

EZRA

INTRODUCTION

Ezra himself was a "priest, [a] scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD" (7:11). He led the second of three groups returning to Jerusalem from Babylon. A devout man, he firmly established the Law (the Pentateuch) as the basis of faith (7:10).

The events in Ezra cover slightly more than eighty years and fall into two distinct segments. The first segment (chs. 1-6) covers some twenty-three years, dealing with the first postexilic return under Zerubbabel and the reconstruction of the temple.

Following over sixty years in Babylonian captivity, God moves the heart of the ruler of Babylon, King Cyrus of Persia, to issue an edict stating that willing Jews can return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and city. A faithful group responds and departs in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel. Temple construction is begun, but opposition from the non-Jewish inhabitants discourages the people and they cease their work. God then raises up the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah who call the people to complete the task. Though far less splendid than the previous temple of Solomon, the new temple is completed and dedicated in 515 B.C.

Nearly sixty years later (458 B.C.), another group of exiles returns to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra (chs. 7-10). They are sent by the then reigning Persian king, Artaxerxes, with additional monies and valuables to enhance the temple worship. Ezra is also commissioned to appoint leaders in Jerusalem to oversee the people.

Once in Jerusalem, Ezra assumes the ministry of spiritual reformer for what was probably only one year. After that he likely lived as an influential private citizen into the time of Nehemiah. A devout priest, he finds an Israel which has adopted many of the pagan inhabitants' practices; he calls Israel to repentance and to a renewed submission to the Law, even to the point of divorcing their pagan wives.

Two major messages emerge from Ezra: God's faithfulness and man's unfaithfulness.

God had promised through Jeremiah (25:12) that the Babylonian captivity would be limited in duration. In His ordained time, He faithfully keeps this promise and stirs the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue an edict for the exiles to return (1:1-4). He then faithfully provides leadership (Zerubbabel and Ezra), and the exiles are sent off with booty, including items that had been taken from Solomon's temple (1:5-10).

When the people become discouraged because of the enemies' mockings, God faithfully raises up Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people to complete the task. Their encouragement proves successful (5:1, 2).

Finally, when the people stray from the truths of God's word, He faithfully sends a devout priest who artfully instructs the people in the truth, calling them to confession of sin and repentance from their evil ways (chs. 9; 10).

God's faithfulness is contrasted with the people's unfaithfulness. In spite of their return and divine promises, they allow their enemies to discourage them and they temporarily give up (4:24). Then, having completed their task so they can worship in their own temple (6:16-18), the people become faithless to the commandments of God; an entire generation is raised up whose "iniquities have risen higher than our heads" (9:6). However, as noted above, God's faithfulness triumphs in each situation.

The messages of Ezra are a constant reminder of how easily God's people can lose heart and their distinctives. God is fulfilling His promises. In spite of this, covenant people easily forget His promises and the moral distinctives that are to characterize "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Pet. 2:9). When this happens God's plans are delayed. Erring saints cannot totally thwart God's sovereign plans, but they can delay or frustrate them. God is greater than we, and He does have ways of transcending our shortcomings. However, He wants us to walk in obedience so that His plans can be fulfilled as originally revealed.

Ezra himself foreshadows Christ by the life he lives and the roles he fulfills. Three particulars stand out:

1) As one who "had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it" (7:10), Ezra reminds us of Christ's description of Himself as the One who ardently obeys the Father (John 5:19).

2) As "the priest" (7:11), Ezra foreshadows Christ's role as the "great High Priest" (Heb. 4:14).

3) As the great spiritual reformer who calls Israel to repentance (ch. 10), Ezra typifies Christ's messianic role as the reshaper of Israel's spiritual perspectives, including a call away from dead traditionalism and moral impurity (Matt. 11:20-24; 23).

The working of the Holy Spirit in Ezra is clearly seen in the providential moving of God to fulfill His promises. This is indicated by the phrase "the hand of the LORD," which occurs six times.

It would have been by His Spirit that "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (1:1) and "turned the heart of the king of Assyria" (6:22). It would also have been by the Holy Spirit that "Haggai and Zechariah ... prophesied to the Jews" (5:1).

The work of the Holy Spirit is clearly seen in Ezra's personal life, both in terms of working in him, "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD" (7:10), and on his behalf, "the king granted him all his request" (7:6).

(Spirit Filled Life Bible's Introduction to Ezra, Gary Matsdorf)

Ezra 1:1-11

What was the state of the captive Jews in Babylon? They were under the power of those who hated them, had nothing they could call their own; no temple, no altar; if they sang psalms, their enemies ridiculed them; and yet they had prophets among them. Some of them were advanced at court, others had comfortable settlements in the country, and they were all borne up with hope that, in due time, they should return to their own land again, in expectation of which they preserved among them the distinction of their families, the knowledge of their religion, and an aversion toward idolatry.

What was the state of the government under which they were? Nebuchadnezzar carried many of them into captivity in the first year of his reign, which was the fourth of Jehoiakim; he reigned forty-five years, his son Evil-Merodach twenty-three, and his grandson Belshazzar three years, which make up the seventy years. It is charged against Nebuchadnezzar that he *would not let his captives go home*, Isa. 14:17. And, if he had shown mercy to the poor Jews, Daniel told him it *may be that his prosperity would continue*, Dan. 4:27. But the measure of the sins of Babylon was at length full, and then destruction was brought upon them by Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian, which we read of in Dan. 5. Darius, being old, left the government to Cyrus, and he was employed as the instrument of the Jews' deliverance, as soon as he was master of the kingdom of Babylon, perhaps in a pious regard for the prophecy of Isaiah, where he was expressly named as the man who should do this for God, and for whom God would do great things (Isa. 44:28; 45:1ff.). His name (some say) in the Persian language means the *sun*, for he brought light and healing to the people of God, and was an eminent symbol of Christ the *Sun of righteousness*.

The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus. It is said of Cyrus that he did not know God, nor how to serve him; but God knew him, and how to serve himself by him, Isa. 45:4. God governs the world by his influence on the spirits of men, and whatever good is done at any time, it is God who stirs up the spirit to do it, puts thoughts into the mind, gives to the understanding to form a right judgment, and directs the will which way he pleases.

Cyrus having given order that their neighbors should help them, they did so, v. 6. All those who were around them furnished them with precious metals and goods to bear the charges of their journey, and to help them in building and furnishing both their own houses and God's temple. As the tabernacle was made of the spoils of Egypt, and the first temple built by the labors of the aliens, so the second by the contributions of the Babylonians, all intimating the admission of the Gentiles into the church in due time.

How this proclamation was seconded by Cyrus himself. To give proof of the sincerity of his affection for the house of God, he not only released the people of God, but restored the vessels of the temple, v. 7, 8.

Judah had a prince, even in captivity. Sheshbazzar, supposed to be the same with Zerubbabel, is here called *prince of Judah*; the Babylonians called him *Sheshbazzar*, which means *joy in tribulation*; but among his own people he went by the name of *Zerubbabel—a stranger in Babylon*; so he looked on himself, and considered Jerusalem his home, though, as Josephus says, he was captain of the body guard to the king of Babylon. He took care of the affairs of the Jews. To him the sacred vessels were numbered out (v. 8), and he took care for their safe conveyance to Jerusalem, v. 11.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Jeremiah warned the leaders of Judea that the Babylonian exile was inevitable (Jer. 20:4-6; 21:7-10) and he also announced that the captivity would last for seventy years (Jer. 25:1-14; 29:10). **It was the Lord who raised Nebuchadnezzar to chasten the people of Judea (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10); did He also call Cyrus to liberate the exiles and enable them to rebuild their city and temple (v.13).**

Ezra 1:1 Isa. 44:28 Isa. 45:1

Was it He, by His Spirit that filled the Jews with a ambition to fulfill His purpose?

Ezra 1:5 Zech. 4:6

How are those bound under the dominion of sin brought out of slavery to be made free by Jesus Christ?

Luke 4:18

Ezra 2:1-70

An account was kept in writing of the families that came up out of captivity, and the numbers of each family. This was done for their honor, as part of their recompense for their faith and courage, and their affection for their own land, and to stir up others to follow their good example. The names of all those Israelites indeed who accept the offer of deliverance through Christ shall be found, to their honor, in a more sacred record than this, even in *the Lamb's book of life*. The account that was kept of the families that came up from the captivity was intended also for the benefit of posterity, that they might know from whom they descended and to whom they were allied.

They are called *people of the province*. Judah, which had been an illustrious kingdom, to which other kingdoms had been made provinces, subject to it and dependent on it, was now itself made a province, to receive laws and commissions from the king of Persia and to be accountable to him.

They are said to come *each to his own town*, that is, the town appointed them, in which appointment an eye, no doubt, was had to their former settlement by Joshua; and to that, as near as might be, they returned.

That the leaders are first mentioned, v. 2. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were their Moses and Aaron, the former their chief prince, the latter their chief priest.

Some of these different families are named from the persons who were their ancestors, others from the places in which they had formerly resided. Here are two families that are called *the descendants of Elam* (one v. 7, another v. 31), and, which is strange, the number of both is the same, 1,254. The children of Bethlehem (v. 21) were but 123, though it was David's city; for Bethlehem was *little among the thousands of Judah*, yet there must the Messiah arise, Micah 5:2. Anathoth had been a famous place in the tribe of Benjamin and yet here it numbered but 128 (v. 23), which is to be imputed to the divine curse which the men of Anathoth brought upon themselves by persecuting Jeremiah, who was of their city. Jer. 11:21, 23.

Of the priests who returned, and they were a considerable number, about a tenth part of the whole company: for the whole were over 42,000 (v. 64), and four families of priests made up over 4,200 (v. 36-39).

Of the Levites. The small number of them, for, taking in both the singers and the gatekeepers (v. 40-42), they did not make 350.

Of the Nethinim, the Gibeonites, *given* (so their name means) by Joshua first (Joshua 9:27), and again by David (Ezra 8:20), when Saul had expelled them, to be employed by the Levites in the work of God's house as hewers of wood and drawers of water.

Of some who were looked on as Israelites by birth, and others as priests, and yet could not make out a clear title to the honor.

There were some who could not prove themselves Israelites (v. 59, 60), a considerable number, who presumed they were descendants of Jacob, but could not produce their ancestry, and yet would go up to Jerusalem, having an affection for the temple and people of God.

There were others who could not prove themselves priests, and yet were supposed to be descendants of Aaron.

The sum total of the company that returned out of Babylon. Those mentioned above amount to not quite 30,000 (29,818), so that there were over 12,000 who, it is probable, were of the rest of the tribes of Israel, besides Judah and Benjamin. This was more than double the number who were carried captive into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, so that, as in Egypt, the time of their affliction was the time of their increase.

Their retinue. Their servants were comparatively few (v. 65) and their beasts of burden about as many, v. 66, 67. But notice is taken of 200 *men and women singers* whom they had among them, who were intended (as those 2 Chron. 35:25) to excite *their mourning*.

Their offerings. It is said (v. 68, 69),

1. That they *arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem*; and yet that house, that holy and beautiful house, was now in ruins.

2. That they offered freely towards the *rebuilding of it on its site*. That, it seems, was the first house they talked of setting up. Their offering was nothing in comparison with the offerings of the princes in David's time; then they offered by talents (1 Chron. 29:7), now by drachmas, yet these drachmas, being given according to their ability, were as acceptable to God as those talents, like the widow's two coins.

3. That they *settled in their towns*, v. 70. Though their cities were out of repair, yet, because they were their cities, such as God had assigned them, they were content to dwell in them. Their poverty was a bad cause, but their unity and unanimity were a good effect of it.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

What was the first act of the restored Jews?

Ezra 2:68

What is said of the quality and quantity of the offerings made by the people for the rebuilding of the temple?

Ezra 2:69

Ezra 3:1-13

We may suppose that they came from Babylon in the spring. The seventh month therefore soon came, in which many of the feasts of the Lord were to be observed. Such was their zeal for religion that they left all their business in the country, to attend God's altar; and they came *as one man*. Let worldly business be postponed to the business of religion and it will prosper the better.

Joshua and his brothers the priests, Zerubbabel and his brothers the princes, built *the altar of the God of Israel* (v. 2), in the same place where it had stood. v. 3. They could not immediately have a temple, but they would not be without an altar. Abraham, wherever he came, *built an altar*; and wherever we come, though we may perhaps lack the benefit of the lampstand of preaching, and the bread of the eucharist, yet, if we do not bring the sacrifices of prayer and praise, we are lacking in our duty, for we always have an altar that sanctifies the gift.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

What did Abraham do when he first came to the land of Canaan?

Gen. 12:7

What was the effect on the people during the initial phase of the rebuilding of the temple?

Ezra 3:10-11

What two emotions blended at the Temple's refounding? Why did some weep?

Ezra 3:11-13

Ezra 4:1-24

An instance of the old enmity that was put between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. God's temple cannot be built without the rage of Satan, and the *gates of hell will fight against it*. The gospel kingdom was, in like manner, to be set up with much struggling and contention.

The *exiles* (v. 1) had recently come out of captivity, were born in captivity, and had still the marks of their captivity on them; though they were not now captives, they were under the control of those whose captives they had recently been. Israel was God's son, his first-born; but by their iniquity the people sold and enslaved themselves, and so became children of the captivity.

The opposers of the undertaking are here said to be *the enemies of Judah and Benjamin*, not the Babylonians or Persians, but the relics of the ten tribes, and the foreigners who had joined themselves to them, and patched up that mongrel religion we had an account of, 2 Kings 17:33. *They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods*. They are called *the people of the land*, v. 4.

The opposition they gave had in it much of the subtlety of the old serpent. When they heard that the temple was in the building they were immediately aware that it would be a fatal blow to their superstition, and set themselves to oppose it.

Cyrus steadfastly adhered to the Jews' interest. His successor was Ahasuerus (v. 6 margin), called also *Artaxerxes* (v. 7), supposed to be the same who in heathen authors is called *Cambyses*, who had never taken such cognizance of the despised Jews as to concern himself for them. To him these Samaritans applied for an order to stop the building of the temple; and they did it in the beginning of his reign, being resolved to lose no time when they thought they had a king for their purpose. See how watchful the church's enemies are to take the first opportunity of doing it harm; let not its friends be less careful to do it kindness.

The general purport of the letter which they sent to the king, to inform him of this matter is called (v. 6) *an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem*.

The schemers are named (v. 7) who plotted the thing, the writers (v. 8) who put it into form, and the subscribers (v. 9) who concurred in it and joined with them. *The rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his temple*. The building of the temple would do them no harm, yet they appear against it with the utmost concern and virulence, perhaps because the prophets of the God of Israel had foretold the *destruction and perishing* of all the *gods of the land*, Zeph. 2:11; Jer. 10:11. The people concurred with them in imagining this vain thing. All the different colonies from the cities or countries of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, etc., from which they came, set their hands, by their representatives, to this letter.

The orders which the king of Persia gave, in answer to the information sent him by the Samaritans against the Jews. He allowed himself to be deceived by their falsehood, but was very willing to gratify them with an order to halt the proceedings. He consulted the records concerning Jerusalem, and found that it had indeed rebelled against the king of Babylon, and therefore that it was, as they called it, a *wicked city* (v. 19), and that in times past kings had reigned there, to whom all the countries on that side of the river had been subject (v. 20). He appointed these Samaritans to stop the building of the city immediately, v. 21, 22. Neither they, in their letter, nor he, in his order, make any mention of the temple, and the building of that, because both they and he knew that they had a command from Cyrus to rebuild that. They spoke only of the *city*: "Let not *that* be built," that is, as a city with walls and gates.

The order was only to prevent the walling of the *city*, but, having force and power on their side, they construed it as relating to the *temple*, for it was that to which they had an ill will. The consequence was that *the work on the house of God ceased* for a time, through the power and insolence of its enemies.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

How did the adversaries of Judea and Benjamin describe those who returned to build the temple to king Artaxerxes?

Ezra 4:11-16

How did king Artaxerxes react to the accusations against the Jews?

Ezra 4:17-24

Should the Jews have stopped rebuilding the temple?

Ezra 5:1-17

During this time they had an altar and a tabernacle. But the counselors who were hired to hinder the work (*Ezra 4:5*) told them that the time had not come for the building of the temple (*Hag. 1:2*), urging that it was long before the time came for the building of Solomon's temple; and thus the people were put at ease in their own *paneled houses*, while *God's house remained a ruin*.

They had two good ministers, who, in God's name, earnestly persuaded them to put the wheel of business in motion again. Haggai and Zechariah both began to prophesy in the second year of Darius, as appears, *Hag. 1:1*; *Zech. 1:1*. The temple of God among men is to be built not by secular force but by *the word of God*. As the *weapons of our warfare* so the instruments of our building *are not carnal*, but *spiritual*. It is the business of God's prophets to stir up God's people to that which is good, and to help them in it, to strengthen their hands, and, by suitable considerations drawn from the word of God, to quicken them to their duty and encourage them in it. They prophesied in the name, or (as some read it) *in the cause*, or for the sake, *of the God of Israel*; they spoke by commission from him, and argued from his authority.

They had two good magistrates, who were forward and active in this work. Zerubbabel their chief prince, and Jeshua their chief priest, v. 2. These great men thought it no disparagement to them, but a happiness, to be taught and prescribed to by the prophets of the Lord, and were glad of their help in reviving this good work.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Show how the elders of the Jews had courage to face their enemies and to go vigorously with their work until the matter came to Darius, despite all the opposition they met? Is this the same courage we see today as Israel stands against those peoples and nations who try to completely destroy Israel?

Ezra 6:1-22

The heart of kings is in the hand of God, and he turns it whichever way he pleases; what they are he makes them to be, for he is *King of kings*. The enemies of the Jews, in appealing to Darius, hoped to get an order to suppress them, but, instead of that, they got an order to supply them.

The building of the temple carried on, and finished in a little time. v. 14, 15. Now the *elders of the Jews built* with cheerfulness. They found themselves bound to it *by the command of the God of Israel*. They found themselves shamed into it by the command of the heathen kings, Cyrus formerly, Darius now, and Artaxerxes some time after. They found themselves encouraged in it by the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. And now the work went on so prosperously that, in four years' time, it was brought to perfection. The gospel church, that spiritual temple, is long in the building, but it will be finished at last, when the mystical body is completed. Every believer is a *living temple, building up himself in his most holy faith*. Much opposition is given to this work by Satan and our own corruptions. We trifle, and proceed in it with many stops and pauses; but he who has *begun the good work* will see it performed, and will *bring forth judgment to victory*.

When it was built, being intended only for sacred uses, *they showed by an example how it should be used*, which is the proper sense of the word *dedicate*. They entered into it with seriousness and probably with a public declaration of the separating of it from common uses and the surrender of it to the honor of God, to be employed in his worship.

The persons employed in this service were not only *the priests and Levites* who officiated, but *the Israelites*, some of each of the *twelve tribes*, though Judah and Benjamin were the chief, and *all the exiles*.

2. The sacrifices that were offered on this occasion were *bulls, rams and lambs* (v. 17), for burnt offerings and peace offerings; not to be compared, in number, with what had been offered at the dedication of Solomon's temple, but, being according to their present ability, they were accepted. These hundreds were more to them than Solomon's thousands were to him.

3. This service was performed with joy.

4. When they dedicated the house they settled the household. Though the temple service could not now be

performed with so much pomp and plenty as formerly, because of their poverty, yet perhaps it was performed with as much purity and close adherence to the divine institution as ever, which was the true glory of it. There is no beauty like the beauty of holiness.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

The temple was completed and Israel celebrated the Passover (Ezra 6:19). The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ezra 6:22) was in remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 12:14-20) and the significance of the unleavened bread (bread without yeast) had a particular meaning for the people during the dedication. **What is the meaning of using unleavened bread?**

1 Cor. 5:6-8

Ezra 7:1-28

Zerubbabel and Jeshua by this time have grown old, if they had not yet died; nor do we hear any more of Haggai and Zechariah; they have finished their testimony. What shall become of the cause of God and Israel when these useful instruments are laid aside? Trust God to raise up others in their place. Ezra here, and Nehemiah in the next book, are as serviceable in their days as those were in theirs.

Ezra was very much conversant with the scriptures (v. 6), especially the writings of Moses, had the words ready and was well acquainted with the sense and meaning of them. It is to be feared that learning ran low among the Jews in Babylon; but Ezra was instrumental to revive it. The Jews say that he collected and collated all the copies of the law he could find, and published an accurate edition of it, with all the prophetic books, historical and poetic, that were given by divine inspiration, and so made up the canon of the Old Testament, with the addition of the prophecies and histories of his own time. Now that prophecy was about to cease it was time to promote knowledge of the scripture, Mal. 4:4.

Two things Ezra blessed God for:

1. For his commission. *Praise be to the Lord (he says) who has put it into the king's heart.* God can put things into men's hearts which would not arise there of themselves, and into their heads too, both by his providence and by his grace, in things *pertaining both to life and godliness.* If any good appears to be in our own hearts, or in the hearts of others, we must confess it was God who put it there, and praise him for it. When princes and magistrates act for the suppression of vice, and the encouragement of religion, we must thank God who *put it into their hearts* to do so.

2. For the encouragement he had in pursuance of his commission (v. 28): *He has extended his good favor to me.* Ezra himself was a man of courage, yet he attributed his encouragement not to his own heart, but to God's hand: "I was strengthened to undertake the services, *because the hand of the Lord my God was on me,* to direct and support me."

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Is the most we can hope for in this life what is said about Ezra "the good hand of the Lord was upon him"?

Ezra 7:6, 9, 28 Ezra 8:18, 22, 31 John 15:5

How dedicated was Ezra in studying and sharing the word of God?

Ezra 7:10

What commission did the king of Babylon give to Ezra?

Ezra 7:12-26

Ezra 8:1-36

Ezra, having received his commission from the king, rallies for volunteers, as it were, sets up a banner to assemble the outcasts of Israel and the dispersed of Judah, Isa. 11:12. "Whoever of the sons of Zion, who *dwell with the daughters of Babylon,* is disposed to go to Jerusalem, now that the temple there is finished and the temple service set in motion, now is their time."

Some offered themselves willingly to go with Ezra. The heads of the several families are here named, for their honor, and the numbers of the males that each brought in, amounting in all to 1,496. Several of their families, or clans, here named, we had before, *ch. 2.*

The Levites who went in this company were in a manner pressed into the service. Ezra appointed a general rendezvous of all his company at a certain place on new-year's day, the first day of the first month, *ch. 7:9.* There he mustered them, *and found no Levites,* v. 15. Some priests there were, but no others who were Levites. Where was the spirit of that sacred tribe? Ezra had money enough for the service of the temple, but lacked men. Eleven men of understanding, he chooses out of his company, to be employed for the filling up of this lamentable vacancy. Ezra sent

them to a proper place, where there was a college of Levites, *the place Casiphia*, probably a street or square in Babylon allowed for that purpose—*Silver Street* one may call it, for *ceseph* means *silver*. He sent them to a proper person, to Iddo, the chief president of the college, to urge him to send some of the juniors, *attendants for the house of our God*, v. 17. Though the warning was short, they brought about forty Levites to attend Ezra. Of the Nethinim, the servitors of the sacred college, more appeared eager to go. Of them 220, on this hasty summons, enlisted themselves, and had the honor to be expressed by name in Ezra's register, v. 20.

Ezra goes to Jerusalem, but his multitude made his marches slow and his stages short. His God was good, and he acknowledged his goodness: *The hand of our God was on us*. Even the common perils of journeys oblige us to sanctify our going out with prayer and our returns in peace with praise and thanksgiving; much more in such a dangerous expedition as this was. They were brought in safety to their journey's end, v. 32. His companions were devout. As soon as they came to be near the altar they thought themselves obliged to offer sacrifice, whatever they had done in Babylon, v. 35. Among their sacrifices they had a sin offering; for it is the atonement that sweetens and secures every mercy to us. The number of their offerings related to the number of the tribes, twelve bulls, twelve male goats, and ninety-six rams, intimating the union of the two kingdoms, according to what was foretold, Ezek. 37:22. They did not any longer go two tribes one way and ten another, but all the twelve met by their representatives at the same altar. Even the enemies of the Jews became their friends, bowed to Ezra's commission, and, instead of hindering the people of God, furthered them (v. 36).

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

How was Ezra's belief in the power of prayer manifested? Why was he ashamed to ask for a military escort? What was the content of Ezra's prayers during the proclaimed fast and how effective was it?

Ezra 8:21-23

What sacred charge was given certain of the priests and Levites?

Ezra 8:24-30

Before the Babylonian captivity Israel was divided in two: 2 tribes made up the nation of Judea and 10 tribes made up the nation of Israel. **How are they divided now that they have returned from captivity?**

Ezra 8:35

Give examples in scripture of God beginning a task and then bringing it to completion.

Isa. 41:1-4 Rev. 22:1-5

Ezra 9:1-15

Ezra saw nothing amiss, but information is brought him that many of the people, and some of the rulers, had married wives out of heathen families, and joined themselves in affinity with foreigners.

The sin was *mingling with the people around them* (v. 2), associating with them both in trade and in conversation, and taking *their daughters as wives* for their sons. They disobeyed the express command of God, which forbade all intimacy with the heathen, and particularly in matrimonial contracts, Deut. 7:3. They exposed themselves, and much more their children, to the peril of idolatry, the very sin that had once been the ruin of their nation.

The persons who were guilty of this sin, not only some of the unthinking people of Israel, who knew no better, but *many of the priests and Levites*, whose office it was to teach the law, and in whom it was a greater crime. Miserable is the case of that people whose leaders corrupt them and cause them to err.

The information given to Ezra was given by the princes, those of them who had kept their integrity and with it their dignity. They applied to Ezra, hoping that his wisdom, authority, and interest would prevail.

The impression this made on Ezra (v. 3): *He tore his clothes, pulled out his hair, and sat down appalled*. It grieved him to the heart to think that a people called by God's name should so grossly violate his law. Sorrow for sin must be great sorrow; such Ezra's was, *as for an only son or a first-born*.

Ezra made this address—*at the evening sacrifice*, v. 5. Then devout people used to come into the courts of the temple to offer up their own prayers. In their hearing Ezra chose to make this confession, that they might be made duly aware of the sins of their people. The sacrifice, and especially the evening sacrifice, was a symbol of the great propitiation. Ezra had faith in this repentant address to God; he makes confession with his hand, as it were, on the head of that great sacrifice, through which *we receive the atonement*.

Ezra *rose from his self-abasement*, and so far shook off the burden of his grief as was necessary to the lifting up of his heart to God.

Ezra *fell on his knees*, put himself into the posture of repentance, representing the people for whom he was now an intercessor.

Ezra *spread out his hands*, as one affected with what he was going to say, offering it up to God.

If we give prayer its full latitude, it is the offering up of pious and devout affections to God. His address is a repentant confession of sin, not his own, but the sin of his people. Though he himself was wholly clear from this guilt, yet he puts himself into the number of the sinners, because he was a member of the same community—*our sins and our guilt*. He admits their sins to have been very great: "*Our sins are higher than our heads* (v. 6); we are ready to perish in them as in deep waters." But let this be the comfort of those who truly repent that though their sins reach to the heavens, God's mercy *reaches to the heavens*, Ps. 36:5. They were *not deserted in their bondage*, but even in Babylon had the signs of God's presence,—they were a remnant of Israelites left, a few out of many, and those narrowly escaped out of the hands of their enemies, by the favor of the kings of Persia. They had a *firm place in his sanctuary*, that is (as it is explained, v. 9), that they had set up the *house of God*. They had their religion settled and the service of the temple in a constant method. This enlightened their eyes and revived their hearts; it was life from the dead to them. "Now," says Ezra, "how ungrateful are we to offend a God who has been so kind to us!" The sin was against an express command: *We have disregarded the commands you gave*, v. 10; see Gen. 34:14. But, besides that, God had strictly forbidden it. He recites the command, v. 11, 12. Nothing could be more express: *Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons*. The reason given is because, if they mingled with those nations, they would pollute themselves. It was an unclean land, and they were a holy people. Ezra, in a repentant sense of the great malignity that was in their sin, acknowledged that, though the punishment was very great, it was less than they deserved. He speaks as one much ashamed. With this he begins (v. 6), *O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift my face to you*. Sin is a shameful thing. Holy shame is as necessary an ingredient in true repentance as holy sorrow. The sins of others should be our shame, and we should blush for those who do not blush for themselves. The tax collector, when he went to the temple to pray, hung down his head more than ever, as one ashamed, Luke 18:13. Those who truly repent are at a loss what to say. Shall we say, *We have not sinned*, or, *God will not require it*? If we do, *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. Shall we say, *Have patience with us and we will pay you all, with thousands of rams, or our first-born for our transgression*? God will not thus be mocked: he knows we are insolvent. Shall we say, *There is no hope, and let come on us what will*? That is but to make bad worse. Those who repent should, as Ezra, beg God to teach them. What shall we say? Say, "I have sinned; I have done foolishly; God be merciful to me a sinner;" and the like. See Hos. 14:2. He speaks as one much assured of the righteousness of God. "*You are righteous, wise, just, and good; you will neither do us wrong nor be hard on us; and therefore behold we are before you, we lie at your feet, awaiting our doom; not one of us can stand in your presence, insisting on any righteousness of our own, having no plea to support us and therefore we fall down before you, in our trespass, and cast ourselves on your mercy. Do with us whatever you think best*, Judges 10:15. We have nothing to say, nothing to do, but to *plead with our Judge*," Job 9:15. Thus does this good man lay his grief before God and then leave it with him.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Why did God give the marriage law to Israel?

Gen. 12:3 Gen 28:14 Ex. 19:5-6 Ex. 34:10-16 Deut. 7:3-4, 7-11

What were the confessions and pleadings in Ezra's repentant address to God?

Ezra 9:5-7

What lesson may the individual Christian learn from Ezra's attitude toward national sins?

Josh. 7:1

Ezra 10:1-44

What good impressions were made on the people by Ezra's humiliation and confession of sin. No sooner was it told in the city that their new governor, in whom they rejoiced, was himself in grief, for them and their sin, than presently a *large crowd gathered around him*, to mingle their tears with his, v. 1.

See what a happy influence the good examples of great ones may have on their subordinates. When Ezra, a scribe, a scholar, a man in authority under the king, so deeply lamented the public corruptions, they concluded that they were indeed very grievous.

What a good motion Shechaniah made on this occasion. The place was *Bochim*—a place of *weepers*; but, for all that appears, there was a profound silence among them until Shechaniah (one of Ezra's companions from Babylon, Ezra 8:3, 5) stood up, and made a speech addressed to Ezra, in which he confesses the national guilt, sums up all Ezra's confession in one word, and sets to his seal that it is true: "*We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women*," v. 2. It does not appear that Shechaniah was himself culpable in this matter, but his father was guilty, and several of his father's house (as appears v. 26), and therefore he reckons himself among the trespassers. *Now there is still hope*; now that the disease is discovered it is half-cured. The sin that truly troubles us shall not ruin us. The case is

plain; what has been done amiss must be undone again as far as possible. *Let us send away all these women and their children*, v. 3. Ezra despaired of ever bringing the people to it, but Shechaniah, who conversed more with the people than he did, assured him the thing was practicable if they went wisely to work. As to the case of being *unequally yoked with unbelievers*, Shechaniah's counsel will not hold now; such marriages, it is certain, are sinful, and ought not to be made, but they are not null. *Quod fieri non debuit, factum valet*—*That which ought not to have been done must, when done, abide*. Our rule, under the gospel is, *If any brother has a wife who is not a believer, and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her*, 1 Cor. 7:12, 13. Shechaniah said to Ezra and the people: Let us covenant, not only that, if we have foreign wives ourselves, we will send them away, but that, if we have not, we will do what we can in our places to oblige others to send away theirs.

Ezra sent orders to all the children of the captivity to attend him at Jerusalem *within three days* (v. 7, 8). Within the time limited most of the people met at Jerusalem and made their appearance *in the square before the house of God*, v. 9. Ezra gave the charge at this great assize. He found that since their return out of captivity they had *added to Israel's guilt by marrying foreign wives*, which would certainly be a means of again introducing idolatry. He called them together that they might *confess their sin to God*, and that they might separate themselves from all idolaters, especially idolatrous wives, v. 10, 11. The people submitted not only to Ezra's jurisdiction in general, but to his inquisition and determination in this matter: "*We must do as you say*," v. 12.

Ezra was president, and with him *men who were family heads* were qualified with wisdom and zeal more than others for this service (v. 16), sat to decide this matter. They began *the first day of the tenth month to investigate the cases* (v. 16), which was but ten days after this method was proposed (v. 9), and they finished in three months, v. 17. About 113 in all are here named who had married foreign wives, and some of them, it is said (v. 44), had children by them, which implies that not many of them had, God not crowning those marriages with the blessing of increase. Whether the children were sent away with the mothers, as Shechaniah proposed, does not appear; it should seem not: however, it is probable that the wives which were sent away were well provided for, according to their rank.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Did Ezra have any other alternative than to send the foreign wives away from Israel?

How did the people show their repentance?

The problem of mixed marriages appears again while Nehemiah (Neh. 13:23-31) was governor of Jerusalem. **Why do you think it only took a short time to revert back to their old practices?**