Ezra - Commentaries by Nicolas Simon

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 9:13-15, Repentance -

Article from https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btsb

Repentance is the path to restoration — it is a process and not a point in time. True repentance is taking God's side against ourselves and is always accompanied by a change in behaviour. One that is truly repentant has reached that place where they are ready to acknowledge the just nature of the consequences to their conduct. One that confesses merely to avoid consequences is not repentant. In Ezra's prayer and in the subsequent actions of the people, we see these principles in practice. He recognized that Israel had received less than their iniquities deserved (Ezra 9:13). Ezra concludes his prayer with, "O Lord God of Israel, Thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this" (Ezra 9:15).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 9:12, Weakness -

As a result of their intermingling with the world, the children of Israel lacked strength; they were in no spiritual state to enjoy the good of the land, and they were in danger of losing their inheritance (Ezra 9:12).

In the earlier chapters of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians we see what great spiritual weakness was amongst that assembly — weakness that rendered them insensible to the grossest of sins in their very midst. We also see that there was physical weakness, sickness, and even death. Because of their failure to discern the Lord's body — neither the One Body as expressed in the loaf nor the unfathomable love and grace as represented in that broken loaf — God had acted in discipline. "On this account many among you are weak and infirm, and a good many are fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 11:30 JND).

The Lord is never vindictive or capricious in His treatment of His people; rather, He acts in discipline out of love to spare His children. "We are disciplined of the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:30-32). "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). God often allows weakness to make us more dependent on Him.

Let us resist the temptation to think, "If only the brethren were less severe … " or, "If they weren't so legal … ." Providing that which satisfies the flesh never brings strength; for a short time it may increase the popularity of the meetings, but ultimately, if the assembly is just like the world, why stay?

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra?s Intercessory Prayer - Ezra 9:3-11

Intercession for the people of God is one of the characteristics of the true prophet. "He is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live" (Gen. 20:7). Though Ezra is never specifically styled a prophet, we see him acting in this role. Daniel and Micah can likewise be found interceding for the people of God (Dan. 9; Micah 7). Jeremiah, on the other hand, is forbidden to do so: "pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to Me: for I will not hear thee" (Jer. 7:16).

In each example, the prophet takes his place with the people, confessing their sins as his own, and justifying God in His government. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens" (Ezra 9:6). To acknowledge the sin as our own is not a matter of condescension or a false humility, but rather an understanding of the principle brought out in the Book of Joshua. When Achan sinned in taking of the accursed thing, God says: "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff" (Josh. 7:11). When defilement comes in amongst the people of God, the whole is defiled: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). Unless the sin is acknowledged, owned and confessed collectively, it cannot be dealt with. When the horror of the evil and sin is felt as our own, then action will follow as being needful to purge oneself of it — this is what it means to eat the sin offering (Lev. 6:26, 29).

Ezra does not unilaterally act on behalf of the people, but rather, he waits until the conscience of the people is reached: "Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away" (Ezra 9:4). The Apostle Paul, likewise, did not wish to impose his power as an apostle upon the assembly in Corinth, for then the whole assembly must have been dealt with. It was his desire that the assembly act in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ and in His name (1 Cor. 5:4).

How important, too, that we judge according to the Word of God and not according to our own assessment; these men "trembled at the words of the God of Israel." How unlike the Laodicians; their view of themselves was all rosy, but God had to tell them that they were "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

Perhaps at that time, the people merely trembled at the prospect of the fearful consequences of their sinful conduct — for God's government would have affected them all — nevertheless, it was the beginning of a work that ultimately resulted in true repentance.

Confession is not a way to dodge the outcome of sin, but rather, it reveals a state of soul that shows that we are willing to submit to its consequences. It is then that God can come in with blessing, though we may still suffer loss — we see this vividly in David's sin with

Bathsheba. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Psa. 51:17).

One thing that is not to be found in Ezra’s prayer is an appeal to God for forgiveness. To do so would have depreciated the significance of the sin and of the dishonor it had brought upon Jehovah and His testimony at Jerusalem. With us falls the responsibility of confession and repentance; on God’s side, He will faithfully execute His part: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

It is important to note that Ezra came to God at the time of the evening sacrifice; that is to say, he approached God on the basis of sacrifice and not on his merits or that of the people.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 9:1-2, The Condition of the Remnant in Judea -

The children of Israel were a people separated unto Jehovah (Lev. 20:26). Sanctification, if interpreted literally, means to be made holy; practically, it implies separation from this world and a walk in association with God. Throughout chapter 19 of Leviticus, every injunction is followed by the statement, “I am Jehovah your God.” They were to be holy, not because they were better than everyone else, but because Jehovah was their God. “Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). Chapter 18 plainly declares what this meant: “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, I am the Lord your God. After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do: and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do: neither shall ye walk in their ordinances” (Lev. 18:23). They were a sanctified people, separated unto Jehovah, and they were not to behave like the nations.

It is little wonder that Ezra was overwhelmed by the state of the people that he found in the land — one not dissimilar to that which preceded their Babylonian captivity (Ezra 9:3). They had not separated themselves from the people of the land — the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites — but were doing according to their abominations. Worse yet, they had encouraged their sons to marry the daughters of the land. In so doing, they had “mingled the holy seed with the peoples of the lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass” (Ezra 9:2). Perhaps, saddest of all, those in responsibility were chief in this unfaithfulness.

How vividly this translates to our present day. God’s injunction to be holy remains true as we have already observed: “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16), and why? Not because we are under law, but because we have “been redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

It may seem presumptive to say that Israel’s seed was any more holy than that of the nations, but they were a people redeemed by God, delivered from Egypt, and separated unto Himself through the sprinkling of blood — all vivid types as to our position in Christ. Paul makes it perfectly clear in his second letter to the Corinthians what this means to us: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers ... come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:14,17-18).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 8:35-36, Burnt Offerings for All Israel -

Again we see this faithful remnant offering up a sacrifice for all Israel. Though they represented just a small part — primarily Judah, Benjamin and the Levites — they never lost sight of the unity of all Israel. It was no pretention on their part; rather, it was spiritual intelligence as to the things of God. In a coming day, “all Israel shall be saved” (Rom. 11:26). He has not forgotten any of that family.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 8:24-34, Weighed Unto Them -

Twelve of the chief of the priests and 10 of their brethren were chosen by Ezra to bear the silver, gold and precious vessels. These ones were chosen because they were holy unto Jehovah; it would never do for the holy vessels to be defiled by man. “Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the Lord God of your fathers. Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord” (Ezra 8:28-29). To each Ezra weighed the same measure, and at the end of the trip, it was weighed again — none were found wanting. I do not believe that this was done because Ezra doubted them; indeed, they were chosen because they were counted faithful. Rather, it was so no one could accuse them of misusing their service to enrich themselves (2 Cor. 8:20-21).

We, too, are holy men in the sight of God, and our walk should reflect that. “As He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conduct” (1 Peter 1:14-15). The man of God no longer lives his life according to the lusts of the flesh but to the will of God (1 Peter 4:2). He has committed a gift to our stewardship: “as every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). Can we join with the Apostle Paul in saying, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful” (1 Tim. 1:12). Will we hear at the end of our earthly pathway, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21)?

Sadly, how quickly man turns the gift of God into a lucrative business. The responsibility of oversight was especially committed to the elders, but towards the end of his life, Peter found it necessary to exhort them: “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). It was not many years afterwards that men were set over parishes, were compensated monetarily, and they began referring to the flock of God as their flock.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 8:21-23, Fasting by the River of Ahava -

There were very real dangers for these travelers in this desert land: enemies were in the way and bandits lay in wait (Ezra 8:22,31). The journey was not a short one; in all it took them four months. During that time it was necessary to feed and protect this company of men, women and children, and to guard the significant quantity of gold and silver that they were carrying. It was only natural that Ezra should have requested a military escort. However, this was not his way for, he had told the king, “The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him” (Ezra 8:22). Faithful words such as these are not to be spoken rashly, and Ezra was not such a man. He had counted the cost and knew that his God was able to protect them. However, it cannot be I and God, or even God and I, it must be all God; and so they fasted and humbled themselves before their God to seek of Him a right way: “I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance” (Ezra 8:21).

Fasting is not a form of flagellation; we cannot destroy the flesh through fasting. Rather, fasting results from putting the flesh in its true place, a place of death. What need is there to feed a dead man? Fasting can certainly be a conscious decision; however, unless it is accompanied by the right spirit, it will only exalt the flesh as monasticism does. In the Gospel of Mark we read of “prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29) — it speaks of dependence on God and separation from the world. This is not a formula; it describes a state of soul. With Daniel we see such a man (Dan. 9:3). We can hardly say that we are dependent on God when we are friends with the world. On the other hand, separation without dependence on God leads to self-glorification, as with the Pharisees.

This company by the river sought a right way for themselves, but their exercise did not end there; they also prayed for their little ones. God delights to bless families. God’s promise to the Philippian jailer, should he believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, was that he would be saved and his house — not saved on the basis of his faith, but rather, because of his faith blessing, and ultimately salvation, would come to all his. It is good to note that the last of the family of Adonikam, whom we first met in chapter two (Ezra 2:13), joined their brethren in the land (Ezra 8:13).

Having prayed for their families, they didn’t stop with that either. They also committed all their substance into God’s care. How often we find ourselves fretting, not about our loved ones, but about our stuff! “Regard not your stuff” was Pharaoh’s advice to the sons of Jacob — why bother with it, when all the good of the land of Egypt lay before them (Gen. 45:20). Likewise, Paul can say, “My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). That doesn’t mean that we are to be poor stewards of the things that we have been entrusted with. These men had a good deal entrusted to them. However, if we remember that everything that we have is the Lord’s, then we can say with Job, “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

The enemy’s efforts were directed at preventing their gathering to Jerusalem, God’s divine center. The enemy will always oppose a testimony to the truth. Like this feeble remnant, we can only be preserved if we are found in complete dependence on God, humbling ourselves before Him, and “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts” (Titus 2:12). The outcome of their prayer and fasting before God was, “and He was intreated of us” (Ezra 8:23).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 8:15-20, Where Are the Levites? -

Ezra gathers the people together by the river at Ahava and surveys the company. Once more, we see a good response from the priests, but this time there are no Levites numbered amongst them at all! This lack of ministers for the house of our God clearly disturbed Ezra — they were needed to handle the sacred vessels to be carried up to Jerusalem. Perhaps, compared to the priests, the Levites felt that their service was of little consequence — things were in a state of ruin, so why bother; or perhaps, since they did not have an inheritance in the land, there was nothing much to be gained in returning to Judah. All such thoughts — and we can arrive at many like excuses — are centered on self and not on God.

Christendom has managed to make the position of a deacon a badge of honor. Scripture sees it quite differently. The word “deacon” simply means “servant,” one who serves in the house of God. That being said, the Lord does not look down upon the service of a deacon. The house of Stephanas is especially commended in that they “devoted themselves to the saints for service” (1 Cor. 16:15 JND). Furthermore, those who have ministered well, “purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). This is not about gaining preeminence. Contrariwise, that which seems so inferior, may well lead to larger things in God’s service. We see this practically in the life of Stephen. He began his ministry serving at the tables of widows. Whether in Ezra’s day, or in our present day, there is a need for willing servants in the house of God.

Ezra sent men with discernment to seek out Levites who would join them on this journey, and they did not return empty handed. It is good to have individuals who are capable of energizing the lagging spiritual energy of their brethren and to be able to rightly discern those who will faithfully execute their office. It is again beautiful to see a disproportionate response amongst the Nethinim, 220 in all, and each expressed by name (Ezra 8:20). Almost certainly of Gentile descent, perhaps even former captives, they appeared to value what had come to them at a great cost. This contrasts sharply with the Levites, who seemed to place little value on their inherited position. Sadly, this is often the case with the children of the saints today. “Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding” (Prov. 23:23).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 8:1-14, The Families -

Chapter eight fills in the details of Ezra’s trip from Babylon to Jerusalem. The names of the chiefs of the fathers, along with the number accompanying them, have been recorded by God. It is interesting to note that these are reckoned by genealogy (Ezra 8:3). No longer do we find the people recorded by city as we did in the second chapter; the response appears to be more individual: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev. 2:7, etc.). Also, it seemed especially important that each be able to specify their lineage.

As we noted earlier, the assembly is not to be a mixed multitude; each person at the Lord's Table should be able to clearly state their family, not now by natural birth, but by new birth.

If the numbers are representative of the whole, then significantly fewer people returned with Ezra than did some 50 years earlier with Zerubbabel. God, however, acknowledges them all, whether 28 or 300 (Ezra 8:5,11).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 7:11-28, The Kings Letter -

Ezra received a commission from Artaxerxes to return to the land. The letter established Ezra's authority and detailed the king's instructions (Ezra 7:12-26). The king recognized Ezra as a "priest, a scribe of the Law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:12). As to how Ezra came to the notice of the king is not recorded; like Daniel, however, his faith was known to those in authority, even to Artaxerxes himself.

The letter granted permission to the Jews of the king's realm to return to Jerusalem. Only those with a desire to return were called upon to go — "which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:13). There is a saying, "absence makes the heart grow fonder," but in spiritual things, the opposite is true. Like a campfire, the further we sit from it, the colder we become. Those that returned with Ezra, as we shall see in the next chapter, appear to have been much fewer in number than the company that returned with Zerubbabel. It is important to note that this generation of exiles did not return to build the temple or even the walls of the city. The one had been completed and the other awaited Nehemiah. These returned to maintain the testimony of the God of Israel at Jerusalem, where He had placed His name. The energy of faith is limited to a few. When there is a great work to be done or battles to be fought, we respond; when we are called upon to simply "hold that fast which thou hast" (Rev. 3:11), how lethargic we become.

Ezra was to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, and, it would seem, especially with respect to the obedience of the people to the law of God (Ezra 7:14). This is confirmed in the instructions to establish magistrates and judges who knew the law of God; disobedience to the law of God and the law of the king was to be speedily addressed (Ezra 7:26). It is not long before we find how needful this was; those who had returned earlier had been greatly weakened through alliances with the people of the land.

How essential it is to have the Word of God nearby — in Ezra's case, it was in his hand (Ezra 7:14; Deut. 11:18-31). "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psa. 119:105). If I don't want to walk in the counsel of the ungodly, then my delight must be in the Word of God (Psa. 1:1-2). The latter does not follow from the former; rather the converse is true.

The king and counselors sent with Ezra silver and gold, along with that which had been given as a free will offering by the people. The money was especially designated for the purchase of animals for the offerings; the remainder was to be used as they saw fit — though in part, at least, it appears that it was to be used to beautify the house of Jehovah (Ezra 7:27). When we consider the free will offering of the people, we are reminded of the verses: "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb. 13:15-16). Praise and worship must come first, but we are not to forget to do good and share of our substance; but it is "by Him" (Heb. 13:15). It cannot be by constraint or for personal gain. It should likewise be noted, that all of this is found in connection with our going "forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:13). We should not think that we need to join the camp to do good; indeed, we should separate ourselves from it so we can do that which is well pleasing to the Lord.

Ezra attributes all to God. He does not take credit for putting the idea into the king's heart, nor does he take credit for the kindness shown him by the king and his princes. Rather, he thanks God for strengthening his hand in gathering chief men to go up with him (Ezra 7:27-28).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra - Ezra 7:1-10

It is not until chapter 7 that we get to meet the individual whose name titles this book. Ezra was a scribe, and no doubt, the author of both this book and the book of Nehemiah, and perhaps also the books of Chronicles. Close to 50 years had passed since the completion of the temple before Ezra was granted permission by king Artaxerxes to return to the land along with those like minded. During those 50 years, Xerxes (Ahasuerus), the king of Esther's fame, had reigned.

Ezra's genealogy is traced back to Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the chief priest. There was no question as to his qualification to serve in the priesthood. Here was a man that could be described as a "ready scribe" in the Law of Moses — one who was skillful and diligent (Ezra 7:6). A little further in the chapter we learn why this was so. "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra. 7:10). It wasn't simply that Ezra had a good grasp of the law in his head, but he prepared his heart to seek it, and furthermore, to do it. "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). This verse does not suggest that we should have answers ready to roll off the tongue (see Mark 13:11), but rather, it refers to our state of soul as the next verse tells us, "having a good conscience" (1 Pet. 3:16). The heart that is full of worldly cares will not have much room for the things of God. A house that is untidy, unkempt and cluttered with goods is not a house into which we readily invite guests — we are embarrassed to bring them in. The heart, however, that is separated unto God will be full of Christ and must necessarily share the things of God with others.

Ezra, it appears, was bold to ask the king for those things that he would need — though we note that he did not seek the king's protection, but rather, committed himself to the Lord (Ezra 7:22). "The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him" (Ezra 7:6). When we are walking with God, then we have confidence in making request of Him. "If our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:21). "Delight thyself also in the Lord: and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psa. 37:4).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 6:22, Joy From the Lord -

The result of obedience to the Word of God is joy, “for the Lord had made them joyful” (Ezra 6:22). Despite what man may teach, true joy comes from God and not by following our own wills, or, as we often hear, following our hearts. Unless our hearts’ affections are guarded by the breastplate of faith (1 Thess. 5:8) and restrained by the breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:14), our hearts will lead us astray. The path of obedience to the Word of God is the path of true happiness.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 6:19-21, Keeping the Passover -

The house of God was completed at the beginning of the month Adar, the last month of the year. The Passover, of course, occurred on the 14th day of the first month (Ex. 12:2). Before the Passover could be celebrated, however, it was necessary for things to be in order according to the word of Moses, especially, in connection with the purification of the priests and Levites (2 Chron. 30:3). Even in a day of weakness, God’s holiness in connection with His house must not be compromised (Psa. 93:5; 1 Pet. 1:16). It was not sufficient that the priestly class and those that served in the house were pure, but it was also necessary for the people to have separated themselves from the filthiness of the heathen before they could eat (Ezra 6:21). This is also true of the assembly. The Apostle Paul had to address a situation in Corinth where the immorality of one had tainted the whole assembly. He reminds them: “Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

For Israel, the Passover looked back to the sacrifice of the lamb which had preserved them from judgment, and to their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Though there was no longer an outward display of God’s awesome power, such as the dividing of the Red Sea, Haggai reminds the people: “the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not” (Hag. 2:5). God’s power had not changed. In our day, we err if we expect a Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we can say with confidence that the same Spirit remains with us today — indeed, indwelling every true believer of God, and collectively the assembly. Furthermore, we can (in great weakness no doubt) continue to show forth the Lord’s death in the remembrance of the Lord, a memorial to Christ’s death and of our deliverance from bondage.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 6:16-18, The Dedication of the House -

The temple with its stone blocks and timber beams must have seemed crude when compared to the gilded, brass-pillared, temple of Solomon’s day. The sacrifices offered were likewise paltry compared to those offered by Solomon. Whereas Solomon offered 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (1 Kings 8:63), at the dedication of this temple, only 100 bullocks, 200 rams and 400 lambs were offered (Ezra 6:17). Such an offering was not, however, despised by God. Of special interest are the 12 he-goats offered as a sin offering for all Israel — one for each tribe (Ezra 6:17). Despite the small representation of that nation and the presence of only those from Judah, Benjamin and Levi, all the children of Israel were recognized in that offering. Likewise today, even though just a few may be gathered to the Lord’s name, the loaf takes in all the redeemed company. It symbolizes not just the body of Christ which was broken for us, but also the church of God, the Body of Christ: “We being many are one bread, and one body” (1 Cor. 10:17). In partaking of that one loaf, we give practical expression to the unity of the body.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 6:14-15, The House of God Completed -

“And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo”

“finished it, according to the

commandment of the God

of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia”

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 6:1-13, The Enemies Thwarted -

A search having been made, the decree of Cyrus is located in the province of the Medes. The enemy, who had hoped to stop the work of the Jews, is now compelled by the king to assist them in their efforts. Darius decreed that they were to leave the work alone (Ezra 6:7), that the expenses for the building were to be taken from the tribute exacted from that side of the river (v. 8), and that they were to provide for the daily sacrifices, day by day without fail (v. 9)! This theme is to be found often in Scripture: the enemy seeks to overthrow only to find himself overthrown. The supreme example of this is to be seen, of course, at Calvary — all the forces of evil conspired against the Son of God, only to find themselves utterly defeated. “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me” (John 12:31-32).

By weakness and defeat,He won the meed and crown;Trod all our foes beneath His feetBy being trodden down.

The king, who by historic accounts was Zoroastrian, believed in a supreme being and was fiercely opposed to idolatry. He seemed to value these Jews praying to the God of heaven for his life and that of his sons (Ezra 6:10). He even appears to recognize that God had caused His

name to dwell at Jerusalem (v. 12). Man's heart has not changed throughout the centuries. It is not unusual to find those who value spiritual things, and who may even accept the prayers of another. The vast majority of Americans believe in a supreme being; sadly, that being is very often a god of their own making — in effect, intellectual idolatry. Scripture tells us that God can alone be known through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me" (John 14:6). Without the Son, there is no life; man is lost. In John's Gospel we also read, "the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). This expression is used by people to mean many things, but we should keep in mind, it is the truth as found in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that sets us free. "If therefore the Son shall set you free, ye shall be really free" (John 8:36 JND).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 5:6-17, The Enemy's Second Letter -

As we have noted, the Jews obedience in resuming the work does not go unchallenged; a second letter is written, this time to Darius the king. The enemy's new letter appears to be a somewhat more accurate presentation of the truth. It describes the state of the work and the response of those carrying it out. Unless exaggerated to provoke the king, it is truly a commendation of their progress.

It is evident from the contents of this new letter that the Jews had faithfully acknowledged the government of God upon their fathers. "We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them. And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up. But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon" (Ezra 5:10-12). Faith in such a day is not pretentious but acknowledges the true state of things; on the other hand, it is not easily overcome by circumstances.

Might we answer as boldly as these men: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth" (Ezra 5:11). Indeed, if we can't fearlessly confess whose servants we are, how can we do His work? Having given the heavenly authority upon which they acted, they next give the earthly: "in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God" (Ezra 5:13).

It is also good to see that the remnant recognized that they were neither building a new house nor a different house, but "We ... build the house that was builded these many years ago. ... Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon ... destroyed this house . ... Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God" (Ezra 5:11-13). Despite the destruction of Solomon's temple, God views all the buildings — Zerubbabel's and also the millennial temple — as the same house. "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former" (Hag. 2:9 JND). There was one house in God's sight.

In this present dispensation, God's house is no longer a physical building but it is the church of the living God. "If I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). There is still only one house — the church of the living God. It may have become a great house (2 Tim. 2:20) — taking in things it should not have — but it is still viewed as the house of God, and there is a conduct suited to that house.

It is equally important to recognize that when we are gathered on the ground of the one body, we give testimony to that which is, and always has been, true in God's sight. It is not a new church, but a testimony to the true character of the church.

As courageous and diligent as these men were, there was, however, still work to be done. Likewise, as long as we live in a world that has rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, there is still work to be done. It is important to understand, that although the truth concerning the true character of the church, and the ground on which the saints of God are to gather, was recovered some 185 years ago, there is still work to be done. The enemy never ceases to hinder the work of building up the house of God.

Interestingly, upon receipt of the king's reply, the adversaries agree to submit to the will of the king, but as to God's will, that they do not acknowledge (Ezra 5:17).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 5:1-5, The Prophets Haggai and Zechariah -

Before the work can resume, the condition of the people — and not the enemy — must be addressed. To this end, God raises up His prophets. "Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them" (Ezra 5:1-2). The prophets not only faithfully declared God's message, but they also set an example in lending a hand with the work. It is with a fresh attitude that the rebuilding begins again, but the enemy ever remains the enemy.

While they built their own homes (Hag. 1:4), there was no opposition; but as soon as their work on the house of God recommenced, adversaries again appeared on the scene. Whenever there is a testimony to God in this world, there is opposition to it. It can be a testimony in our walk, the preaching of the Gospel, the collective testimony to the truth of the church, but regardless, Satan will soon appear on the scene. If we mind earthly things, Satan and the world leave us alone; but seek to walk in the Spirit according to the Word of God and the testimony is too great for the world to bear with.

In this present dispensation, the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer testifies of a risen, glorified Christ: "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me" (John 15:26). "And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged" (John 16:8-11). If we truly walk in the Spirit, according to our heavenly calling, the result will be persecution: "These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be

offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 16:1-2).

God does not, however, leave those that acknowledge Him defenseless. Whereas the work had been stopped by force and power in the days of Artaxerxes, the adversaries now prove utterly powerless in the face of the renewed exercise of the people, for "the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius" (Ezra 5:5). The fact that the enemy had been successful the first time in stopping the work was not because of the enemy's power. The hands of the people were weakened because of their own condition, and God in His faithfulness could not allow the work to continue (Hag. 1:9-11). Such is the grace of God. When, however, there is a favorable response to the discipline of God, blessing can flow (Hag. 2:19). Furthermore, the work is no longer our own; it becomes a work of God.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 4:1-24, Adversaries-

Such a work of God does not go unnoticed; as soon as there is activity, enemies appear. These feign friendship, but the fact remains, they are the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4:1). By their own confession they are the father of the Samaritans and not the children of Abraham (Ezra 4:2; 2 Kings 17:24). The Samaritans took the place of privilege and blessing without any claim to it. Their true character is exposed by God: "So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day" (2 Kings 17:41). Zerubbabel and Jeshua, along with the chief of the fathers, rightly refused their help — a narrow and exclusive view perhaps, but one that shows their spiritual perception (Ezra 4:3). Only the Lord's people can be engaged in the building up of the house of God; nothing can justify an alliance with the world, especially the religious world (Gal. 1:4; John 15:19). In Christendom, some have engaged in building, but in reality they have defiled the temple of God; these God will judge (1 Cor. 3:17).

Unable to join with them, these adversaries display their true intent and "weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building" (Ezra 4:4). It would appear, however, from the prophecies of Haggai that there was a state with the people that preceded this weakening. In fact, we might say, the external trial exposed their internal condition. "Consider from this day and upward, from before a stone was laid upon a stone in the temple of the Lord: since those days were, when one came to an heap of twenty measures, there were but ten: when one came to the pressfat for to draw out fifty vessels out of the press, there were but twenty" (Hag. 2:15-16). Little, it would seem, had been accomplished after the laying of the foundation; they had allowed circumstances to guide them. It is easy to confuse circumstances with providential guidance. "This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (Hag. 1:2). Nevertheless, they had the written authority of the unalterable law of the Medes and Persians: "as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us" (Ezra 4:3; Dan. 6:8). Furthermore, even though this was a command of the king, they should have known by the prophecies of Isaiah that it was ordained of God (Isa. 44:28). The people should have rested on the Word of God, but their fear of their enemies was stronger than their faith.

A coalition of those typically opposed to one another was formed to seek Artaxerxes' intervention and to bring the work to a halt (Ezra 4:9-10). How interesting to see that hostility to a work of God brings together the bitterest of rivals. The religious and secular worlds were united in their opposition to Christ and they remain so to this day.

The letter to Artaxerxes opened with a lie; it claimed that the walls of the city were being completed (Ezra 4:12). This was calculated to provoke the worst fears of the king — treason! These cunning adversaries raise the prospect of the city rebelling, thereby depriving the king of his taxes and dues. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). Rather than reacting to such outright provocations, we do well to recognize their source. Furthermore, the contradictions in the letter — and more generally, in the accusations that the world makes against us — are often overlooked. We are too easily intimidated by argument rather than holding fast to faith and resting on the Word of God. He will ultimately expose the false and contradictory position of the accuser. These very same ones had earlier offered to help in this work (Ezra 4:2)! Were they not, therefore, just as guilty as those they now accused?

It is, however, to be noted, that the history of Jerusalem as presented in the letter, was not altogether inaccurate. The world loves to recall the failings of Christendom and is very astute in its ability to use it as a weapon to discourage the saints of God. Even from within Christendom itself, we hear an emphasis on the failings of the church — the divisions, the acrimony — and yet, does this in any way have a bearing on the walk of faith? Surely it should break our hearts, but to go on, realizing what God has allowed in His government, is the true walk of faith (Hag. 1). God does hate division, but to pretend that division does not exist does not eliminate it, and, at its worst, is rebellion against the counsels of God (Luke 7:30).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 3:7-13, The Foundation of the House of God -

It is not until the second year in the second month that work began on the house of God. We find Zerubbabel and Jeshua — administrative and spiritual leaders — along with the remnant of their brethren joining in the work. We see scriptural order established with the Levites from 20 years old and upward supervising the effort (Ezra 3:8; 1 Chron. 23:24). Furthermore, we again observe that in obedience to the Word of God, they acted as one (Ezra 3:9 margin). Even their praise was "after the ordinance of David king of Israel" (Ezra 3:10; 1 Chron. 25:6; 2 Chron. 5:12-13).

All this occurred before the prophets Haggai and Zechariah appeared on the scene — we do not see direct instruction from God. Rather, we see the children of Israel acting in faith according to the Word of God — this should characterize our acting in the day in which we live. We have the full revelation of God; no prophet is needed to convey to us the will of God. Instead, it should be our desire that we "stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12) as revealed in His word.

At the restoration of the foundation, there was singing and joy. Nevertheless, those that remembered Solomon's temple wept at the recollection. Likewise, in our day there should be no pretention that the church can be returned to the days of Pentecost. We can, however, be restored to the true foundation — that which the Apostle Paul laid, "which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). At that we can joy, but to deny the

ruin is nothing other than the blindness of Laodicea.

In the book of Zechariah we find that God took delight in the work of Zerubbabel (Zech. 4:9-10). Furthermore, though Zerubbabel was the instrument that placed the foundation stone, it was laid of God. “Behold, I will bring forth My servant the BRANCH. Behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day” (Zech. 3:9). Although the people of the day only thought of the restoration of the temple, in God’s sight it was so much more — it was the assurance of the introduction of Christ, the Branch.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 3:4-6, The Feast of Tabernacles -

The feast of tabernacles is a picture of the future, millennial glory of Israel. In Zerubbabel’s day it may have seemed a pitiful sight — a few back in the land, though still under foreign dominion, in stark contrast to the millennial scene which it typifies. Nevertheless, it was something that they could carry out in faith according to the Word of God.

“And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord” (Ezra 3:5). The Holy Spirit should likewise have liberty in the assembly for all to offer up that which they have received of the Lord: the brothers in prayer and scripture, the sisters in singing and thanksgiving.

Having enjoyed the blessing of restored worship there is a hiatus in the rebuilding of the house of God. God, however, not only desires our worship but also fellowship with Himself and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 3:4, Gathered As One Man to Jerusalem -

The seventh month was a busy one for a faithful Israelite. In that month there were three feasts of Jehovah — the feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and the feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). Three times each year all males had to appear in Jerusalem: for the Passover, for the feast of Weeks and for the feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month (Deut. 16:16). It should not surprise us, therefore, to read that “when the seventh month was come ... the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem” (Ezra 3:1). This expression of unity was not produced by common agreement but through simple subjection to the Word of God. “They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written” (Ezra 3:4).

We see a similar gathering when the church was formed: “when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place” (Acts 2:1). The Lord had distinctly given His disciples direction before He departed from them, “that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith He, ye have heard of Me” (Acts 1:4). Through obedience to the instruction of the Lord, they were found together in one place. Is it too much to expect in this present day, that subjection to the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit should not likewise lead us to be gathered together and in one place? We should keep in mind that the representation in Ezra’s day was small. A little more than 42,000 individuals responded to the call to return to the land, and we can safely say, these were principally from just three tribes: Judah, Benjamin and Levi. Upon Ezra’s return in chapter eight, the numbers were even smaller. We should, likewise, not expect vast numbers to respond to the call today.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 3:1-3, Restoration of Scriptural Worship -

Before the foundations of the temple could be laid, the altar must first be placed on its bases — that would be its historic position — no other location, no other place would do. Today, with the outward testimony of Christendom in ruins, every man chooses his own bases for setting up his altar. This is contrary to the Word of God.

The morning and evening sacrifice — the continual burnt-offering (Ex. 29:38-46) — was established first. It was not the sin offering, but the burnt offering. In type, this offering speaks of the perfectness of Christ in giving Himself up in death for the glory of God; it is the basis of worship. They could not worship in Egypt (Ex. 5:1-3), neither could they worship in Babylon. Each speaks of the world: its pleasures and lusts in the first instance, and in the second, the religious world. It is instructive to note that Israel was in bondage in each place — a tyrant presided over both realms. Satan is both the prince of this world and its god. There was only one place an Israelite could worship, and that was at Jerusalem, the one location where Jehovah had placed His name. It is good to note that all was according to the Word of God (Ezra 3:2); we have here the scriptural restoration of worship in truth.

It is on the same ground, namely, offered and accepted sacrifice, that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ worship today, and, if we are to worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23), it must also be according to the Word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A reason given for the setting up of the altar and the reestablishing of the morning and evening sacrifice, was the remnant’s fear of the people of that country (Ezra 3:3). In Exodus we read that it was in virtue of these particular sacrifices that God was able to dwell in the midst of His people (Ex. 29:38-46). The efficacy of the sacrifice remained. They were far safer with the Lord in their midst than they would have been had the city walls surrounded them: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psa. 46:1).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 2:3-70, A Remnant Company -

A list of those that returned to Jerusalem is recorded by God. It reminds us of Malachi's reference to the faithful remnant at a little later date: "a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name" (Mal. 3:16). Faithfulness is never overlooked by God. The list is broken up into: the leaders, families, towns, priests, Levites, Nethinim, the children of Solomon's servants and finally those who could not show by genealogy as to whether they were even of Israel. In all, 42,360 individuals went up with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem.

Being unable to establish one's genealogy was a serious matter. God's blessings under the Mosaic Law were intimately connected with the children of Israel. Those who were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel were shut out. In this present administration of grace, it is no longer a matter of natural birth, but of new birth — "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). No one outside of the family of God has any place in "the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:16). Nevertheless, we find that Christendom has become a great house (2 Tim. 2:21) — enlarged beyond its original design and includes unsaved persons and others that are a dishonor to the house of God. Paul instructs Timothy to purge himself (not the house) from these so that he might be a vessel of honor, sanctified — separated — for the master's use (2 Tim. 2:21).

Interestingly, neither the Nethinim (meaning the given ones) nor the children of Solomon's servants are believed to be Israelites; they were probably gentiles. These, however, do not appear to be numbered with those who could not show their genealogy. Though the children of Israel were under law, God has acted in all dispensations in grace towards any that seek after Him. It is not that God presented grace to Israel — very clearly He did not; they were firmly under law; and yet, without grace, they would have all been destroyed. We see, then, that even within the law, provision was made for the stranger to worship amongst them (Ex. 12:43-49; Num. 9:14).

Those priests who were unable to establish their genealogy had to be put away from the priesthood as polluted. There they had to remain until there was a priest with Urim and Thummim (Lights and Perfections; Ex. 28:30) to make a determination as to their position within the family of Aaron. Sadly, it is not clear that there ever was a priest in Israel's latter history that was recognized as having these mysterious attributes. In our present day, it is only by waiting on the Lord that we can discern the true character of an individual when there is a confused testimony as to their salvation. "Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins: keep thyself pure" (2 Tim. 5:22). Even under grace, or perhaps we should say, more so under grace, God's holiness is not to be compromised (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 2:1-2, Zerubbabel -

Leading the returning remnant of Judah was Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2). Elsewhere we read that he was the son of Shealtiel, the son of Jehoiachin (otherwise known as Jechoniah), the next to last king of Judah. From Chronicles we learn that as far as natural relationships go, Zerubbabel was probably the nephew of Shealtiel being the son of Pedaiah (1 Chron. 3:19). Nevertheless, Zerubbabel is recognized by God in the genealogy of Matthew as coming from the kingly line (Matt. 1:12). In Luke we also see that he is a descendant of David, not now through Solomon, but through his son Nathan (Luke 3:27).

Though a prince and heir we never see Zerubbabel pretending to the throne. He is described as the Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:11); he was also apparently the Tirshatha, or governor, as Nehemiah was at a later date (Ezra 2:63). We only learn this indirectly; the second letter written to the king by the enemies of the Jews expounds upon this point (Ezra 5:14). It is a characteristic of the remnant that there is no pretension. All occurs under the rule and authority of the Gentiles — for this was the time of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24). Because of God's government upon Israel, He cannot own them publicly as His people (Hos. 1:9). Nevertheless, it is beautiful to see in the book of Haggai, Zerubbabel used as a type of Christ, the anointed One in whom He will seal His promises concerning His people and the nations (Hag. 2:23).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 1:5-11, The People Exercised -

Not only do we see a work of God with Cyrus, but there also has to be a similar work in the hearts of His people. "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:5). Unless this was a work of the Lord, it would all be in vain. "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it" (Psa. 127:1). Even those that remained behind were exercised to help the people by providing them with the necessary supplies.

Most importantly, Cyrus returned the vessels of the house of the Lord which Nebuchadnezzar had brought from Jerusalem. Remarkably, these vessels of gold and silver were still intact. The idolatrous kings of Babylon had placed them in the temple of their gods — no doubt to emphasize the superiority of the Babylonian gods. Nevertheless, it was through this means that they appear to have been preserved. Man never works contrary to God, even though it may appear so outwardly.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 1:1-4, Cyrus -

For seventy years Judah remained in captivity — one year for each sabbatical year that the land of Israel should have enjoyed, but which evidently had not been observed (2 Chron. 36:21; Lev. 25:17; Jer. 34; Neh. 10:31). The book of Ezra takes up the history of Judah at the close of these seventy years. God's judgment had fallen upon Judah because of her idolatry, and now Babylon, the rod He had used upon them, was to be judged. Her pride, violence, immorality and idolatry could not be ignored (Isa. 44:6-47:15; Hab. 2). In the book of Daniel we read how Belshazzar drank wine from the vessels taken from Solomon's temple; with them he praised his gods in celebration of their supremacy over the true God (Dan. 5:4). Such gross profanity did not pass by God unnoticed, and in that very night mighty Babylon fell to Cyrus king of the Persians.

Though Daniel records Darius, the Mede, as taking the kingdom, it should be understood that he was, no doubt, a provincial governor and ruled under the authority of Cyrus (Dan. 6:28; 9:1). Although secular history may have difficulty with this, Biblical accounts have time and again proven correct, just as we should expect.

Cyrus was not only appointed by God to judge the Babylonian, but it was also prophesied that he would permit the Jews to return back to their land to rebuild the house of God. “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:12).

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Cyrus was familiar with Daniel (an official in his kingdom) and perhaps even the prophecy of Jeremiah. Nevertheless, we do not find here the mere working of the human will. It was Jehovah who stirred up the spirit of Cyrus the king (Ezra 1:1). “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will” (Prov. 21:1).

Behind the scenes we see Daniel praying according to the will of God; he takes God at His word and prays accordingly (Dan. 9:13; 1 Kings 8:46-50). God’s faithfulness is unchanged and His promises are just as true in our day. “This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us” (1 John 5:14). “The fervent supplication of the righteous man has much power” (James 5:16 JND). The key is our asking according to His will. Daniel was familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah, but he didn’t just wait for their fulfillment — he prayed!

With Daniel we also see another important characteristic, as we will again with Ezra and Nehemiah — he glorifies God and acknowledges His government upon His people. “O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither Thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against Thee” (Dan. 9:7). Unless we have the correct attitude of heart, why should we expect God to hear us? Today there is much contrary to the Word of God in Christendom, and even amongst those that purport to walk in separation from that which is dishonoring to God we find many divisions. The present state of Christendom is a direct result of our failure and reflects the government of God upon His people; to simply ignore this corresponds to a Laodecian state of things — “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing” (Rev. 3:17).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 10:16-44, The Sons of Jeshua and His Brethren -

Amongst those listed as having to put away their wives are the sons of Jeshua. Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, was one of the chief men that returned with Zeruabbabel (Ezra 2:1; 3:2); he was also the high priest (Zech. 6:11). It was a serious thing for this family to be associated with this guilt in such a definitive way. Should the anointed priest sin, it brought guilt upon all the people of God (Lev. 4:3). In this instance, the trespass was not committed by the high priest himself, but in that the sin was associated with his family, it was still a most solemn matter. The priests had a special responsibility as Malachi tells the corrupt priests of his day: “The priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 2:7).

Through their example, the sons of Jeshua had no doubt turned aside many. Of these individuals alone do we read of their offering a ram of the flock for their trespass (Ezra 10:19). A trespass or guilt offering especially seemed to be associated with wrongs done to Jehovah in the holy things (Lev. 5:15). A ram was used in the consecration of the priests (Ex. 29:19-22); it was fitting that a ram should also be used in the trespass offering for the desecration of the holy things (Lev. 5:15).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 10:15, Opposition -

While the people generally seemed to be of one mind concerning the matter, there were two that took the lead in standing against it; in this they had two helpers (Ezra 10:15 JND). This opposition did not alter what had to be done; all must be according to the commandment of God. Unanimity is not required in such matters; the assembly of God is not a democracy. Perhaps it seemed unnecessarily harsh to these men, as it may even to us — though Meshullam appears to have had a personal motive (see v. 29). However, God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isa. 55:9) and “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Cor. 1:25). Blessing can only come when we do things God’s way — no matter how foreign it may feel to human nature. It is good to see that these men, Meshullam included, ultimately appear to have submitted to the decision of that assemblage (Ezra 10:29; Neh. 8:7; 11:16).

It is important to recognize that we cannot judge these Israelites by the principles of this present dispensation. We live in a day of grace, whereas they lived under law. The Apostle Paul writes, “the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). Paul describes the situation where the husband or wife is saved after marriage, thereby finding him or herself in an unequal yoke with an unbeliever. It in no way gives liberty to the believer to marry an unbeliever. Furthermore, for one that has knowingly entered into an unequal yoke, there is no exit because of the sin committed. “Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife” (1 Cor. 7:10-11). One contemplating an unequal union should be strongly counseled as to the painful consequences, and that such willful disobedience must bear bitter fruit: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). This subject is addressed again at the close of the book of Nehemiah.

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 10:5-14, Confession and Separation -

There was a root cause to their unholy marriages. They had disregarded the admonition to be a separate people; their lives were intertwined with the peoples of the land (Ezra 10:11). One will never marry an unbeliever if one never dates an unbeliever. Friendship with the world leads to friendships between peoples and the passions of the heart should never be underestimated. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23).

Lessons from the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Practical Guidance In A Day Of Ruin, Ezra 10:1-4, Hope in Israel -

In the midst of such confusion and shame there was one, Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, who was used of God to bring the first glimmer of hope to the people of God. Ezra’s profound sense of the sin committed, and his public grief and confession, had aroused other faithful men. Though Shechaniah says, “we have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives” (Ezra 10:2), he spoke on behalf of the people; his name does not appear with those who had to put away their wives. His father, Jehiel, however, could well have been amongst the number (see v. 26). It must have taken great spiritual courage for Shechaniah to take such a stand.

The only remedy in times of declension and failure, such as in the scene before us, is faithful obedience to the Word of God. “Let it be done according to the law” (Ezra 10:3). Confession and obedience to the Word of God brings hope (Ezra 10:2). Confession is not enough; there must be action as well. Obedience without action is not obedience at all. Godly sorrow with the Corinthians resulted in great action. Paul could write, “ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Cor. 7:11).

On the other hand, action without confession must end in ruin. It is legality, and often the most legal of men turn out to be the most immoral. Legality is a slavish adherence to rules when the heart is not engaged; it is doing things according to the letter, but never entering into the spirit. Sadly, legality often turns people away from the Word of God. The Word of God is good, and to be obedient to it is a good thing; we should not allow the behavior of those that abuse it, to turn us from it. Often the one who rejects legality rejects the truth as well, forgetting that it was not the problem — sadly, such a course suggests that the truth was never bought in the first place.

It takes courage to walk in the path of obedience — taking one step at a time, not knowing what the outcome may be (Ezra 10:4). Though restoration is indeed a happy thing, it is not without mourning. Disobedience comes at a great cost; in this instance, especially for the strange wives, their husbands, and the children born to them (Ezra 10:44). Sin bears bitter fruit. There could be no rejoicing at what had to be done — just mourning and weeping. Even the rain contributed to the misery of the occasion (Ezra 10:9).

clickbible.org