



## THE RUMBLINGS OF RENEWAL

Ezra 1–2

God is the God of history. He shapes events and moves people to achieve His glorious purposes. Yet this does not mean we are mere bystanders. These first two chapters of Ezra teach us to act in faithful obedience to what He initiates and reveals in His Word.

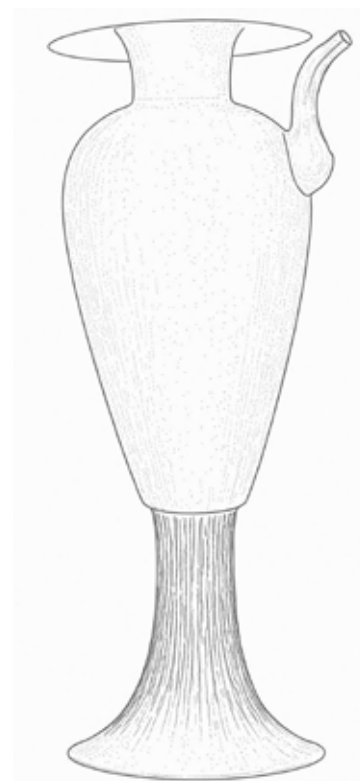
As we begin our Wisdom Journey through the book of Ezra, we find in the opening verse a rather surprising statement: “The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia.” Now, you might remember in our last study that Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians. The kingdom of Judah had come to an end, and most of the Jewish people had been deported to Babylon, where they would remain until the promised seventy-year exile was completed.

Now, suddenly, in these opening verses of Ezra, it’s a Persian king, not a Babylonian, who appears on the scene. You see, the book of Ezra takes us to the end of the captivity. The Babylonian Empire has fallen to the Medes and Persians. Chapter 5 in the book of Daniel gives us the details.

Well, this Persian king by the name of Cyrus now reigns over a vast empire that includes the land of Judah.

The Lord is evidently at work. Solomon wrote, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Proverbs 21:1). Well, the Lord’s been stirring the heart of King Cyrus to make a rather stunning proclamation here in verses 2-3:

*“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia:  
The LORD, the God of heaven,  
has given me all the kingdoms of  
the earth, and he has charged me*



Gold libation vessel from which beverages were poured



*to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.”*

God has sovereignly turned the heart of King Cyrus to let God’s chosen people return to their homeland. Not only this, but the king actually commands the returning Jewish people to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Now you might think Cyrus has become a follower of God. It sure sounds like it here. Ancient inscriptions affirm, however, that Cyrus was a polytheist—that is, he believed in many gods. In fact, you will notice that he says here the Lord “is the God who is in Jerusalem.” In other words, the God of Abraham is the God over in Judah; He’s the God who belongs in Jerusalem—that’s *His* territory.

And that makes this proclamation all the more miraculous. God is moving the heart of a pagan ruler to accomplish His purpose. Let me tell you something else that’s miraculous. Over 150 years earlier, before Cyrus was even born, the prophet Isaiah delivered the following prophecy in Isaiah 44:28:

*“[The Lord] says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”*

Isaiah prophesies the return to Jerusalem, and he even gives the name of the king who will set it in motion.

Let me tell you, beloved, history is *His*-story; it’s God’s story. History is the outworking of God’s eternal plan and purpose.

We do not always see it, of course. We might think the hearts of the rulers of our day are beyond the control of God, that God might be letting things slip by. Oh no. God is unseen, but He has not been unseated. He is actively at work; and as here, He even uses ungodly people to achieve His goals.

But notice also that God is stirring up the hearts of His own people as well. Look at verse 5:

*Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.*

God has been working to change their hearts. Just as the prodigal son came to his senses only after he landed in the pigpen, so these Jewish people have come to their senses while in the pigpen of Babylonian captivity. I don’t doubt for a moment that they remembered the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah and saw God at work through King Cyrus.

Many people are now stirred up and ready to go back to Jerusalem—the land of promise, the land of their forefathers. Those who stay behind in Persia pull out their wallets and their pocketbooks and give donations to pay the expenses. Even Cyrus gives back the treasures that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

In verse 8 we are introduced to an official named Sheshbazzar. That’s a Babylonian name, but he is identified here as “the prince of Judah.” Bible scholars believe this is another name for Zerubbabel, the man who leads the people back to the land of Israel. Zerubbabel was a royal descendant of David and is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:12-13.



Now in chapter 2, we find a long list of those who return to Jerusalem. The leaders are listed first, beginning with Zerubbabel in verse 2. Then there is a listing of various groups of people. Ordinary citizens are listed by clan in verses 3-20 and also by ancestral homes in verses 21-35. Not much is revealed about these people, but they are the carpenters, the sheepherders, the farmers, and the stonecutters. They are faithful people who have been stirred by God to pioneer this return to the land.

Then there is a listing of priests, Levites, and temple servants. Verse 59 adds that some of these willing people “could not prove their fathers’ houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel.” In our day that would be like losing your birth certificate or your driver’s license. For those returning to Judah, ancestry was critical because only the descendants of Aaron could serve in the temple.

All these people return to Jerusalem and Judah, and verse 68 says they present “freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.” This is a great day—a day that was prophesied years earlier. You can just imagine the thrill in the hearts of these people as they trust God and go back to rebuild their temple and their nation.

Now the sad note here is that if you do the math, you find that only around fifty thousand people are

returning to Judah. That is a small fraction of the nation in exile. We know that others will return later on, but there is no doubt the majority of the people have become comfortable in Babylon and would rather have Babylon than the promised land. Let me tell you that to this day, many people would rather have Babylon than God. They are way too comfortable in the world to ever choose the life of faith.

But I want to focus on the positive side here. God is reminding us, through the example of those who return to their homeland, to do what we know is the right thing to do. And He is not handicapped when only a few people show up to serve Him. History teaches us that God’s work never has required a lot of people, just the right people—those who are ready to follow Him and obey Him. Let’s be that kind of people today!

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Consider your own national leadership in light of Proverbs 21:1. Now, consider the command of 1 Timothy 2:1-4. How are you encouraged and challenged by these scriptures? What avenues has God made available to you to influence your nation’s leadership for His glory?

Why is it a mistake to assume that large numbers gathered “in His name” are sanctioned and blessed by God? Applying your scripture knowledge, how are “his people” to act, think, treat His word, and lead His church?

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## THE BUILDING STARTS—AND STOPS!

Ezra 3–4

The Jews who returned to their homeland after the captivity understood that genuine commitment to following the Lord means making worship a priority. They soon discovered that such a commitment not only produces glory to God but also stirs up satanic opposition.

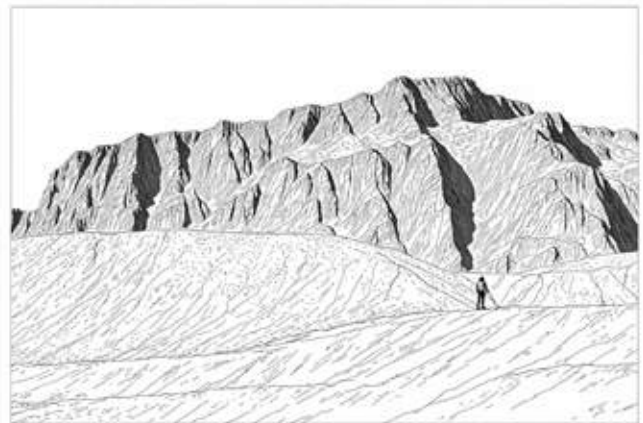
It's not often that a team wins a championship two years in a row. Whether it's the Super Bowl or a golf tournament, holding that championship trophy in your hand, year after year, is highly unlikely.

A lot of it has to do with the added pressure of expectations, a sense of overconfidence, and especially the determination of other athletes to make sure you don't win again. There is always opposition, and there are no guarantees.

The same can be said of those who follow the Lord. Life can be very difficult at times, but then, we have never been guaranteed a smooth path in life. It has often been said that there is no such thing as opportunity without opposition. Indeed, they are both part of the Christian's life.

That is also the experience of the Jewish captives who have been freed by King Cyrus. They have returned to Judah and Jerusalem after seventy years of captivity. In the months and years that follow, they will experience opportunities and successes, as well as opposition and disappointments.

We are now in the third chapter of Ezra, and the Jewish exiles have been back in the land about three months. Verse 1 tells us, "The people gathered as one man to Jerusalem." In other words, there is a real sense of national unity and fellowship.



Achaemenid Tombs at Naqsh-i-Rustam where Xerxes I is buried

And the first order of business is building the altar of burnt offering so that sacrifices can be presented according to the law. The worship of God is their priority—even over providing for their own personal safety by rebuilding Jerusalem.

So, even though they are afraid of the people living around Jerusalem, they focus on setting the altar in place and observing the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles. This feast was a time of thanksgiving as they remembered how God had led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

Still, their worship is limited, so to speak, because the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Bab-





ylonians. As verse 6 explains, “The foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.” So, to remedy this, they join together in a capital campaign for the temple reconstruction. Verse 7 tells us:

*They gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.*

It takes another seven months to plan this building project. Then Zerubbabel and the priest Jeshua appoint Levites as supervisors of the work (verses 8-9), and the construction begins. It’s not long before the foundation is completed, and the people stop to celebrate.

With the priests and Levites taking the lead, verse 11 says:

*They sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*

Can you imagine the difference here between these people and their forefathers who were taken into captivity seventy years earlier? That rebellious, idolatrous nation has now become a humble, grateful people who now worship the one true and living God.

Keep in mind, they are not celebrating a finished project. Only the foundation has been laid—that’s all. But they are not going to wait till everything is

finished perfectly before they stop and thank God—and by the way, neither should we.

Thanksgiving should not be just one afternoon around one turkey dinner with some pumpkin pie. Times of thanksgiving ought to happen often—even when things are not completed perfectly and everything in life isn’t working out smoothly.

Now there are certain people present who are not in the mood to sing quite as loudly. Verse 12 says:

*But many of the . . . old men who had seen the first [temple], wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid.*

There are some old folks here who can remember Solomon’s temple. They had seen it. And they can tell this new temple is not going to be anything as grand and glorious as Solomon’s. These are genuine tears as they remember what they lost.

Nevertheless, they all eventually dry their tears and get back to this building project, which is necessary for the full reestablishment of their worship of the Lord. Now, it is clear that in these early months, the people have experienced amazing success: they have built the altar, resumed sacrificial worship, and completed the foundation of the new temple. But all these successes in chapter 3 are about to meet up with opposition in chapter 4.

Their thanksgiving singing and shouting praise to God apparently reaches the ears of their neighbors, described here in verse 1 of chapter 4 as “adversaries.” These adversaries are the Samaritans, descendants of Israelites in the north who had escaped the Assyrian deportation, stayed in the land, and married foreigners the Assyrians brought into the region. They don’t want the Jewish people back in Jerusalem, and they don’t want a competing religion in the land.

Even though they offer to help rebuild the temple, Zerubbabel and the other leaders recognize their true motives, and they deny the Samaritans’ request. They respond to them in verse 3:



*“You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel.”*

Sure enough, the Samaritans show their true colors as they now attempt to stop the rebuilding of this temple. Verse 4 tells us they discourage the workers; verse 5 tells us that they bribe people to become “counselors against them to frustrate their purpose.”

In verse 6, Ezra, the author, points to a time fifty years into the future when the Samaritans write a letter to the Persian king Ahasuerus—a man we are going to meet close up in the book of Esther.

And in this letter, the Samaritans make all kinds of accusations. Look at their words to the king in verses 12-13:

*They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations . . . if this city is rebuilt . . . they will not pay tribute . . . and the royal revenue will be impaired.*

In other words, “Oh King Ahasuerus, these people are going to steal your money and make your life miserable.” You can imagine how this letter gets his attention!

This future reference here in chapter 4 is given by Ezra to emphasize the persistent opposition the Jewish people faced throughout the years as they sought to reestablish themselves in the land.

Verse 24 then returns us to the present time, picking up the account from verse 5 and informing us that the people become so discouraged by these false counselors and the implied threats of their enemies that their work on the temple grinds to a halt. For the next fifteen years, nothing will be done—the end of

verse 24 says—“until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

Let me tell you, a discouraging word can stop a believer from serving the Lord just as easily as open persecution. That is a good reminder for us today to stick together and stay at the work God has given us to do.

Frankly, the church family ought to be a place where we hear encouraging words. We are surrounded by a hostile and discouraging world, and the church should serve as a storm shelter, so to speak—a place of refuge where we encourage one another as we serve our true and living Lord.

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As you engage opposition and hardships in life, does the priority of worship increase or decrease in your mind? Why is this? If it decreases, what practical resources has the LORD already given you to guard against your decrease?

Why is it important to thank God for the process of recovering from hardships as well as His complete delivery?

Opposition to your ministry is inevitable. How does it encourage you to know that God is easily accustomed to protecting His people from those who oppose the work of God?

Consider how effective your church is at being a “place of refuge.” To what degree do you contribute to or hinder that effectiveness?

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## FINDING ENCOURAGEMENT

Ezra 5–6

The Lord knows us, and He knows what we need. And one thing we all need is encouragement—encouragement to faithfully obey and serve Him, even when doing so seems to offer no benefit. Thankfully, His encouragement is available to us, as it was to the Jewish people in Ezra 5–6.

The Jewish people who returned to Judah from their Babylonian exile made the Lord their priority in life again as they began to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They were filled with enthusiasm, and soon they had completed the foundation for the temple. But with that, unfortunately, the work came to a screeching halt.

Opposition arose from ungodly people around that area. These adversaries didn't want the Jewish people back in their promised land, and they certainly didn't want them reestablishing the worship of the God of Abraham. They tried everything they could to discourage the Jewish people—they even threatened bodily harm. And eventually they succeeded. The people were so disheartened and discouraged

that they abandoned any further work on the temple for the next fifteen years.

Well, here in the fifth chapter of Ezra, during the days of the Persian king Darius, the Lord encourages His people to return to this important reconstruction. And God sends encouragement to them through two sources.

First, they are encouraged by *God's prophets*. Chapter 5 and verse 1 says:

*Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.*

Now eventually we will get to their messages, which have been recorded in Scripture in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. But for now, they encourage the people to overcome their personal fears and concerns and finish the job. They understand that as the people make the Lord their priority, God will take care of the rest.

That reminds me of the way Hudson Taylor encouraged his missionary team in China back in the 1800s



Elephantine papyrus petitioning the Persian governor for permission to build a temple



as they faced physical threats and financial difficulties. He used to say to them, “If you are simply obeying the Lord, all the responsibility will rest with Him, not on you!”<sup>1</sup>

Well, fortunately, the people here respond in faith and obedience; verse 2 says:

*[They] arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.*

Now this doesn’t mean all their problems go away; in fact, the opposition immediately returns. Tattenai, the Persian governor responsible for this region, comes around and asks who gave the Jews the authority to build this temple. He even wants to know the names of those involved.

This is nothing less than a threat. But this time, the people don’t stop the work. The continued encouragement from God’s prophets—Haggai and Zechariah—is exactly what they need to keep going.

The second source of encouragement comes from *God’s providence*. The word *providence* refers to the way God moves people and events to fulfill His ultimate purpose. God is the ultimate chess player as He moves history in His direction.

Governor Tattenai sends off a letter to King Darius, hoping the king will shut down this reconstruction of the temple. But God will providentially use this to benefit His people.

This letter from Tattenai is quite clever. He’s trying to prove to Darius that the Jewish people are rebellious. To make his point, he quotes the Jewish leaders in his letter to Darius. In other words, he is saying, “King Darius, you need to know this is what those people are saying.” He then cites their words:

*“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago . . . But because our fathers had angered*

*the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house . . . However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt.”*

(verses 11-13)

Now Governor Tattenai is hoping Darius will smell treason in their words. After all, they referred to themselves as “the servants of the God of heaven,” not Darius. Tattenai also includes a reference to King Cyrus making a decree that the temple should be rebuilt. Apparently, Tattenai does not believe a pagan king like Cyrus would decree such a thing, so he asks King Darius to search the royal archives to prove it never happened.

But here in chapter 6, when Darius orders the search, the proclamation of King Cyrus is discovered. And with that, God changes everything in Darius’s mind.

King Darius writes a letter back to Tattenai—and you have to love this letter. Note the king’s demand here in verse 7:

*“Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.”*

Tattenai’s letter completely backfires. God had moved Cyrus years earlier to release the Jews to rebuild the temple and to keep this proclamation in the royal archives.

And that’s not all. Surprisingly, Darius also demands financial support from Governor Tattenai! His letter reads here in verse 8:

*“Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you [Tattenai] shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house*





*of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province.”*

In other words, “Tattenai, I want you to start signing the checks to cover the bills on this building project.”

And if that is not enough, Darius makes a further demand:

*“And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven . . . let that be given to them day by day without fail.”* (verse 9)

And then there is a P.S. at the bottom of the letter in verse 10, where Darius asks the Jewish people to pray for him and for his family.

Wow! Do you see God’s providence in all this? God turns the hostile actions of the governor completely around. And in four and a half years, the temple is rebuilt.

Well, this calls for a celebration. The temple is dedicated with various offerings, and the priests and Levites are set in order for the service of the Lord. And verse 18 emphasizes that everything was accomplished according to what is “written in the Book of Moses.”

One month later, the people celebrate Passover (verse 19) and, along with it, the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (verse 22). It’s hard to imagine the great joy with which they celebrated.

Chapter 6 ends with the theme of joy:

*The LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king . . . so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.* (verse 22)

God sent the people two sources of encouragement: the prophets of God and the providence of God. Beloved, I want you to keep that in mind. These are the same encouragements you and I have today.

When discouragement knocks on your door, when you encounter enemies of the gospel who want you to stop living for God, you need to listen to God’s prophets—that is, to God’s living, inspired Word. It will encourage you to remain “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Be encouraged also by the providence of God, knowing “that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Now that does not automatically make life easier, but it does remind us of our ultimate security, which is in Him.

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*In what way do you also have the encouragement of these and other prophets to encourage you during times of opposition? Why is it important to pursue understanding from those books in the Bible that appear to be obscure or not relevant to believers today?*

*Recall a time when you experienced the providence of God. Were you expecting it? Why? How did it build up your faith?*

*Review these verses to prepare your heart to trust God’s promise that He can and will work all things in your life and in His kingdom together for good. Job 12:23, Psalm 103:19, Proverbs 16:9, Daniel 4:35.*

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China’s Open Century, Book Three: If I Had a Thousand Lives* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1982), 454.





## EZRA'S MODEL FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY

Ezra 7–8

The work of God is just that—*His* work. Like Ezra, we should be committed to knowing, obeying, and teaching God's Word, but we also must remind ourselves and others that whatever the Lord accomplishes through us is because of His favor, or grace.

Between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra, fifty-eight years passed. During those fifty-eight years, the excitement surrounding the temple completion began to dwindle. The people were prospering, farming their land and enjoying their homes. But they had become satisfied with mediocrity in their relationship with God.

Zerubbabel had led in the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah will come along later and rebuild the city. But somebody needs to come along and rebuild the people. They need a spiritual revival.

Here in chapter 7 we are introduced to the man who will spark this revival, and he is none other than the author of this little book. His name is Ezra.

The opening verses of chapter 7 give us a little biographical information about Ezra. He is a priest, a direct descendant of Aaron, Israel's first high priest. Verse 6 also describes him as "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses." This tells us that he is a Bible scholar and teacher.

We do not know what official position Ezra has in Persia, but at the moment he's still back there, and he apparently has personal access to Artaxerxes, the Persian king. In fact, we are told here at the end of verse 6 that "the king granted him all that he asked."

That sounds like a sweet arrangement if you ask me. But why was the king so favorable toward Ezra? Well, verse 6 tells us, "The hand of the LORD his God was on him." By the way, that is a running theme in Ezra's life. You will read something like that six times in chapters 7 and 8—the good hand of God is on the life and ministry of Ezra. And it's by God's hand that Ezra leads a number of exiles back to Jerusalem.

Now Ezra's not running around like a rooster taking all the credit. In fact, here in verse 10, the Bible tells us that "Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel."

I want to encourage you as we take this Wisdom Journey today to follow the model of Ezra in life and minis-



Statue of a scribe



try. Ezra set his heart on learning, obeying, living, and communicating to others the truth of God's Word.

The remainder of chapters 7 and 8 fill in some of the details of how Ezra's return to Jerusalem came about and what it involved. A typical letter of reference from the king authorizing it all is cited here. Verse 13 records:

*"I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you."*

So clearly, this is what Ezra had requested from the king.

The king's letter is rather amazing, and we do not want to miss what God is providentially doing here. In verse 14, King Artaxerxes authorizes Ezra to find out if the people of Judah are living according to the Law of God—that is, the first five books of the Bible.

Ezra also is allowed to take silver and gold with him and buy everything he needs for the work in the temple (verses 15-17). But the king basically tells Ezra that he doesn't need to keep any receipts to justify what he purchases. He says:

*"Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God."* (verse 18)

He completely trusts Ezra to do the right thing with this money.

But Artaxerxes doesn't stop with that. He also gives Ezra a blank checkbook, so to speak, connected to the royal bank of Persia. Listen to what the king writes here in verse 21:

*"And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasur-*

*ers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra . . . requires of you, let it be done with all diligence."*

This is amazing! And Ezra recognizes this as the hand of God. He writes:

*Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king . . . I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.* (verses 27-28)

Chapter 8 begins with a list of the people who prepare to return with Ezra to Jerusalem. It isn't long, though, before Ezra discovers that there are no Levites among them. And Levites are a key to the renewal of the nation because they will help teach the people the Word of God. Once again, we are told here in verse 18, that God's good hand upon them allows Ezra and other leading men to recruit a number of Levites to join them.

Now before they set out on their journey to Jerusalem, Ezra calls for a time of fasting and prayer. And specifically, they are going to pray for safety on the journey. Remember, they are carrying a train load of gold and silver to use at the temple.

Listen to Ezra here in verse 22:

*I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the en-*



*emy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.”*

In other words, since Ezra has already proclaimed God’s power to protect them, he does not want to turn around and ask for soldiers to guard them on their way. He is concerned that this would call into question the power of the Lord. Ezra is more concerned with the Lord’s reputation than he is about his own life.

But don’t misunderstand, protection is needed on this journey—divine protection. They have a caravan of men, women, and children. And the gold and silver mentioned in verses 26 and 27 would be worth millions of dollars in today’s economy.

Ezra and the men accompanying him never took a class in sword fighting. They are not soldiers, and bandits would love to get their hands on their treasures!

Well, the journey finally begins, and the only comment on it is given in verse 31, where Ezra testifies, “The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.” After four months of travel (see Ezra 7:9), they safely arrived in Jerusalem. They deliver the gold and silver and the temple vessels, and then they offer sacrifices of thanksgiving at the temple. Oh, I’m sure they were thankful indeed!

Ezra and these people clearly understand that apart from the hand of God upon them, they never would have made it. And all they want to do is give thanks to God.

Let’s follow the model we see here in the life and ministry of Ezra. All we are and all we do, and everything we hope to be, is the result of the good hand of God and His grace upon our lives. So, let’s get started, even today, giving thanks to God.

*All we are and all we do, and everything we hope to be, is the result of the good hand of God and His grace upon our lives. So, let’s get started, even today, giving thanks to God.*

In what practical ways do you thank God for His grace? Why is such a spiritual discipline helpful in building your faith? For whom in your life are you modeling this discipline?

God provided Ezra’s caravan with providence to get going. From the text above, what else did the LORD do to build up this band of humble believers? Why is it that God so often requires our faith to accompany His acts of providence?

Finish this sentence after reading Ephesians 3:20-21 : The next time I face overwhelming circumstances I will \_\_\_\_\_.

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## FOUR STEPS IN RESPONDING TO SIN

Ezra 9–10

We live in a day when sin is excused, justified, and often lauded. Ezra reminds us that sin should horrify us so that we confess it, turn from it, and by God's grace avoid it and its consequences.

It seems today that many people want to change the world, so long as it doesn't involve changing themselves. They want the world to act right, but they are not ready to live right themselves.

The truth is our world is not going to see any kind of meaningful change unless individuals confess their sin and turn to the Lord. And by the way, that's why the Lord did not tell us to change our culture but to make disciples. And one disciple at a time can bring the light of truth to a dark world.

Ezra understood this principle in his day, some 450 years before the birth of Christ. The Jewish nation needed to change. But it was not going to happen unless individuals confessed their sin.

Now while Ezra is dealing with a unique situation involving the covenant people of Israel, we can find some timeless lessons here in chapters 9 and 10 for us today.

Even before Ezra left Persia to return to Judah, he knew there were sin problems among his people. Now in Jerusalem, he is informed of one of them here in the opening verses of chapter 9:

*The officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not sep-*



Engraving of Israelites being flayed by Assyrians

*arated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations... For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands."* (verses 1-2)

The issue here isn't ethnic or racial but spiritual. The Lord had forbidden intermarriage with unbelieving idolaters. Ezra cites God's prohibition (see Deuteronomy 7:1-6) later in verses 11-12:



*“The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it . . . Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons.”*

And that is exactly what they had started doing. In fact, even the Jewish leaders and officials were disobeying this command.

Now with that news, watch what Ezra does here. In fact, I want to point out through his actions four steps to take in correctly responding to sin. The first step is *anguish*. Ezra immediately reacts to this news, writing here in verse 3, “As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.”

Tearing the clothes was a common expression of grief. Pulling out some of his hair expressed distress—he is “appalled” by this sin. He is horrified by what it means. It is only when we become appalled and distressed and horrified over our sin that we are going to do anything about it.

Verse 4 tells us here that other people also “trembled at the words of the God of Israel.” They are fearful of God’s judgment. After all, their recent captivity was the result of idolatry and defiance against God.

This same evening, Ezra writes in verse 5, “I . . . fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God.” I call this second step in responding correctly to sin *admission*.

Ezra prays here in verse 6:

*“Oh my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.”*

That is what I call total admission of sin.

Ezra understands that what makes their sin so horrible is that God had only recently shown them mercy by allowing them to survive and even return to their land. But now look: they are gladly intermarrying with people who worship other gods and practice all sorts of immorality in the names of their gods.

And notice what Ezra acknowledges here in verse 13: “You . . . have punished us less than our iniquities deserved.” I know people who won’t repent because they think God is too hard on them, but those who truly repent realize that God has not been nearly as hard on them as He could have been.

*Those who truly repent realize that God has not been nearly as hard on them as He could have been.*

Well, properly responding to sin not only involves anguish and admission; it also leads to *action*. Ezra’s prayer of confession is being offered publicly, before the temple, and that makes a big impression on the people.

In fact, verse 1 of chapter 10 reveals that a great number of people gather around him and begin to weep over their sin. One of them, a man named Shecaniah, says to Ezra here in verse 2:

*“We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.”*

By the way, that’s pretty good theology. There is always hope for sinners, no matter what they have done, if they confess their sin. Shecaniah goes on to suggest that the people need to make a covenant with



God to put away their foreign wives. In other words, “Let’s get serious about changing our lives.” Now I don’t know much about Shecaniah, but he was a brave man for being willing to change his life and challenge others to change theirs.

Ezra has the people take an oath that they will dissolve these marriages. Then, after fasting through the night, Ezra issues a proclamation calling everyone to assemble in Jerusalem. Three days later when they come together in Jerusalem, it’s pouring rain. Ezra preaches anyway, and with great power. In his sermon, he says this:

*“Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.”* (verse 11)

Now keep in mind this is a unique step specifically for the nation of Israel during this unique time. This is not advice for you today to go and divorce your unsaved husband or wife. There are passages in the New Testament that tell us what to do in cases like that today—and if you want to look ahead, you can read 1 Peter 3, where the wife of an unbelieving husband is encouraged to respect him and win him with the gospel without even saying a word.

Well, the people are convicted. They confess their sin and then make the changes in their lives that reflect true repentance.

This change is not going to happen overnight. In fact, individual cases will have to be examined. After all, if a foreign spouse has become a follower of the Lord, that marriage would continue. Just think of Boaz marrying a former idolater and Gentile woman named Ruth.

Now there is one more step needed in responding to sin. Along with anguish, admission, and action, there is a final step: *accountability*. The last half of chapter 10 is a list of those men who had taken unbelieving, idolatrous wives. Let me tell you, the public listing of

these 113 Jewish men given here is enough to hold them accountable. You would not want your name on this list for very long.

Many turned back to God in repentance. And so should we today, beloved. We all sin; the question is, How do we respond? Let’s regularly take these steps of anguish, admission, action, and accountability and walk in fellowship with God.

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What role does a thoroughly biblical view of God’s character and nature have in fueling an appropriate response to sin? In what ways does your response to sin resemble Ezra’s and the people’s response to sin? Why is it important for the world to see God’s people “anguish” over their own sin?

Notice that in this text confession comes after prayer and fasting in the company of like-minded people. How does this example influence your own practice of confession? What value is it to have a group of people with whom you can confess sin in each other’s presence? (Proverbs 28:13, James 5:16, 1 John 1:9)

What heart-attitudes will likely accompany someone who resists being held accountable for their sins? (Hebrews 3:13) To what degree do you welcome and practice accountability from others? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> We have a resource called *For Better or for Worse* based on this passage in 1 Peter. Contact us for more information. <https://www.wisdomonline.org/store>

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