezra puts his trust in the Lord, demonstrating that in prayer and fasting (vv. 21, 23). That prayer is answered in verses 31–32.

7:9 tells us that it takes them four months to make that long, arduous

journey. The Lord keeps them safe throughout. Nothing is lost (vv. 33–34). Is it any wonder they are thankful (v. 35)?

Too often we look to our own strength and our own strategies to keep us safe, rather than rely upon the Lord and commit ourselves to Him in prayer. But we know the Lord’s hand upon us. In Christ we know He will never leave us or forsake us.

That isn’t a reason to be reckless. We’re not to be naive in thinking we don’t have to protect our possessions. But I doubt that ‘recklessly trusting God’ is our biggest temptation. The challenge here is to really believe that God is powerful, to trust that His hand is upon us, and to fully and entirely rely upon Him. Perhaps the first challenge is to put ourselves in situations where we have to rely upon Him alone.

REFLECTION

Are you so risk-averse that you are reluctant to put yourself in situations where you must rely upon the Lord? Consider how mighty and powerful He is. Think about why you doubt His ability to bring you through tough situations. Ask Him to help you to trust Him and Him alone.

Ezra has been travelling around the country delivering the king's orders to all the officials of Trans-Euphrates (8:36). Then comes a bombshell. Leaders in Judah tell him devastating news: 'The people of Israel ... have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices' (v. 1). They should have kept themselves pure and distinctive. Instead, they have 'mingled the holy race' (v. 2), becoming like every other nation, most obviously by marrying people from other faiths.

This is not a racist comment. Inter-marriage is not an issue of race or ethnicity. The issue is theologically relational, impacting our relationship with the Lord. If our closest human relationship is with someone who does not follow the Lord but has a completely different worldview, our wholehearted commitment to the Lord will be challenged. This is why it is wise not to marry unbelievers. We may argue that we will influence them for Christ, but the truth is that they are likely to pull us away from Him.

But while the presenting issue is intermarriage, the underlying problem is that the people of God are not putting the Lord first. The nations listed in verse 1 remind us that this is clear disobedience against God's Word. As the Lord led His people out of Egypt, ready to enter Canaan, He instructed them not to make a covenant with the people around them, not to follow their customs and practices, and not to worship their gods (Ex. 34:11–16). But now God's people, by marrying

those from other nations, have entered into covenants with them and inevitably begun to follow their practices. They are compromising their position as the pure, distinctive people of God.

Living distinctively Christian lives is an issue for God's people in every age. It's often expressed like this: 'We are to be in the world, but not of the world', yet we will always be tempted to go one way or the other. We may not live in the world for fear of becoming like the world – but we then become exclusive, staying away from any real engagement with others. Or we may become immersed in the world, in order to win the world – but we then become like the world and are tempted to keep quiet about anything that might offend people or put them off following Jesus. So desperate to live in a way that doesn't look weird, we don't decisively and distinctively put the Lord first.

When Ezra hears what is happening in Jerusalem, he is appalled (vv. 3–4). Are we that appalled when the church and Christians are not distinctive? Are we horrified when the church becomes like the world?

REFLECTION

Ask the Lord to help you see where you or your church family are failing to be distinctive. Pray for a desire to be positively holy and the strength to continue to be a witness in the world.

In the past Christians have understood the importance of repentance and confession, therefore incorporating a time of confession into the weekly Sunday gathering. But in many churches today – and I would guess in most individual Christian’s prayer lives – there is rarely a time of significant confession of sins, though this should be an integral part of any individual or corporate prayer.

We’ve already witnessed how appalled Ezra is at the way God’s people have become like the world around them (vv. 3–4). In these verses we also see him repenting.

Ezra’s repentance is visibly expressed in tearing his clothes (v. 3). When we’re frustrated, we might declare, ‘I’m tearing my hair out.’ We mean it metaphorically. Ezra does it literally.

Ezra’s repentance is public. Others gather round him (v. 4). Ezra falls on his knees with his hands spread out (v. 5), his posture expressing his emotions.

Ezra’s repentance flows from the Word of God (v. 4). The others who join him also take the Word of the Lord seriously.

Ezra’s repentance is tied up with the evening sacrifice (vv. 4–5), one of two Old Testament daily sacrifices (Ex. 29:38–43). Morning and evening a lamb was to be offered and the whole animal burnt up. It has been suggested that these daily burnt offerings were

not only atonement-making sacrifices but, because the whole animal was given, they were also symbolic of a total rededication to God. So as the priests made this sacrifice on behalf of the nation, it was both a sacrifice for the nation to be atoned for and a sacrifice of their total commitment and rededication to God.

Those Old Testament sacrifices point us today to the sacrifice of Jesus. At the cross we know atonement for our sins. That should motivate us to a life of total commitment, daily rededicating our lives to God that we might become living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2).

That’s what drives Ezra to confession and repentance – that he and the whole nation would be completely dedicated to the Lord in living distinctively from the nations around.

REFLECTION

Are confession and repentance a regular part of your prayer time? Spend some time confessing now. Thank God for the forgiveness that is freely given in Jesus’ sacrifice. Pray that the cross of Christ would motivate you – and your whole church family – to a life of dedicated, distinctive service to the Lord.

We live in a blame culture that promotes self-righteous justification. We unhelpfully point the finger in part to excuse ourselves. But that will never lead us towards personal confession and will stop us following Ezra's example.

These verses record Ezra's prayer of confession. The first thing that is so striking is how Ezra identifies with God's people. He talks of 'our sins' (vv. 6–7), though he hasn't personally committed those sins that led him to be so 'appalled'. He could easily have prayed self-righteously: 'O God, look at the state of the nation. What have *they* done? O Lord, change them.' Yet he knows that he is part of the people of God, so the sins of God's people are his sins.

It is very easy for us to look down our noses at the sins of others in the church and then begin to feel self-righteous. That leads to proud praying, which is a misnomer. Biblical confession includes identifying with the sins of God's people corporately and feeling the weight of our sins.

Next notice how Ezra's confession starts by acknowledging the gravity of sin. He doesn't make light of or excuse it – 'We're only human after all.' Rather, Ezra feels 'ashamed and disgraced' (v. 6). It's as if he can't look God in the eye – he's 'too ashamed ... to lift up my face to you' (v. 6). He paints a picture of sins piling up – and the pile is very high: 'our

sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens' (v. 6).

Then Ezra concedes that the sins of God's people deserve judgement and exile – separation – from God (v. 7).

Praying like this could be considered depressing, leaving us crushed. But remember this was in the context of the morning and evening sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. That points us to the one sacrifice – the one perfect lamb – that was made once for all for us. Jesus' sacrifice is enough to cover all sin, so we can pray openly and honestly in confession knowing that, no matter how great our sins are, they are forgiven. What's more, when we grasp the depth and enormity of our sin, it makes us even more amazed by the grace of God and even more thankful for the forgiveness that is ours in Christ.

REFLECTION

Consider how you are tempted to be self-righteous, distancing yourself from the sins of others in your church family.

Ask God to help you grasp the depth and enormity of sin. Spend time confessing your sin and owning the sin of other Christians, then rejoice in the forgiveness that is yours in Christ.

Every genuine Christian knows that they're saved, but for what? The way we answer that question will (or should) have an impact on how we live our lives. There are a number of biblical answers to the question and top of the list is that we are saved to glorify God. But how do we glorify God?

Again there are a number of answers to that question, but one answer is here in verses 8–9. It has an impact on the way Ezra prays and how he lives his life. Ezra prays, '[God] has granted us new life to rebuild the house of our God and repair its ruins' (v. 9).

Ezra's prayer of confession in verse 7 continues with an acknowledgment of the grace of God (v. 8). Aware of the enormity of the sin of God's people, Ezra knows that their only hope is God's grace. Without this, God would leave His people in slavery to sin and to the many masters that rule this world (v. 8). But the loving kindness of God (v. 9) delivers God's people out of bondage and out of exile. For Ezra's generation this means being taken back to Jerusalem. Now, having been saved and granted new life by God, they are to be about the task of repairing the ruins of God's house (v. 9). That brings glory to God.

Jesus describes us as slaves to sin (John 8:34). But in his gracious, loving kindness He has bought us out of our bondage to sin, freed us from the wicked slave masters we naturally want to serve, and sets us on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem. Now we are to be about rebuilding the house of God – not a bricks-and-mortar building but the people of God, numerically and spiritually.

Knowing what we're saved for should motivate us to give our lives to the task of evangelism and discipleship. We build up the church through proclaiming the gospel and helping Christians grow in Christ. That glorifies God. May we not only rejoice that we are saved, but know for what we are saved.

REFLECTION

Consider that you are saved in order to bring glory to God. Think about how building the church will bring glory to God. Devote yourself today to the task of building the church numerically and spiritually.

For the Christian ‘No’ and ‘Lord’ are two words that simply can’t be put together in one sentence. That said, I just have! And we do! But we shouldn’t find ourselves saying, ‘No, Lord.’ If God is Lord of our lives, then it is a misnomer to say ‘No’ to Him.

God’s people in Ezra’s day made the same mistake. When the Lord brought His people out of slavery in Egypt, He spoke clearly through His prophets (v. 11) about how His people should live. The Lord said, ‘Do not intermarry with [other nations]. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods’ (Deut. 7:3–4). Yet Ezra has discovered that is precisely what the people have done, repeatedly, since returning to Jerusalem. In doing so they have disregarded the commands the Lord had given (v. 10). They have said, ‘No, Lord. No, we don’t want to obey your Word.’

In disobeying the Word of the Lord, they are disregarding the Lordship of God in their lives. We do the same, arrogantly saying we know best. We claim to know better than the Lord of all creation.

For the people of God to intermarry with unbelievers is to put our salvation on the line. It is to run a huge risk because an unbelievers’ influence over us may be greater than our influence over them, so we end up following other gods. To marry an unbeliever is to think we know better than God and it is to play fast and loose with our salvation.

No wonder Ezra was so appalled by the actions of God’s people intermarrying. No wonder he prayed this prayer of confession. We simply can’t say, ‘No, Lord.’

REFLECTION

Ask God to show you where you are saying, ‘No, Lord.’ Confess how you are ignoring God’s Word and living your own way. Ask for forgiveness and humble yourself before the Lord. Consider how disobeying the Lord’s instruction is to play fast and loose with your salvation.

The Christian author and speaker Paul Tripp warns of the persuasive ‘inner lawyer’ in all of us.⁴ Our inner lawyer is brilliant. He is always able to justify our actions; always making a ‘good’ case for why we’ve done something; always managing to make even the most unacceptable behaviour seem reasonable. Our inner lawyer pleads extenuating circumstances and very good reasons for our actions. When we listen to our inner lawyer, we are left feeling justified by even the most sinful deeds.

But the fact is there is no justification for sin – we need to hold up our hands. There is no excuse. The inner lawyer might be very good at his job, but even if he pleads a case, we are guilty.

Biblical confession is a terrific way to helpfully silence the inner lawyer. Ezra does just that at the end of this remarkable prayer. He calls the deeds of God’s people ‘evil’ (v. 13). He admits ‘guilt’ (v. 13). He confesses to have broken God’s commands (v. 14).

That’s a scary thing to do, leaving you completely vulnerable and without a case to plead ... if you’re not a Christian. Sadly, even many of us Christians approach our sin as unbelievers. We worry that an admission of guilt will leave us doomed, with the Lord angry enough to destroy us (v. 14). We know that the Lord would be quite justified in wiping out every one of us (v. 14). We are aware that the Lord would be perfectly righteous, in seeing

our guilt, to cast us out of His presence forever (v. 15). So we get our inner lawyer to defend us. But that’s not the Christian way. It’s not the gospel.

Ezra knows that the Lord does not punish His people as their sins deserve (v. 13). Remember Ezra is confessing in the context of the evening sacrifice (9:5) that brings atonement for the people of God.

As Christians we know of *the* perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Christ took our guilt. He takes our punishment by being cast out of the Father’s presence. Through His sacrifice we are acceptable to God.

Biblical confession is liberating. There’s no need to pretend and no need to hide. Knowing the gospel gives us the freedom to be completely honest with ourselves and with God about our evil deeds and our guilt. Biblical confession renders our inner lawyer redundant and out of our lives.

REFLECTION

Knowing the gospel, why do you justify yourself? Think about how liberating the gospel is but how enslaving and exhausting self-justification is. Spend time confessing your sin in the context of the liberating forgiveness that is yours in Christ.

A whole church needs to change to bring about a reformation, but sometimes it only takes one person to spark that reformation.

Throughout chapter 9 we've been considering Ezra's magnificent prayer of confession. In 10:1 we're reminded that it all takes place outside the temple. Ezra not only makes his prayer of confession, but weeps and throws himself down on the ground in the full sight of passers-by. It's not surprising then to read that a large crowd gathers around him. As men, women and children hear Ezra's heartfelt prayer, they are convicted of their sin – they 'wept bitterly' (v. 1). Ezra's heartfelt confession is the catalyst for others to feel the gravity of the nation's sin. Sometimes it only takes one person to respond in a godly way to ignite God's people to a godly response.

Shecaniah speaks to Ezra, expressing the repentant mood of the gathered crowd (v. 2). It's a key moment in God's people being reformed. Shecaniah calls it as it is: 'We have been unfaithful to our God' (v. 2), but knows that, despite their sin, there is always hope for the people of God. He understands that this hope comes from the covenant being re-established as the people of God return in obedience to the one true God (v. 3).

For sure, the way Shecaniah suggests this be done grates on our ears, and his response needs to be considered (which we'll do on day 38). But for now see how Shecaniah wants to return to obey God's Law (v. 3) and how he looks to Ezra to 'rise up' off the ground and take the matter into his own hands (v. 4). Crucially Shecaniah offers Ezra the support of the crowd (v. 4).

Ezra is a man with a mandate. The Lord took him to Jerusalem to bring about a reformation among the people, and now the people are behind him, wanting to return to the Lord. We know Ezra is 'devoted ... to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD' (7:10), not only knowing the Law but wanting to live out God's Word. The Lord uses Ezra's uncompromising public confession to begin a revolution.

REFLECTION

Consider the place of public confession among God's people. Think about ways you could encourage others towards godly repentance through your own confession. Ask the Lord to move many to genuine confession and repentance.

Someone once told me that ‘revival’ is spelt ‘re-Bible’. We see revival among God’s people by coming back to the Bible.

We’ve seen that in Ezra, but verse 3 raises a number of difficult questions for Christians. Does biblical faithfulness mean that anyone married to an unbeliever should divorce them and send their children away? Most (if not all) Christians instinctively know that’s not right, but then we’re left with a conundrum: won’t we be charged with hypocrisy if we seemingly choose the parts of the Bible that suit us? We’re also concerned that any explanation might suggest an inconsistency within the Bible itself.

We must therefore understand why the New Testament instructs those already married to unbelievers to remain with them (1 Cor. 7:12–13; 1 Pet. 3:1–6), when the people in Ezra 10 follow the opposite practice. Dale Ralph Davis writes, ‘Is not Ezra chapters 9 and 10 a unique situation, a unique emergency? Remember what was at stake ... : the survival of a definable people of God in this world.’⁵

A colleague of mine explained this further. The basis for us being the ‘definable people of God in this world’ has changed. In Ezra’s time it was the Law (marked by circumcision); for us it is faith in Christ. The believer in Christ is made holy by Christ, and cannot be made

unholy merely by having an unbelieving spouse. Christians married to unbelievers are therefore encouraged to stay with and ‘win over’ their unbelieving spouses, rather than divorce them.

So the New Testament mandate is clear. Christians should not marry unbelievers, as doing so will make it harder to live for Christ in this sinful world. But once married to an unbeliever (either through becoming Christians after marriage or through ignoring the wisdom of this teaching), Christians are to remain married to their unbelieving spouse and witness to them through a holy, distinctive life. Our lives must be positively different to the world around as the Lord God reigns in our lives.

What always matters is being faithful to the Bible’s teaching – hard as it is. A determination to look to the Bible as our guide and rule in everything is the way we’ll experience a reformation in the church.

REFLECTION

Pray that those married to unbelievers would live holy and distinctive lives in their marriages. Consider where you are failing to live out the most challenging commands in the Bible. Ask the Lord to give you courage to obey His Word no matter how hard it is to do so.

Someone once said, 'A man is only what he is when he is alone with His God.' We see that very clearly with Ezra.

The Lord took Ezra to Jerusalem to bring about a reformation among the people of God. This looks as if it might be about to happen. Ezra has identified Israel's key area of sin and confessed that to the Lord. As a result, others have begun to acknowledge their sin and support Ezra. The leaders of God's people make an oath to live as they should (v. 5). What happens next is very striking.

I would expect verse 6 to tell me that Ezra began to implement his master plan, but no. Instead 'Ezra withdrew'. He goes into a private room, eats no food, drinks no water and continues to mourn the unfaithfulness of God's people.

Ezra's magnificent and very public prayer in chapter 9 is genuine and heartfelt. He isn't just putting on a show. Ezra takes himself to a place where he can be alone with His God and mourns the unfaithfulness he has discovered. Not eating or drinking is a mark of continued repentance. He is genuinely, personally crushed by the sin he has experienced among God's people.

Behind any reformation in the church are great Christian leaders on their knees in sincere, heartfelt, private prayer. Read the biographies of great Christian leaders and you'll often learn they rose early from their beds in order to pray.

In some ways it's easy to pray passionate prayers publicly (as Ezra does in chapter 9), but it's quite another thing to pray that way in private. Only when we have a genuine concern about sin and unfaithfulness will we pray earnestly on our own. No-one sees private prayer and yet, paradoxically, it is the sign to the world of a heartfelt concern.

REFLECTION

Jesus exposed our hypocrisy when we pray publicly quite differently to the way we pray in private (Matt. 6:5–15). Consider how consistent your private prayer life is with the way you pray in public. Ask God to help you to be consistently prayerful in your daily, private devotions.

Being carried along by a crowd can be dangerous, but it can also bring about genuine change. We are so individualistic in the way we think about our walk with the Lord that we tend to underestimate the powerful influence of a corporate response, as happens in Ezra 10.

With private and corporate prayer undergirding everything, and a formal, corporate commitment from the leaders of God's people to obey God's Word, a proclamation is issued to God's people (vv. 7–8). Today I doubt we could ever 'threaten' to confiscate property and excommunicate anyone who doesn't show up to a church meeting. But gathering all God's people to address them together is always a good thing. Within three days, all God's people are represented in Jerusalem (v. 9).

From the numbers we've been given throughout the book of Ezra, we know that in excess of 40,000 people – the size of a premiership football crowd – is gathered outside the temple, but they aren't cheering excitedly. They are 'greatly distressed' (v. 9) for two reasons – the situation and the rain.

It is the 20th day of the ninth month – 20 December 458 BC. The weather reflects the situation in Israel and the mood of the people – miserable. As they sit there in the rain, Ezra spells out the issue (vv. 10–11).

Ezra states their sin and calls them to confession. Then he instructs them to repent and directs them to become the distinctive, unique people of God. What

a brilliant response God's people make. The whole assembly responds with a loud voice, 'We must do as you say' (v. 12).

With no excuses they face up to their sin. They recognise the gravity of the situation and understand it will take some time to work it out. So they appoint officials to rule on each individual case of intermarriage (vv. 13–14).

It is a remarkable response. Out of a crowd of over 40,000 people, only four oppose the suggestion (v. 15). When so many are united in repentance, you know that a reformation is happening.

The people of God duly begin their investigations (vv. 16–17). It takes three months – 75 days to be precise – to process 111 cases (as we see in 10:18–44). They don't rush the procedure. They are dealing with real lives, which are complex and need to be worked through systematically.

Repentance needs to be decisive – there needs to be a commitment to change. But it can't always be worked out immediately. It takes time to unravel the complexities of sin in people's lives.

REFLECTION

Pray for your church to respond as God's Word is preached each Sunday. Be determined to be the first to obey and consider how you can encourage others to also be obedient.

The book ends with another list of unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce names. But by now we should be convinced that these lists contain important details that are written for our learning (Rom. 15:4).

This list is of all those who had intermarried. There are 111 people, which strikes me as not many out of 40,000. Having seen how Ezra has reacted to these intermarriages, we might begin to wonder what all the fuss is about. But when even a minority among God's people have sinned, it affects everyone.

The apostle Paul describes this as 'a little yeast' spreading though 'a whole batch of dough' (1 Cor. 5:6). When even a relatively few people are not living a distinctive Christian life, it affects the whole church family. That means that if we're going to see reformation, we need to deal carefully and sensitively with any who are not living among us as they should. It means we must not tolerate obvious sin when we become aware of it, even if only a minority are living unfaithfully.

Note too that the first people listed here are leaders: the priests (v. 18), the Levites (v. 23), the singers and the gatekeepers (v. 24). Leaders need to repent first and be disciplined first because if they are not leading by example, they cannot expect others to follow.

So while the book seems to end on something of an anti-climax with a list of all those who had married foreign women (v. 44), this isn't a damp squib for two reasons. First, Ezra has a companion – Nehemiah. The two books need to be read together. Why not study Nehemiah next? Second, Ezra ends with God's people determined to be distinctive, to take drastic action to be holy. When that final step is taken by the whole people of God, then a reformation is realised.

REFLECTION

Consider how even a few people sinning can affect the whole people of God. Ask God to help you and those in leadership to deal seriously with sin in the church. Pray that this would be a healthy part of reforming the church for good. Spend some time, today or in the next few days, thinking about the big lessons of the book of Ezra.



NOTES

- 1 Dale Ralph Davis, *New Opportunity Under Grey Skies* (a commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah printed by Christian Focus Publications), p. 10. However, this material was originally published in the online magazine of Thirdmill, Third Millennium Ministries, between 2000 and 2001, and can still be accessed online: <https://thirdmill.org/magazine/>
- 2 See Edwin M. Yamauchi and Elaine Philips, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (revised edition: Zondervan Academic, 2017).
- 3 Dale Ralph Davis, *New Opportunity Under Grey Skies*, p. 31.
- 4 See, for example, Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling* (Crossway Books, 2012), p. 178.
- 5 Dale Ralph Davis, *New Opportunity Under Grey Skies*, pp. 41–42.