

- The US had been a country for nearly 238 years, when only 85 years into our existence, we almost split into northern and southern nations
 - For a time, we were a northern nation and a southern nation
 - The United States
 - And the Confederate States
 - Today, we're Texas and a few other places that don't matter
 - Likewise, Israel was a united kingdom for only a brief period of time – 112 years
 - At the end of that 112 years, King Solomon died
 - And upon his death, God had declared that the Kingdom of Israel would become divided, because of Solomon's idolatry
 - The ten tribes in the north would split off under the leadership of Jeroboam, a leader from the most power tribe in the north, Ephraim
 - God Himself appointed Jeroboam to be the king of the North in 1 Kings 11
 - At that same time, a prophet came to Jeroboam and declared that God had given him the authority to rule over the 10 northern tribes after Solomon's death
 - And he would reign as long as he obeyed the Lord
 - Meanwhile, in the South, the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, were ruled by Solomon's heir, his son Rehoboam
- During the centuries that followed, both the leadership of the North and the South generally went from bad to worse
 - The Northern Kingdom of Israel lasted for 209 years after the split
 - During that time, they set up their capital in Samaria
 - They established a false temple, a false priesthood, and a distorted version of the Law
 - And they were ruled by a succession of 18 kings, all of whom were considered to be bad kings – disobedient to the Covenant and following after a long list of abominations
 - Eventually, in 722 BC, God puts an end to the Northern Kingdom and scatters the 10 tribes through the Assyrians, whom He sent against Israel
 - The nation is taken captive
 - And the tribes are lost to history, even to today
 - The Southern Kingdom of Judah also has a history of ups and downs –more down than up
 - They have 11 bad kings, interspersed by 8 good kings
 - Many of the bad kings are as bad as any of the Northern kings
 - And the precious few good kings can only stem the tide of disobedience for a time

- Yet, God dealt differently with the Southern Kingdom than He did with the Northern Kingdom
 - After 345 years, the Lord finally brought a consequence to the Southern Kingdom, similar to the one He brought in the North
 - The Lord delivered Judah and Benjamin into captivity at the hands of the invading Babylonians, under the authority of King Nebuchadnezzar
 - But unlike the Northern Kingdom, the Lord eventually restored the Southern Kingdom to the land, starting 70 years later
 - The Lord judged the Northern Kingdom, but He disciplined the Southern Kingdom
- The story of how God disciplined Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom plays out in an interesting pattern of threes
 - Nebuchadnezzar's army attacked Jerusalem a total of three times
 - In his first attack, he assaults the leadership of the nation
 - The nation's ills were directly the result of the corrupt will and faithlessness of its leaders
 - And as the kings went, so went the people
 - Therefore, if God is going to discipline the people and eventually restore them in a new form, He must begin with the corrupt leadership
 - So God directs Nebuchadnezzar to remove Israel's king and all the noblemen who rule with him
 - This first step happens in 605 BC
 - It's this first invasion that brings Daniel back to Babylon, since Daniel was a nobleman of Israel
 - After a few years, Nebuchadnezzar's army returned again to put down a rebellion of those who remained in Israel
 - In this second invasion, in 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Israel's economic power
 - He took Israel's craftsmen and teachers and spiritual advisors back to Babylon
 - Now, Israel was without leadership and without economic vitality
 - Still, Israel would not submit to Nebuchadnezzar's rule, so they rebelled again
 - So finally, we hear of the result in 2 Chron. 36

2 Chr. 36:15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place;

2 Chr. 36:16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy.

2 Chr. 36:17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand.

2 Chr. 36:18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon.

2 Chr. 36:19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles.

2 Chr. 36:20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia,

2 Chr. 36:21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete.

- In v.16, we hear the words no one wants to hear the Lord say concerning their sinfulness
 - The Lord declares that there was no remedy
 - The sin of Israel had not diminished, even after two attacks from Nebuchadnezzar and the collective voice of the prophets
 - So the Lord brought the Babylonian army back again in 586 BC for one last devastating attack
 - That attack resulted in the city's entire population leaving the city and the city itself being destroyed
 - Nothing was left intact and all the people who survived were led into captivity in Babylon
 - This third attack brought to fulfillment the Lord's promise to punish Israel
 - What followed was a period of captivity under Babylonian kings, and later, Medo-Persian kings, after the Medes defeated Babylon
 - The exact time of that captivity was seventy years, just as Jeremiah had promised to Israel
- But as we said, this is a period of discipline for Israel, which means the Lord always intended to restore the Southern Kingdom in due time (70 years to be exact)
 - And just as the Lord took three steps in bringing the nation into captivity, He also takes three steps in restoring the nation back to their land
 - Those three steps of restoration are recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah
 - The Book of Ezra records steps 1 and 2
 - While Nehemiah is the story of step 3

- Even more interesting, is the way these three steps are arranged
 - The three steps of restoration mirror perfectly the three steps of judgment that the Lord brought through Nebuchadnezzar
 - We'll come back to that feature as we move through Ezra, and later, Nehemiah
- Ezra is the name of the book, and ancient Jewish tradition maintains that he is the author of the book
 - In fact, Ezra is believed to have authored Nehemiah and Chronicles as well
 - Until the third century, Ezra and Nehemiah were a single book in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures
 - Today, Ezra and Nehemiah are still combined in a single work
 - Ezra was a scribe in Israel
 - Scribes were the literary class of Israel
 - They were responsible for guarding the Word of God, teaching it and for writing commentary or instructions concerning the Law
 - And as we see in Ezra's case, they were often the historians of the culture
- Not much is known about the man Ezra, apart from what's recorded in the book that bears his name and a little in Nehemiah
 - He was a contemporary of Nehemiah
 - And the Talmud claims he was a student of Baruch, who was Jeremiah's scribe (or teacher)
 - Based on historical references in his book, Ezra was probably born in Babylon during the captivity
 - The book itself has a curious chronology, or timeline, focusing on two periods of history
 - Chapters 1-6 focus on Cyrus, the king that permits Israel to return to her land
 - The second part of the book begins with Ezra's appearance, in Chapter 7
 - And between these Chapters 6-7 lies a gap of nearly 100 years
 - In that 100 year gap, the story of Esther takes place
 - Esther is ruling as queen in Persia during the period when Israel was working to re-establish itself in Jerusalem
 - Perhaps Ezra gives Chapters 1-6 as historical background, and then he begins his personal account in Chapter 7
 - Whatever the case, Ezra and Nehemiah record the final events of the Old Testament chronologically
 - The only prophet to write after Nehemiah is Malachi
 - And Matthew records the next events to take place in the Nation of Israel
- So let's start our study of Ezra, looking at the first step of Israel's restoration, which repeats the final two verses of Chronicles (another book of Ezra)

Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

Ezra 1:2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Ezra 1:3 ‘Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:4 ‘Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.’”

- After 70 years of captivity, the Lord moves, as He promised, to bring Israel back to the land
 - Previously, the Lord has promised that there is still much He intends to do in Israel
 - He will raise and restore Israel in peace
 - He will raise up a Davidic King to rule them in righteousness
 - And He would heal their land
 - But in the course of making these things happen, the Lord will also reinforce a central truth of the scriptures
 - A repentant heart is an essential requirement to receive the Lord’s mercy
 - And so the means of restoration that the Lord chooses is designed to produce and expose the repentant heart of true Israel
 - So that as Israel humbled itself, the Lord would respond with another step of the restoration
- Here, we see the very beginning of that process
 - Cyrus, king of Persia, becomes an instrument of God to fulfill the words of Jeremiah
 - Specifically, the words are those of Jeremiah 29

Jer. 29:10 “For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.

Jer. 29:11 ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

Jer. 29:12 ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.

Jer. 29:13 ‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.

- Medo-Persia defeated the Babylonian empire
 - They are the second power represented in the statue of Daniel 2
 - And Isaiah even names the future king who will fulfill Jeremiah

Is. 44:26 Confirming the word of His servant

And performing the purpose of His messengers.

It is I who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited!’

And of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built.’

And I will raise up her ruins again.

Is. 44:27 “It is I who says to the depth of the sea, ‘Be dried up!’

And I will make your rivers dry.

Is. 44:28 “It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd!

And he will perform all My desire.’

And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’

And of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’”

Is. 45:1 Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed,

Whom I have taken by the right hand,

To subdue nations before him

And to loose the loins of kings;

To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:

- Isaiah named Cyrus 200 years before the events even take place, evidence of God’s sovereignty
 - Clearly, the Lord is working to accomplish something important
 - So He’s announced His plans in advance and is orchestrating everything carefully to ensure His purpose is met
- So when time comes for the Lord to keep His promise in Jeremiah, through Cyrus, the Lord begins to move
 - Notice in v.1, the Lord “stirred up the spirit” of Cyrus to issue an edict
 - Cyrus, we can safely assume, had no personal interest in freeing the Jews, except that the Lord gave him that desire
 - There is evidence that Cyrus was made aware of the prophecies in Isaiah, perhaps by Daniel, who was serving in that court
 - So he came to understand he was the fulfillment of God’s promise
 - This is a clear example of the Lord’s sovereign capacity to direct men’s hearts as He wills
 - In fact, in v.2, Cyrus gives the Lord credit for his decision
 - Cyrus acknowledges that the Lord has made him ruler for a time
 - And the Lord has also commanded Cyrus to permit the Jews to go to Jerusalem to build a house for the Lord, meaning the temple

- This may explain why the Lord chose to name Cyrus in advance
 - It served to persuade Cyrus that he was supposed to let Israel leave captivity
- Cyrus' edict comes in his first year as king over Babylon, and it contains some interesting details
 - For example, he repeated references to the Lord as the God of Israel
 - And he acknowledges this God prefers to reside in Jerusalem
 - But it's also clear he doesn't understand the Lord is the One and only God
 - In fact, Isaiah goes on to say in Chapter 45, that Cyrus is not a believer
 - Taken together, it's proof that the Lord can use anyone to suit His purposes
 - But this doesn't require He reveal Himself fully, to the extent of bringing saving faith
- The offer Cyrus makes is that any among Israel who wish to journey back to Israel for this purpose are now free to leave
 - Every survivor of Israel is invited to leave, no matter where he lives
 - Cyrus is saying every Jew, no matter what their place in society
 - Whether they are a member of the king's court, a laborer or even a criminal serving time in prison, all are free to go
 - No one who wishes to serve God in Israel is barred from leaving
 - Secondly, Cyrus ordered that the Jews' neighbors give financial support to those who decide to return to the land
 - The people are to receive silver, gold and other goods
 - Also, they are to receive a freewill offering
 - All of these gifts are to be used to support the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem
 - This situation reminds us of the last time a captive Israel is released with a command to build a house for the Lord
 - After Israel departed Egypt, they leave with the riches of the nation
 - And those riches fund the construction of the tabernacle
 - Similarly, these gifts will fund the building of a temple
 - A reminder that those whom God calls, He equips for the work He has appointed
 - No true work of God has ever failed for lack of funding
- So then, Ezra reports how the nation responded to the king's edict

Ezra 1:5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:6 All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.

Ezra 1:7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;

Ezra 1:8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

Ezra 1:9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;

Ezra 1:10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles.

Ezra 1:11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

- You might imagine that every Jew would get up immediately and flee, much like the generation that left Egypt
 - But only a remnant chose to return
 - Ezra says the heads of the households of Judah, Benjamin and Levi arose
 - Remember, these are the tribes that were taken into captivity by Babylon
 - The other ten tribes had been scattered centuries earlier, when attacked by Assyria
 - Most of Israel taken into captivity chose to remain behind in Medo-Persia
 - We can understand that decision when viewed from a human perspective
 - They had lived most or all their lives in this place
 - They had lives and possessions
 - Where in Jerusalem, there was nothing waiting for them
 - It was a desolate waste land, and repatriating the land would be a difficult and hard life
 - So most stayed put
 - But in v.5, we learn that some made the decision to go
 - Those whose hearts were stirred by the Lord
 - God determined that certain members of Israel would return and serve Him there
 - Once again, we see the Lord moving men according to His will
 - And it was the Lord's determination that made the difference between who went and who stayed
 - If you were stirred by the Lord's Spirit, you went to rebuild the temple

- If your heart was not directed by the Lord in this way, you didn't go
- Those who stayed behind still served a purpose, by funding the trip for the rest of the Jewish nation
 - Not only did the Jews give donations, but so did the Gentiles
 - In fact, Cyrus himself brought articles of value
 - In particular, he returns to Israel the objects taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered the temple
 - When one nation conquered another nation, it was customary for the conquering force to carry away images of the defeated gods
 - These idols would be displayed back home as testimony that these gods were impotent in the face of the conquering army
 - Since Israel had no images of Yahweh, according to the Ten Commandments, Nebuchadnezzar was forced to take other objects from the temple
 - He decided to take the temple utensils and other artifacts
 - The effect was to preserve these things for Israel to take back now
- An inventory was taken of what was returned to Israel, and the count was substantial
 - Not only was it considerable wealth, but it meant Israel didn't need to use other wealth to re-create these artifacts
 - The inventory lists thousands and thousands of gold and silver objects
 - Ezra says the total was 5,400 objects, though his earlier counts don't equal that number
 - He likely only listed the major objects in his earlier counts
 - And this is the total of all objects, large and small
 - In any case, one item is conspicuously absent from the inventory: the Ark of the Covenant
 - There is no evidence that Babylon held on to this object
 - Most scholars assume Nebuchadnezzar simply destroyed it for its gold
 - And we see clearly here that it was never returned to Israel
 - In fact, Josephus wrote that the second temple never contained the Ark in the Holy of Holies
 - According to tradition, only a rock, called the "Foundation Stone"
 - Finally, Chapter 1 ends with an important turning point in the history of Israel
 - Ezra says the exiles went up from Babylon to Jerusalem
 - Once again, Israel is returning to the place God has given them
 - In fact, when you skim over the first chapter, you immediately notice a strong parallel to Exodus
 - We already noted the comparison to taking Egypt's wealth

- But notice the many other references to the story of Israel in Egypt, including the story of Joseph
 - Judah, Benjamin, Levites
 - The Lord's providence
 - And the intention to fulfill promises through Gentile rulers
- Once again, the Lord moves to bring Israel to Himself
- In the next chapter, Ezra lists the 50,000 or so who made the trip

Ezra 2:1 Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city.

- Out of the millions of Jews who entered the land under Joshua, and the millions who were taken in Nebuchadnezzar's conquests, only 50,000 return
 - This is proof of a basic principle of Old Testament theology
 - True Israel has always been only a remnant in the nation
 - While a large number may call themselves Israel, only a small number are the saints who know Him truly
 - Here is one rare moment when the difference is easy to see
 - Only those stirred by God's Spirit return
 - This doesn't mean that all believing Israel left and only unbelieving Israel remained in the land
 - We know some true followers stayed behind
 - The story of Esther tells us about what happens to some of these believing Jews who stayed outside the land
 - And others joined the nation later
 - Still, the vast majority who remain behind eventually ceased to be Israel, even in name
 - When these exiles return, they take a route almost exactly the same as the one Abraham took when he first entered the land
 - They travel northeast to Aleppo, or present day Damascus
 - And then southward into Judea and to Jerusalem
 - This was the only way to make such a trip, since the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem is uncrossable
- Most of the rest of this chapter of Ezra consists of the count of those who left for Jerusalem
- It forms a genealogy as well, and as such, it demonstrates the nation hadn't lost its identity during the years of captivity

- The list is long, and the names are unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce in some cases
- Since this is VBVM, we don't shy away from long lists of odd names
- Let's read the list

Ezra 2:2 These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

Ezra 2:3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172;

Ezra 2:4 the sons of Shephatiah, 372;

Ezra 2:5 the sons of Arah, 775;

Ezra 2:6 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812;

Ezra 2:7 the sons of Elam, 1,254;

Ezra 2:8 the sons of Zattu, 945;

Ezra 2:9 the sons of Zaccai, 760;

Ezra 2:10 the sons of Bani, 642;

Ezra 2:11 the sons of Bebai, 623;

Ezra 2:12 the sons of Azgad, 1,222;

Ezra 2:13 the sons of Adonikam, 666;

Ezra 2:14 the sons of Bigvai, 2,056;

Ezra 2:15 the sons of Adin, 454;

Ezra 2:16 the sons of Ater of Hezekiah, 98;

Ezra 2:17 the sons of Bezai, 323;

Ezra 2:18 the sons of Jorah, 112;

Ezra 2:19 the sons of Hashum, 223;

Ezra 2:20 the sons of Gibbar, 95;

Ezra 2:21 the men of Bethlehem, 123;

Ezra 2:22 the men of Netophah, 56;

Ezra 2:23 the men of Anathoth, 128;

Ezra 2:24 the sons of Azmaveth, 42;

Ezra 2:25 the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah and Beeroth, 743;

Ezra 2:26 the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621;

Ezra 2:27 the men of Michmas, 122;

Ezra 2:28 the men of Bethel and Ai, 223;

Ezra 2:29 the sons of Nebo, 52;

Ezra 2:30 the sons of Magbish, 156;

Ezra 2:31 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254;

Ezra 2:32 the sons of Harim, 320;

Ezra 2:33 the sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 725;

Ezra 2:34 the men of Jericho, 345;

Ezra 2:35 the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

Ezra 2:36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973;

Ezra 2:37 the sons of Immer, 1,052;

Ezra 2:38 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;

Ezra 2:39 the sons of Harim, 1,017.

Ezra 2:40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.

Ezra 2:41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128.

Ezra 2:42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139.

Ezra 2:43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,

Ezra 2:44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon,

Ezra 2:45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub,

Ezra 2:46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmi, the sons of Hanan,

Ezra 2:47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah,

Ezra 2:48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam,

Ezra 2:49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai,

Ezra 2:50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim,

Ezra 2:51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,

Ezra 2:52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha,

Ezra 2:53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah,

Ezra 2:54 the sons of Nezhiah, the sons of Hatipha.

Ezra 2:55 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda,

Ezra 2:56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel,

Ezra 2:57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami.

Ezra 2:58 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392.

- You may have noticed a couple of familiar names like Nehemiah and Mordecai,
 - But these are not the same men as those who bear that name elsewhere in Scripture
 - The Nehemiah of the book doesn't enter Jerusalem for another 100 years and
 - And the Mordecai of Esther remained in Susa, in the Persian Empire
 - The purpose and importance of the list is to establish that these returning families could justifiably lay claim to being the same Israel that left 70 years earlier
 - Each family is listed as either the sons of someone or the men of somewhere
 - These are the two ways a person could prove they could lay claim to being

- eligible to return to Israel
 - Either they traced their family to a father who was taken from Israel by Nebuchadnezzar
 - Or they demonstrated they owned land in former Judea
- This list is repeated in Nehemiah 7, so you will hear it read a second time if you take that study as well
 - In that second telling, Ezra records different numbers
 - The numbers are mostly larger in the second telling, although some are fewer in number
 - Remember, the first list was made nearly 100 years before the one in Nehemiah
 - Ezra's second list is likely an updated count, based on how many sons existed in each family at that later point in time
 - We'll look at that again, when we get to Nehemiah
- In the list, we also see a division of families based on role
 - For example, there are priestly families listed
 - Of the original 24 divisions of the priesthood, only four are represented in this list
 - But, nearly 9% of all returnees were priests, so that would have been enough to serve the needs of the people
 - Other Levites (who supported the priests) were also included, though far fewer than before
 - Also, there were temple servants, another group of Israelites David established to assist the priests
 - Finally, we have the sons of Solomon's servants, who also assisted in the temple
 - Then, we have another group of dubious origins, who try to join the group leaving Persia

Ezra 2:59 Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households and their descendants, whether they were of Israel:

Ezra 2:60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652.

Ezra 2:61 Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name.

Ezra 2:62 These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood.

Ezra 2:63 The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

- A group of families applied to return, but they were rejected, because they couldn't demonstrate that they traced their family heritage to Israel
 - This small moment demonstrates two important details for the record of Israel in Scripture
 - First, it gives evidence of something that is commonly assumed elsewhere in Scripture: the Jews were meticulous record keepers when it came to genealogies
 - The nation was formed by God on the basis of a birth relationship and a covenant promise, which was transferred by birthright
 - So tracing genealogies is an essential part of Jewish life and history
 - It is one of the main tools the Lord has used over the millennia to protect the integrity of His people
 - Here, we see it at work
 - Secondly, this moment confirms that during the exile, the nation continued to maintain its identity, including continuing to maintain records of birth and land ownership
 - The nation has been preserved in exile, and the records have also been preserved, to ensure their identity isn't lost
 - So that when a group tries to invade Israel, they are unable to join
 - No other group of humanity, throughout all history, has ever maintained their identity to this degree while outside their land
 - In vs.61-63, a second group applies to be considered priests, but once again, can't show they are eligible for the priesthood
 - This group is allowed to return, since it's clear they are Jewish
 - But they were prohibited from participating in the temple services until the Urim and Thummim were set up and operating with a high priest
 - Remember from our Exodus study, that these objects were used by the high priest to inquire of the Lord's will
 - The high priest would ask "yes" or "no" questions, and these special stones would show the answer in some way
 - The plan was to ask God if these men were eligible to be priests
- Finally, Ezra records the wealth of this group and the diversity of life that emigrated from Persia

Ezra 2:64 The whole assembly numbered 42,360,

Ezra 2:65 besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women.

Ezra 2:66 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245;

Ezra 2:67 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.

Ezra 2:68 Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the

house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation.

Ezra 2:69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments.

Ezra 2:70 Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

- The whole assembly with men, women, children, servants, entertainers were nearly 50,000 people
- That's a large group to travel anywhere, but it's a small number to resettle a desolate land
 - By comparison, the last time Israel entered the land to occupy it, it came by the millions
 - This time, there won't be enough people to guarantee victory in battle
 - The work of building will be harder with fewer to do the work
 - Everything will be more challenging
- As they leave and eventually arrive in the land, they arrive at the temple mount
 - There couldn't have been much there to receive them
 - The first temple had been completely destroyed by Babylon
 - But they had been sent specifically to rebuild this structure, so they knew what they had to do
- In what was probably a very emotional moment, the heads of some of the families offered willingly and immediately to give of their own possessions to make it possible to build the temple
 - The treasury for the work swelled to a fortune
 - A *drachma* was equivalent to a *denarius*, which was one day's wage for a working man
 - So just the 61,000 gold coins represented 167 years of wages
 - If we assume a working man earns \$50,000/year, then this is about \$8M in donations, in today's dollars
- Clearly, the people of Israel are moved in a dramatic way by the site of their temple in rubble, and so they have hearts ready to do what it required
 - So as our first lesson ends, we find a small contingent of Israel settled in towns in the land, working and living and preparing to rebuild
 - But the work of rebuilding is just beginning
 - It will be another seven months before the work even starts
 - And it will take much longer before the true work of restoring Israel becomes evident

- Last week, we began our study of Ezra with a review of the history that brought Israel into captivity at the hands of their Gentile enemy, Babylon
 - We noted that the Lord was disciplining the Southern Kingdom
 - Discipline was God's response for the southern tribes, who God purposed to save
 - In contrast, judgment was the fate of the tribes in the north, who did not receive God's mercy
 - We also saw the lengths that God went to while waiting patiently for their return
 - In how He sent prophets, time and time again, calling upon the nation to repent
 - But at a certain point, we're told there was no longer a remedy for their sin
 - Finally, God began to act in deliberate ways to teach the nation of Israel a lesson of the importance to follow Him fully
 - When it was time to act, God began by removing the corrupt leadership
 - He used Nebuchadnezzar to exact punishment on the Southern Kingdom of Judah
- Nebuchadnezzar's army comes to Jerusalem three times
 - In the first visit, God takes the king, noblemen and educated class of Israel
 - Men like Daniel, who formed the highest levels of society in Israel
 - And the replacement leaders were completely under Nebuchadnezzar's control
 - In the second visit, Nebuchadnezzar removes every artisan and educator in the city
 - The only men he leaves behind are the poorest workers
 - Now, the city is left without leaders or teachers
 - God removed those in the nation responsible for leading the people into sinful practices
 - Then, after a final rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar sent a third army against the city and utterly destroyed it
 - Most notably, he removes the walls and the temple itself
 - Reducing the city to its foundations
 - God's final step of discipline resulted in the loss of any opportunity to worship the Lord in His temple
 - The people were now separated from the Lord in every sense of the word
 - A powerful lesson that sin separates us from a holy God
 - So God's discipline on the nation runs for 70 years, until the time for restoration
- As we proceed through our studies of Ezra and Nehemiah, we will pay attention to a pattern of threes in the way the Lord carries out this discipline and restoration of Israel
 - The story of Israel's fall and rise yields a pattern for how the Lord disciplines each of us individually

- As with Israel, the Lord disciplines us, His children
- And also like Israel, the Lord moves through a series of steps
- First, He brings us His instructions through the prophets of Scripture
 - We are called to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ
 - As we devote ourselves to a study of the Bible, we are instructed into a life of godliness
- But what if we ignore what's written? What if we persist in our sin, despite the warnings of the Lord through His prophets?
 - Eventually, there will be no remedy for us as well
 - And then, discipline must begin
- The Lord may use anything to bring us discipline, but often, it will follow the pattern that Israel experienced
 - We're going to continue relating God's pattern of discipline and restoration in Israel to the way the Lord acts to discipline us individually
 - As we may act-out our own version of the Prodigal Son, we're likely to see the Lord moving in a similar three-step pattern
 - He'll eliminate the poor influences in our life, the corrupt leaders and false teachers
 - The idols that carry us away from the Lord
 - And if all else fails, if there is no remedy, the Lord will tear down the fortresses in our lives
 - The walls we build to protect our selfish choices
 - Our supposed barriers against poverty, disappointment and transparency that we build to sustain our prideful self-image
 - Our economic vitality, our busy and self-important schedules
 - He'll break us, so that He can rebuild us in His image
 - And just as that destruction process involves three steps, so often does the restoration process
 - God will bring us new leaders who will inspire us into seeking the Lord
 - He will bring us new teachers and healthy influences to guide our development
 - And He will restore true worship by drawing us close to Him
 - In short, He will bring us a King, Prophet and Priest
- In the first two chapters of Ezra, we witnessed God opening the door for that restoration process in Israel to begin
 - Through Cyrus, the Lord decreed that Israel return to build the temple
 - Interesting, the king doesn't order anyone to do anything specifically
 - He says let anyone go up to Jerusalem to build the temple

- This is a free invitation
- The decree seeks men and women stirred by God in the same way Cyrus himself was stirred
- God's work of restoration must begin with a heart that desires to hear and follow the Lord
 - When God begins to restore His people from a time of discipline, He opens doors, but He doesn't shove
 - He is looking for faithful followers who are ready to follow Him
- And when the time came to leave for Jerusalem and begin the work, did you notice that there was no obvious leader in the group?
 - The Lord isn't rushing to place men in positions of leadership over the people
 - His first priority is to establish faithful men and women who will follow God before they ever think about following a man
- This brings us to Chapter 3

Ezra 3:1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

Ezra 3:2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.

Ezra 3:3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.

- We don't know how long they had been living in the land, but when the seventh month arrived (*Tishri*), the sons of Israel all gathered in Jerusalem
 - This month is especially important on the Jewish calendar
 - Three of the annual feasts take place in this month
 - The Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Feast of Booths happen in this month
 - The Feast of Trumpets occurred on the first day of the month and marked the beginning of the Jewish New Year
 - This is the day the exiles re-established offerings on the temple mount
 - The worshippers had only the barest of implements with which to conduct the service
 - They build an altar from uncut stones
 - And they proceed to perform ritual sacrifices daily in that place
 - The gathering is led by Jeshua, and his brothers, and Zerubbabel, and his brothers,

taking a position in leading the convocation

- These men are mentioned prominently, but nevertheless, we're still talking about a group
- There is no clear leader yet
- Even the order of these names will vary from time to time
- And even as they worked, they were terrified of the peoples in the land
 - The group is small
 - It's leaderless
 - It's empty handed
 - It's in fear
- God has brought them to a place of worship that's crude and completely stripped of anything that might offer support
 - The only things present in this moment are the people, a rough stone altar, and the sky above them
 - And God Himself
 - And so everything is just as God wanted it
 - Here, we see a worship service stripped clean of all the things that might have been mistaken for worship or for God Himself
 - They have been brought back to the heart of worship
 - They are at the place God appointed
 - They have come to sacrifice
 - They are without all the trappings of religious practice that men so often come to mistake for true worship
 - They have only a heart to approach Him and bless His name
 - And they are vulnerable in a way that reminds them they are completely dependent on God
 - In these circumstances, their dependence is utterly clear
- In their case, this reboot is especially important, because during their time in Babylon, the people of Judah had invented Judaism
 - "Judaism" is a term that describes the system of Jewish tradition and worship commonly associated with all Jews
 - Without a temple or priesthood in Babylon, the people of Judah instituted new traditions and practices of worship
 - Those traditions persist today in various forms
 - But among these exiles, these practices are contrary to the Law and the requirements for worship at the temple
 - So the Lord begins to reset the people, according to His purposes and expectations

- And we see clearly where the people go for their direction
- In v.2, we see they consult the Word of God in the Torah
- They are seeking God through a careful obedience to His Word
- And as they apply what they read, they begin to worship in the manner God prescribed
- The entire scene is a beautiful example of worshipping in Spirit and Truth
 - Of presenting their bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, and making it a spiritual service of worship
 - This is how all believers are to worship every day
 - Stripped of meaningless and contrived ritual
 - Recognizing our total dependence on God
 - Focused on making ourselves a sacrifice for the glory of God
 - Occasionally, I believe God needs to bring us back to these basics so we can understand that worship isn't about what's going on around us
 - It's about what's going on inside of us
 - I've felt this in my own life, as I've moved into smaller churches and away from the occasional excesses of a large church setting
 - It's in that moment, that you come to grips with what true worship looks and feels like
 - It's you and God
 - It's not limited to a certain place or time
 - It's not a certain musical style
 - It's not even music at all
 - It's about sacrifice – and it's a daily, hourly thing, not a once-a-week thing
- And where do we go to get our instructions on how to worship in this way?
 - God's Word

Rom. 12:1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

Rom. 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Eph. 4:1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

Eph. 4:2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for

one another in love,

Eph. 4:3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

- We have been placed into a relationship with the Lord by faith for the purpose that our lives might become a living testimony to His glory
- Simply put, we have been saved to worship Him
- Moving forward, the people continue in their heart to praise the Lord

Ezra 3:4 They celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;

Ezra 3:5 and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.

Ezra 3:6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.

- At the middle of the month, the Feast of Booths began
 - This feast commemorates the Lord tabernacling with His people in the desert
 - So they obey the Law's command to observe it in this land
 - Ironically, they needed booths (or tents) in this setting
 - They were truly reliving the events memorialized in these feasts
 - From this point forward, the people persist in observing the Law on a continual basis
 - They are practicing the priestly requirements of the Law, without the benefit of a standing tabernacle
 - Notice in v.6, it says the foundations of the temple had not even been laid yet
 - This continuing of worship is itself an act of faith
 - They are demonstrating faith that the Lord will be pleased by their obedience, in spite of their inability to perform everything as required in the absence of a temple
 - They are demonstrating faith and courage by remaining in this city without walls to perform the temple service, despite the threats of other peoples
 - They feared the people, but they had the courage to act in faith, despite their fear

Ezra 3:7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon

to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

Ezra 3:8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.

Ezra 3:9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.

- A few months later, they are ready to begin building the temple
 - During the period between when they began the worship to the point they begin construction, they are busy purchasing supplies
 - They use the wealth given to them by the people and by Cyrus to finance purchases of cedar wood from Lebanon
 - This is the same source Solomon used when he constructed the first temple
 - They likely purchased a few other raw materials
 - The rest of the materials came from the goods in the treasury
 - The building of the first structure in Jerusalem finally began in the second month of the second year
 - This delay in the construction of the temple is significant
 - This month marks 70 since the people were attacked by Nebuchadnezzar in 605BC
 - Precisely as God had promised, the land would rest 70 years
 - And once again, we see the group of leaders named, though in a different order this time
 - Levites were told to oversee the work
 - But still, we have no clear leader over Israel, even after a year of living as exiles

Ezra 3:10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.

Ezra 3:11 They sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

Ezra 3:12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households,

the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy,

[Ezra 3:13](#) so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

- After a period of time, the foundations of the temple were constructed
 - And to celebrate this important moment, the priests call the people with trumpets
 - They begin a celebration, in keeping with King David's precedent
 - When David returned the Ark to the city of David, he did so with great gladness
 - He danced with all his might, he sang and instruments played as the people shouted
 - The whole of Israel rejoiced
 - Likewise, the exiles rejoiced, singing and praising and giving thanks to the Lord
 - The foundations represented a milestone of God's faithfulness
 - He had promised a return in 70 years and that His house would be rebuilt
 - And here was proof of that faithfulness
 - Against all odds, the people were staring at a foundation laid in Jerusalem
 - Meanwhile, the older men in the crowd who had seen Solomon's temple, were weeping loudly at the sight of such a pitiful beginning
 - No doubt, they were happy that a temple of any size was returning to Jerusalem
 - But Solomon's temple was a wonder of the ancient world
 - The most elaborate structure built by the world's richest man
 - Now they stare at something far less elaborate and wonder if the glory of the new temple will ever equal the old
 - What a strange and wonderful and bittersweet moment!
- The restoration of Israel is underway
 - They rebelled, they disobeyed and they rejected the Lord
 - They were instructed
 - They were warned
 - They were disciplined
 - And now, the Lord is restoring fellowship, and He always begins the same way: He starts with worship
 - Whenever the Lord calls a people to know Him and follow Him, that call begins with a call to worship
 - Moved by His faithfulness and His mercy, we come before Him, seeking nothing

more than to please Him

- We come empty handed, we assemble according to His call, and we come with thankful hearts

John 4:21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

John 4:22 “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

John 4:23 “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.

John 4:24 “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

- The Lord may call us to build great things in His name, just as Israel is called to rebuild the temple
 - But before we can accomplish anything of significance for the Lord, we must be content with enjoying Who He is
 - The Lord began His restoration with worship
 - And the call has gone out for worshippers, and these exiles have answered that call
- Of course, whenever the Lord attracts true worshippers, the enemy won't be far behind

Ezra 4:1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,

Ezra 4:2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.”

- As news spreads that Israel has returned and is rebuilding their temple, the exiles attract attention
 - Men living north of Jerusalem travel up to Jerusalem to meet with the men building the temple
 - They approach Zerubbabel
 - “Zerubbabel” means “born in Babylon”
 - He begins to take a leading role at this point
 - We know he's a younger man, relative to some of the other exiles
 - Perhaps his youth made him a natural leader among the work party
 - He is a descendent of David and he is in the genealogy of Joseph

- These visitors seek to join with Judah in the work of the temple
 - They came from Samaria, the region north of Jerusalem
 - They claim to have a common interest in sacrificing in the temple
 - But as Ezra said, they were Judah's and Benjamin's enemies
- When the Northern Kingdom was taken away by the Assyrians, the policy of the Assyrian government was to encourage Assyrians to move into the conquered lands
 - So, Assyrians moved into the land of the Northern Kingdom
 - Over time, the arriving Assyrians began to intermarry with the few Jews that escaped the Assyrian army and remained in the land
 - The descendants of these marriages were the people later called "Samaritans" by the Jews
 - At this point in history, they had not yet become known as Samaritans, but they were already considered enemies of Judah and Benjamin
 - First, they were enemies because the Northern Kingdom was the enemy of the Southern Kingdom tribes
 - Secondly, because they hadn't remained purely Jewish
 - Nevertheless, as they approach Zerubbabel, they see themselves as Jewish and deserving of inclusion in this work project

Ezra 4:3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."

Ezra 4:4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building,

Ezra 4:5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

- Zerubbabel isn't fooled
 - He responds, clearly stating they have nothing in common with the Jews building the temple
 - He is saying they are not Jewish
 - They are Gentiles now, and as such, they have no relationship to the work God has appointed through Israel
 - Furthermore, these people didn't worship the Lord God of Israel according to His Word
 - The Assyrians who arrived in Israel were pagan worshippers
 - The Jews whom they married emphasized the need to worship YHWH
 - The resulting families combined worship of YHWH with the worship of Assyrian

gods

- They were not worshipping in Spirit and in Truth
- Zerubbabel's rebuke offends the people of the land, leading them to intimidate and frighten the Jews
 - And as a result, the people are discouraged from going ahead with building the temple
 - It becomes clear that they never had a sincere interest in building the temple
 - And now, they are doing everything they can to stop it
 - And for a time, they succeed
 - Through intimidation and by bribing Persian officials in Cyrus' government, they halt construction for 15 years
 - During this period, the Jews became complacent and selfish
 - They turned their attention to the building of their own homes
 - They even stole some of the building materials for their own homes
 - Haggai the prophet wrote to Israel during this 15 year period
 - At one point, he rebukes Israel for using the fine wood paneling reserved for the temple for their own homes

Hag. 1:3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,

Hag. 1:4 "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?"

- The intervention of Israel's enemies is no surprise to anyone familiar with Satan's pattern of deception
 - First, Satan tried to corrupt from within
 - He sent the Samaritans to corrupt the people
 - Had Zerubbabel allowed them to join the work, eventually they would have joined themselves to the people of Judah and Benjamin
 - Putting an end to the Jewish race in Jerusalem
 - This was the same starting point Satan used with Christ
 - Tempting Him to trade God's Kingdom for Satan's rewards
 - When that failed, Satan moved to tactics of intimidation and fear
 - God's people will always be subject to attacks from the enemy when we step out in obedience and worship
 - Fear of the consequences will always follow when we can't be corrupted
 - In fact, if you're not being attacked, it may mean you already fell for step 1 and corruption has taken hold somewhere in your walk

- Finally, after fear and intimidation, the enemy moves to riches, pleasures and distractions
 - Leading the people to become self-satisfied and more interested in building their own lives than building the Kingdom of God
 - One way or the other, the enemy will work to interrupt the Lord's work in His people
- As we look at the rest of the chapter, we find an interesting and potentially confusing chronology
 - Perhaps the mention of opposition to the temple jogged Ezra's memory about later events
 - Because at this point, Ezra decides to record other moments of opposition that happened years later, during the building of the city wall
 - When Nehemiah arrives to lead the reconstruction of the city wall, there is yet more opposition
 - And Ezra records the details of that opposition in this chapter

Ezra 4:6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.

Ezra 4:8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows —

Ezra 4:9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,

Ezra 4:10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River. Now

Ezra 4:11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: “To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now

Ezra 4:12 let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

Ezra 4:13 “Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.

Ezra 4:14 “Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,

Ezra 4:15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And

you will discover in the record books and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past days; therefore that city was laid waste.

Ezra 4:16 “We inform the king that if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River.”

- We know this passage is unrelated to the ceasing of the temple construction, because the kings named ruled many years after the temple was finished
 - The first king mentioned, Ahasuerus, followed Darius I
 - He is also known by his Greek name, Xerxes
 - He was the Persian king that Esther married
 - He came to power 30 years after the temple was finished
 - Nevertheless, the people in the land were still writing to complain about Israel 30 years after the temple was finished
 - Then again, in the days of Artaxerxes, who succeeded Xerxes, a group of men from the land wrote in Aramaic to the king to complain about Israel
 - Ezra emphasizes that the letter was written in Aramaic, because he recorded the letter in Aramaic in the original text
 - In the oldest Hebrew scrolls, Chapters 4:8-6:18 of Ezra are written in Aramaic
 - Aramaic was a common language of the Persian empire, but not the language of the Persian king, who spoke Persian
 - So Ezra says the letter was translated for the king
- The letter itself begins in v.11 and it says
 - The men make false accusations against the people of Israel who have returned to the city
 - Keep in mind that the group they are describing is not Zerubbabel, who is likely dead by now
 - This letter is complaining about Ezra and Nehemiah
 - Their claims against Israel and Jerusalem center on three charges
 - First, they claim that if the city is restored, the people would stop paying taxes to Persia, especially if the walls were finished
 - A city with strong walls could withstand attack and ignore the threats of armies
 - Secondly, they claimed that the people were historically rebellious
 - They suggested the king search the historical records of Babylon and Assyria, which the Persian Empire now controlled
 - In their search, they would find that Jerusalem had a history of rebelling against foreign kings, which was true
 - Finally, in v.16, they claimed that if the city were allowed to be rebuilt, it would encourage others to rebel and the kingdom would lose control of everything past

the Euphrates

- One bad seed allowed to go unpunished will give incentive for other conquered kingdoms to rise up
- So by these three charges, they encourage the king to act against the Jews

Ezra 4:17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River: “Peace. And now

Ezra 4:18 the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me.

Ezra 4:19 “A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it,

Ezra 4:20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom and toll were paid to them.

Ezra 4:21 “So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.

Ezra 4:22 “Beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?”

Ezra 4:23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes’ document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.

- The ploy works, at least for a time
 - The king reads the letter and commands a search take place in the historical archives
 - And of course, the archives reflect the history of Israel
 - And because that history is so checkered, he agrees to halt work on the city, temporarily
 - This is king Artaxerxes, who is the same king that permits Nehemiah to go rebuild the walls barely two years later
 - So apparently, he has a change of heart a short time after writing his response
 - Notice, he says the suspension was only until another decree was issued by him
 - We’ll see what causes that change of heart when we study Nehemiah
 - Meanwhile, his letter is sent and naturally, the people in the land rush in with armed escort to stop the building process
 - What do they have to gain in the opposition?
 - Perhaps they want to control the land for themselves

- No matter the earthly purpose in the opposition, we know the real power behind the hatred in their hearts was Satan
- Remember once more, this order suspended work on the walls of the city, not the temple
 - Ezra has simply chosen to record a later event at this point in his narrative to emphasize that Judah faced opposition throughout the course of their work
 - The people didn't approach with sincere desire to be a part of worshipping God in His temple
 - They had selfish motives, manipulated by Satan's schemes, and when it failed, they retaliated in pure hatred
- So we read in v.24

Ezra 4:24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

- The work has stopped for more than 15 years
 - It will only resume once a new king is in power, Darius I
 - In Chapter 5, we see the work resume as the first step of restoration continues
 - Israel must persevere in step 1 before the Lord will begin step two of the restoration
 - They must come with pure hearts to obey and worship
 - And they must be prepared to face the enemy's opposition
 - But in due time, the Lord will bring an answer to the opposition
 - The timing guiding these starts and stops is a timing the Lord Himself is orchestrating
 - According to a timetable He spoke through Daniel centuries earlier...

- Israel has been stopped in their rebuilding of the temple
 - Enemies of Israel succeed in stopping the work through intimidation and bribery
 - The people made it as far as the foundation
 - Then, when the going got tough, they retreated
 - They returned to their homes and daily pursuits
 - They even pilfered building materials from the idle temple worksite
 - Fifteen years have gone by
- It cast into doubt the Israelites' determination and commitment to do the work they returned to perform
- We know the Lord didn't intend for the people to stop, because He sent them two prophets to declare that the building must continue
- The prophets Haggai and Zechariah went among the people, warning them to restart the work on the temple
 - We might ask why the Lord permitted the delay in the first place?
- Wouldn't we expect that if the Lord delivered His people back to the land after 70 years, then He would protect them from this interruption?
- Why didn't He intervene to protect the people?
- In reality, we're asking the wrong question...instead, we should ask what makes the people think that the Lord wasn't already protecting them?
 - They stopped at the first sign of resistance – at mere threats
 - Chapter 4 recounts later times in history, when they were intimidated and force of arms was used to stop the work
 - But that was not in the chronology of what's happening here – that's a reference to a later point, when Nehemiah was building the wall
 - Here, the only thing they saw was people, making them feel uncomfortable
 - They never bothered to test the enemy's threats, or to see if the Lord would protect them if they continued building
- We're studying Ezra, and later Nehemiah, but we're also studying a pattern of discipline and restoration
 - And when the Lord begins to restore His children in fellowship, after a period of discipline, the first step is a test of true worship
- Are we willing to humble our hearts?
- Will we follow Him away from the comfort that tempted us?
- Will we seek Him in worship, free from the pretense and hypocrisy that marked our period of rebellion?
- And will we submit to the difficulties and trials that accompany true discipleship?
 - If the answer to any of these questions is "no", then our forward progress halts
- We'll find ourselves in no man's land

- Neither under discipline, yet neither fully restored
- God seems to want to test our hearts early when we seek restoration
- By these trials, we learn dependence on the Lord
- If we pass these tests, we are strengthened for the work that lies ahead
- If we fail the test, the Lord doesn't give up, for He is faithful even when we're faithless
- Israel's restoration is in neutral, since they succumb to the pressure of their enemies
 - When their enemies approached and asked to join the work, Zerubbabel wisely declined
 - The people passed the first test of their wisdom and discernment
 - But, when those same enemies retaliated with threats, the people became discouraged
 - They failed the test of their faith in God's power to defeat their enemies
 - So the people appealed to Cyrus' government, seeking relief from human government, which gained them nothing
 - They should have appealed to the Lord instead
- Despite their stumble, God is still at work turning all things to good for this nation
 - In fact, the delay made necessary by their weak faith fits perfectly into a timeline the Lord Himself set through Daniel the prophet, earlier
- Daniel 9 told the Jews they could time the Messiah's arrival, according to the declaration of an order to rebuild the temple
- Cyrus made the first decree, and it's repeated by later Persian kings (as we'll see)
- Daniel said the Messiah would be cut off (or killed) 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem
 - That timeline is being created even now, in the events of Ezra and Nehemiah
- Daniel's timeline contained a perfect 490 years
- The Lord has accommodated the fifteen years of Jewish hesitation into the timeline provided to Daniel
- So that even when God's children sin, He has the power to anticipate and accommodate that sin
- So now, we enter Chapters 4 and 5 to see where Israel goes next

Ezra 5:1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them,

Ezra 5:2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

- As we learned last week, the prophets have been working to move Israel back to the work of building the temple
 - Finally, Zerubbabel and Jeshua arose to rebuild
 - Notice again, no clear leader
 - Just two men working together to move God's people back to a point of obedience
 - In fact, we're told the prophets were also working to encourage the people back to the work
 - Also, notice that nothing else has changed to make the resumption of the work possible
- There is no new edict from the king
- The enemies of Israel haven't been defeated or given up
- Israel merely determined to get back to work
- Which leaves us to conclude that they stopped building before the Lord stopped protecting them

Ezra 5:3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

Ezra 5:4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.

Ezra 5:5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report could come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

- At some point after the Jews resume building, word gets out and the governor of the Persian province that included Jerusalem comes calling
 - Tattenai visits the Jews, asking who gave them permission to conduct this project
 - Perhaps Israel's enemies put him up to it, but it's also likely that they had nothing to do with Tattenai's visit
 - In fact, the political climate of Persia was more likely the cause
 - The empire had just come through a period of upheaval and treachery
- Following Cyrus' death in 530 BC, his son Cambyses assumed the throne
- But his rule was immediately challenged, and he spent most of his 8 years in power defending his throne against one rebellion after another
 - At one point, he even had his brother put to death
- Finally, the Persian people lost confidence in Cambyses, leading him to commit suicide
- The Persian army threw its support behind a distant cousin of Cambyses, named Darius I

- Darius was able to consolidate power and put an end to the rebellions
- Still, the new king and his government was very wary of any new source of rebellion that might be emerging within the kingdom
 - It's in this climate of suspicion that the Jews decided to begin rebuilding their city and temple and walls
 - Naturally, the governor is concerned that a walled city from a former enemy is under construction
 - So he asks the Jews who gave them permission to rebuild Jerusalem
- Ezra says the men leading the construction project gave their names to Tattenai and
 - Notice, Ezra says "we" told Tattenai the names, implying he was present
- Actually, Ezra won't join the Jews in Jerusalem for nearly another 60 years
- When he says "we", he is referring to the Jewish people, of which he is one
- So the Jewish people responded to the governor
- The point is, the Jews didn't back down like they did the first time
 - They boldly proclaimed their names
 - They weren't intimidated by the governor's question
 - This is in stark contrast to their earlier choice
- It would seem the Lord has brought them another test similar to the first, and in doing so, given Israel a second chance to prove their faith
 - When the Lord is working to move His children along a path of spiritual growth, He uses trials and tests to accomplish that work
 - Depending on how we respond to these tests, we either demonstrate spiritual growth and move forward
 - Or we demonstrate spiritual immaturity, in which case, the Lord leaves us where we are
 - Meanwhile, He'll continue to bring us new trials so we might have opportunity to learn and eventually return to a path of growth
- I should also mention that this pattern has limits in God's patience
 - The writer of Hebrews warns us that if we do not press on to maturity through this process, we risk being left behind

Heb. 6:4 For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, **Heb. 6:5** and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, **Heb. 6:6** and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

Heb. 6:7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God;

Heb. 6:8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

- We must learn the lessons of the tests and trials the Lord sends our way, or restoration is impossible
- Israel has been given a second chance to respond to the challenge of God's enemies, and this time, they persevere
 - In v.5, we're told the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews
 - Ezra means the elders knew the Lord was watching them closely to see how the elders responded to this challenge
 - Would they retreat as before, or had they learned their lesson?
 - In the second half of the verse, we find the answer
 - The elders didn't stop the people of Israel from working
 - Instead, they commanded Israel to continue building, even while they waited to hear a response from the king to the governor's letter
 - They've learned their lesson, so the Lord responds in favor

Ezra 5:6 This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.

Ezra 5:7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace.

Ezra 5:8 "Let it be known to the king that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.

Ezra 5:9 "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'

Ezra 5:10 "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.

Ezra 5:11 "Thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

Ezra 5:12 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.

Ezra 5:13 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a

decree to rebuild this house of God.

Ezra 5:14 ‘Also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.

Ezra 5:15 ‘He said to him, “Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place.”

Ezra 5:16 ‘Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction and it is not yet completed.’

Ezra 5:17 “Now if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king’s treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter.”

- This letter is remarkable, more for what it tells us about Israel than for what it told Darius
 - In his letter, the governor does an admirable job of telling the story in an even-handed and objective manner
 - This feature of the letter argues strongly that the governor was not an enemy of Israel, but merely an official trying to do his job
 - Curiously, he describes the God of Israel as the great God, suggesting that Persians still understood the power of the Lord from His past work in Israel, and perhaps, Egypt
 - First, he describes the building project
 - The temple is being built with great stones, beams and all done in great care
 - In other words, it’s going to be an impressive structure, and so the city is preparing to be a significant destination in Judah
 - This part of his letter is alluding to the potential threat of this city
 - Secondly, he describes his interrogation of the builders
 - He collected their names and asked their intentions
 - They answered they were replacing a religious structure that had been previously destroyed by the Babylonians
- Even more interesting, the Jews recount how they got to this situation
 - They acknowledge that the Lord Himself destroyed the earlier temple
 - The Lord used Nebuchadnezzar’s army to accomplish that task
 - And He did so as an outpouring of His wrath against Israel for their disobedience to His Word
 - When you see the people of Israel making these declarations to the Persian

governor, you clearly see repentance at work

- They are acknowledging that their past misery was a product of God's wrath
- And they acknowledge that God's wrath itself was a product of their sin
- And now, they are determined to please Him, even in the face of opposition and threats
- In short, they have come to fear the Lord more than they fear men
 - This is the turning point God desires and works to produce in our hearts
 - The place where we no longer have an excuse or defense for our mistakes
 - The place where we recognize that the Lord moved in our life to bring us into a state of discipline for our own good
 - And now, we are working to please Him, because we are unwilling to repeat that mistake
 - When you reach this point, you know that restoration has begun and good things are around the corner
- At the end of the letter, the governor asks the new king, Darius, to conduct a search of the archives of Babylon to determine if Cyrus did, in fact, issue this decree
 - Under Persian custom, decrees of prior kings had a force of law that bound even future kings
 - So if Cyrus had, in fact, permitted this rebuilding project, then even Darius couldn't stop it
 - So the search was necessary, regardless of whether Darius approved
 - So then we read what Darius did

Ezra 6:1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.

Ezra 6:2 In Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum —

Ezra 6:3 "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits;

Ezra 6:4 with three layers of huge stones and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.

Ezra 6:5 'Also let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

- Darius issues his own decree that a search take place in the archives

- Nothing is found in the Babylonian archives, where Cyrus was living at the time the exiles were allowed to leave
 - But a search was also conducted in the province of Media, present-day Iran
 - The capital city of that city, Ecbatana (present-day Hamedan), was the summer residence of the Persian kings
 - The city is a mile high and sits next to green, wooded mountains
 - It's cooler in the summer than the surrounding desert region
- In this place, a scroll was found with the instructions of King Cyrus
 - The opening word of the scroll is the word translated “memorandum” or “record”
 - The word indicates that what follows is an official record of the Persian government
 - And from what follows, we learn that God gave Cyrus specific instructions for the size of the new temple
- Based on the dimensions given in this memo, the second temple would be twice as high and three times as wide as Solomon's temple
 - It's unclear if the Jews actually followed these instructions
 - We might assume that if the old men wept at the sight of just the foundation, it must not have been even as big as Solomon's temple
 - Why would they weep at the sight of a much larger foundation?
 - Cyrus commissioned and funded an impressive building, yet the Jews didn't make the most of what God provided
 - It waited until Herod to build a temple that met the standards Cyrus set
- After hearing of Cyrus' edict, King Darius has no choice but to honor the prior king's orders and permit the temple construction to continue
 - So Darius issues his own edict to the governor

Ezra 6:6 “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there.

Ezra 6:7 “Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

Ezra 6:8 “Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.

Ezra 6:9 “Whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,

Ezra 6:10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray

for the life of the king and his sons.

Ezra 6:11 “And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.

Ezra 6:12 “May the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence!”

- Darius echoes Cyrus’ words with his own decree
 - The Jews are allowed to build their temple and the city
 - Moreover, Darius becomes a royal protector of the work
 - He orders that the Persian governor make every effort to ensure the work goes as planned
 - And then, the king declares that Persia will bear the entire cost of the project
 - Whatever is needed for the work and for the sacrifices at the temple will be provided
 - It’s interesting the degree of detail the king includes in his edict
 - He seems to know a great deal about what kind of sacrifices would be practiced in the temple
 - There is no indication that he received this knowledge from Cyrus’ edict
 - Could the Lord be revealing this to Darius, just as He revealed Himself to Cyrus?
 - Finally, Darius commands that anyone who opposes the Jews would be executed by impalement
 - Impaling was a common method of execution in the Persian Empire
 - It’s a forerunner to crucifixion
 - One end of a beam was sharpened and the other side planted in the ground
 - The sharp point was inserted under the chest of a person and pushed through his esophagus and lungs
 - He was then left to hang until he died
 - Darius liked to use it against his enemies
 - He had 3,000 rebels killed by impaling them
 - But in this case, you notice he goes a step further and declares that anyone who tries to stop the work will be defeated by the Lord Himself
 - Though Darius didn’t know the Lord as Savior, nevertheless, it seems clear the Lord impressed these truths upon his heart
- Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and Darius stand as pillars, testifying to the Lord’s capacity to work through the unbelieving world both in His wrath and in His mercy

- When God was angry with Israel, He called upon Nebuchadnezzar to chastise them
 - Nebuchadnezzar attacked because he wanted to destroy and conquer lands to increase his own glory
 - But he was acting as God intended, to enhance God's glory
 - The Lord let him loose on the people of Israel
 - They experience the power of a man and his army
 - He was an instrument of God's wrath
- His choice to use Nebuchadnezzar was a measure of grace
 - The Lord chose a blunt instrument, and dealt with Israel with a light touch
 - Imagine if God had executed the destruction Himself?
 - Nothing would have remained to be restored
- And then, when the time was right, the Lord used Cyrus to conquer Babylon and eventually free the Jews
 - Cyrus was the most powerful man on earth, and yet his will bent to the will of God
 - God directed Cyrus to act just as the Lord promised to do centuries earlier
 - And Cyrus even provided the wealth to get the project started
 - If God can do such wondrous things through a Gentile king, imagine what miracles He is prepared to work through The King of all the Earth?
 - It's the same argument Paul makes in Romans 11

Rom. 11:12 Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

- Finally, the Lord brought a third king to complete the work
 - Darius declares the work to be completed uninterrupted
 - He commands that the power of the realm support, defend and fund the work
 - And he threatens a horrible death to those who oppose the will of God
 - If the man working on God's behalf will exact such a terrible penalty for opposing the work of the Lord, how much more will the Lord's own penalty be for those who oppose Him?
- As a result of Darius' edict, work continues to completion

Ezra 6:13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.

Ezra 6:14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the

prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

Ezra 6:15 This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

Ezra 6:16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Ezra 6:17 They offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel.

Ezra 6:18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

Ezra 6:19 The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.

Ezra 6:20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.

Ezra 6:21 The sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.

Ezra 6:22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

- The Persian governor returns to the land with Darius' edict, and naturally, he carries out the orders of the king faithfully
 - The people persevere in rebuilding the temple
 - Ezra properly credits two works of Lord for causing the temple to be finished
 - First, the Lord sent His prophets, who stirred the people to begin building again
 - Secondly, they credit the work of the Lord through the kings to accomplish His purpose
 - The Lord is always in control of all things in Creation
 - That control is exercised first and foremost through His Word, which goes out to accomplish His purpose
 - And secondly, the Lord directs the steps of men
 - So that nothing in Creation is acting outside the Lord's purposes and plans
 - This is how He works all things to the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose
 - Ezra mentions three kings who contributed to the completion of the work

- The king Artaxerxes played no part in the rebuilding of the temple
- But he was the king who will protect the work of building the walls
- Once again, Ezra is summarizing events over the entire course of rebuilding the city
- Finally, the temple is finished and the proper temple services can begin again
 - To commemorate the opening of the temple, the nation conducts a massive sacrifice of animals at the new temple
 - Hundreds and hundreds of animals are sacrificed to thank the Lord and sanctify the temple
 - While this number may sound impressive, it pales in comparison to Solomon's celebration
 - For the first temple, He sacrificed 200 times as many animals
 - The Jews also offered a sin offering for the twelve tribes
 - Notice that only three of the tribes are represented in the Southern Kingdom
 - This suggests that though the ten tribes were largely scattered outside the land, the nation still thought of itself as a nation of twelve tribes
 - This dedication takes place in the month of Adar, which is roughly late February on our calendar
 - It's been about 21 years since the foundations were laid
 - And 70 years since the Jews lost their first temple
 - That first temple stood for exactly 400 years
 - This second temple will stand for about 593 years, until it will be destroyed by Titus in AD 70
 - A third temple will be built during Tribulation and will stand for seven years, until Christ's return
 - So the first, second and third temples stand for 1,000 years
 - And the fourth temple Christ occupies in the Kingdom will also stand for 1,000 years
- Then five weeks later, the Jews celebrate their Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread
 - They are joyful for the chance to obey the Law they have been given
 - But they are also thankful for the Lord's work through the Assyrian king
 - Darius was not Assyrian, of course, but his kingdom had inherited the Assyrian remnant
 - What was once Assyria, and then Babylon, has now become Persia
 - And the people clearly recognize that the Lord was working to turn these events in Israel's favor
 - So they thank the Lord for turning a power that was once their enemy into their

protector

- This chapter brings to an end the first step of the three steps of restoration
 - The people have shown repentance, a willingness to obey and persevere and a joy over the Lord's faithfulness
 - These steps are a far cry from the disobedient, rebellious people that received God's discipline
 - Before, they were far from Him; now, they are working with Him
 - But there are still many things missing from this relationship
 - First, the people are largely ignorant of what it means to follow and obey the Lord
 - They are reading the Word and doing their best to follow the Lord's instructions
 - But they still need instruction and guidance to ensure they remain obedient to the Lord
 - Secondly, they lack the leadership to drive them forward in a proper way
 - They have men leading in one capacity or another in these various construction projects
 - But who will lead them and guide them in accomplishing God's will?
 - They need leadership
- Next week, we begin the second phase of God's restoration in Israel
 - In Chapter 7, Ezra enters the picture
 - And he comes for the purpose of teaching the people

- Last week, we reached the end of the beginning of the restoration of Israel
 - The Lord is restoring the Nation of Israel after a period of discipline
 - God stirred the heart of the King of Persia to release the Jews from captivity
 - While simultaneously stirring the hearts of nearly 50,000 Jews to answer the call to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple
 - As that first band of refugees arrived in what was left of Jerusalem, they made a crude altar and began to worship God
 - God brought the Jews back to the heart of worship
 - No frills, no distractions
 - Just the people, with hearts to worship and thank God
 - With a total dependence on God
 - And as the people showed a true heart to worship, God was pleased
 - As we've moved along, we've noted that Israel's experiences can serve as a pattern for the way God restores His children in any age
 - For example, the first step the Lord brings us through following a period of rebellion, is to reignite a desire for worship
 - Before anything else, we are brought back to a place where we appreciate the Lord for Who He is and what He has done
 - This is the step we've watched God orchestrate through the first six chapters
- Today, our study moves into the second step of restoration for God's people
 - The people of Israel have rebuilt the temple in accordance with the Lord's request
 - They persevered, despite opposition, and eventually finished the building
 - The temple now stood again in Jerusalem, though it was far less impressive than the one that Solomon built
 - Nevertheless, it was there, and that physical house of worship stood as metaphor for the work God did in the hearts of His people
 - Rebuilding them and bringing them back as a testimony to His faithfulness
 - But what next? Where do these people go from here?
 - In God's plan of restoration, these people have returned to Him, and obeyed His instructions to rebuild the temple
 - So now comes the second step of restoration, beginning with Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem

Ezra 7:1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah,

Ezra 7:2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,

Ezra 7:3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,

Ezra 7:4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,

Ezra 7:5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.

Ezra 7:6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.

Ezra 7:8 He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

Ezra 7:9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.

- Chapter 7 of Ezra takes place 58 years after the close of Chapter 6
 - When we last studied, we noted we were in the time of Darius I
 - Darius ruled the Persian empire well, putting an end to rebellion and uniting the empire under his rule
 - He subdivided the kingdom into 20 divisions called “satrapies”
 - The leader of satrapy was called a “satrap”, a nobleman who acted like a little king in authority over his division
 - Darius was a man who built an extensive road system, a huge palace near the Red Sea
 - And all in all, he brought the kingdom great prosperity
 - Darius’ son, Xerxes, succeeded him in 486 BC
 - He is the king who married Esther
 - As we said at the beginning of this study, all the events of the Book of Esther takes place in the 58 years between Chapters 6 and 7
 - Under Xerxes, rebellions re-emerged, and eventually the Greeks destroyed a third of the Persian naval fleet, forcing Persian forces to withdraw from Europe
 - Eventually, Xerxes was assassinated
 - The younger son of Xerxes, Artaxerxes, assumes power in 464 BC
 - Artaxerxes killed his older brother to gain access to the throne
 - He couldn’t stop the decline of Persia as the Greeks, Egyptians and others in Asia Minor continued to rebel
 - One satrap remained firmly in Persia’s grasp...the province *Yehud* (that is, Judah)
- During the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra departed from Babylon and returned to Jerusalem to join the exiles in the city
 - Ezra introduces himself with his genealogy
 - Ezra is establishing his credibility for what follows in the story
 - And he has an impressive lineage

- His name is a shortened version of “Azariah”, which means “Yahweh helps”
 - He descended from the first priest, Aaron
 - So he is a priest and scribe
- A scribe was a communicator in every sense of the word
 - He wrote, copied, and taught the Word of God
 - Ezra is credited with reestablishing and redefining the role of the scribe in Israel after the exile
 - Before the exile, scribes served as messengers, military officers, and cabinet officials to the kings
 - But after Ezra’s day, scribes became uniquely associated with studying, writing and teaching God’s Word
- In v.6, Ezra declares that the Lord’s hand had been upon Ezra to bring an opportunity for him to join the exiles in Jerusalem
 - Ezra began to leave Babylon on the first of the first month, the month of Nisan
 - He didn’t actually leave Babylon until the 12th, we’ll learn near the end of Chapter 8
 - Which means that Ezra will depart Babylon around Passover
 - Consider how you would feel if you were captive for decades in a foreign land, and you were set free on July 4?
 - That’s probably how Jews felt whenever they read of Ezra’s departure from Babylon in mid-Nisan
 - And then, with God’s grace, Ezra completed the 900-mile journey in only four months
- Why does Ezra leave for Jerusalem so long after the earlier exiles had reached the city?
 - The next verse tells us

Ezra 7:10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

- Perhaps one of the more memorable and inspiring verses in the Old Testament
 - Ezra was a man who had set his heart to three things, three important priorities
 - Notice the verse begins with the word “for”, indicating that this is the reason for the departure
 - And also notice, the verse ends with the phrase “in Israel”
 - Ezra is determined to serve his people in his land
 - And what Ezra feels called to do is especially important, especially at this moment in Israel’s restoration
 - First, Ezra has set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, or the Torah

- The term “Law” is the word “Torah”, which is most specifically a reference to the books of Moses
- But often, the Jew would call the whole of the Old Testament the Torah or instruction of God
- So we should understand the meaning here to be that Ezra began to study all of the Word of God intently
- Secondly, Ezra committed to practicing it, to living it, to obeying it
 - It didn’t satisfy Ezra to simply know what the Word said
 - Many men pursue the knowledge of God
 - Some even choose to do it through His Word
 - But Ezra knew he had to live according to it as well
 - Otherwise, his teaching would be hypocritical and lack authority
 - Godliness is the product of knowing and practicing the Word of God
- Finally, Ezra taught what he knew to others in Israel, to become an instrument to encourage obedience in others
 - Israel has always had many teachers, but often, those teachers were false and self-serving
 - But Ezra was a man who combined sincere knowledge, a model of obedience and a heart to serve others with the truth
- Many have come to this verse and held it up as a model for how Christians are to place a priority on the Word of God, and rightly so
 - We can certainly learn something from the examples of godly men who make a priority of learning, practicing and teaching others the Word of God
 - We understand that this is a model for any mature Christian
 - And we acknowledge without a second thought that every Christian should aspire to this mindset
 - Oh, that every Christian could have these words recorded on their gravestone!
 - But when we make this application, we actually diminish Ezra’s example
 - Ezra isn’t like the ordinary Christian
 - And the vast majority of Christians are not even called to be like Ezra, much less expected to get there
- Take a second look at the start of that verse
 - Ezra set his heart on doing these things
 - To set your heart on something means to focus all your desire, energy and purpose on something
 - To place everything else second
 - To be consumed in the pursuit of something
 - While you or I may like to ski occasionally, Olympic skiers set their heart on

skiing

- While you or I might enjoy playing guitar, Carlos Santana set his heart on playing guitar
- While you and I might enjoy taking a mission trip to Africa, missionaries set their heart on it
- And while you might have a love for studying and living and even teaching God's Word, Ezra set his heart upon it
 - Very few in our day are following in Ezra's footsteps, and I believe only a few are called to do so
 - Everyone is called to study the Bible
 - Everyone is called to be obedient to the Word
 - Everyone is called to share (or witness) what they know with others
- But only a few, in my experience, are called to set these three things above virtually everything else in their lives
 - To make sacrifices for these things
 - To set everything else aside to do these things
 - To serve God's people at a level and with a dedication that puts them in different category
 - They are the Olympians of Bible study
 - And we all benefit from their dedication, just as Israel is about to benefit from Ezra's unique dedication
- So now we know why Ezra leaves, but what triggers the timing of his departure?
 - Once again, Ezra explains by relating the letter of a Persian king, Artaxerxes

Ezra 7:11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:

Ezra 7:12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now

Ezra 7:13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.

Ezra 7:14 "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,

Ezra 7:15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem,

Ezra 7:16 with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who

offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem;

Ezra 7:17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:18 “Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God.

Ezra 7:19 “Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:20 “The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.

Ezra 7:21 “I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,

Ezra 7:22 even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.

Ezra 7:23 “Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.

Ezra 7:24 “We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God.

Ezra 7:25 “You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.

Ezra 7:26 “Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment.”

- Once again, Ezra records a letter from the Persian king, and once again, this letter appears in Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible
 - The king’s order sounds similar to Darius’ order, and it is likely based on Darius’ earlier edict
 - He gives Ezra the right to leave for Israel and bring with him any other Jews who wish to return, along with priests
 - The group is to be well-funded out of the Persian treasury
 - And Ezra is to go with the power of the king to enforce his law in the land of Israel
 - In fact, Ezra is to be the king’s representative in the land, appointing judges to rule over the land
 - At first glance, we’re left wondering why the king has granted Ezra and Israel so much independence and wealth seemingly out of the blue

- Did the Lord stir this king's heart as He did earlier?
- Well, we certainly know the Lord is working through these circumstances, as He works through all things
- But there is no specific statement that God has directed Artaxerxes to make this move on Israel's behalf
- In fact, in this case, there is good political reason for Artaxerxes to make this move
 - In 460 BC, the armies of pre-Alexandrian Greece attacked Persia with 200 warships
 - They captured Egypt and the coasts of Palestine and Phoenicia from Persia in 459
 - These regions formed the coastlines of present-day Israel
 - The very next year, 458 BC, is the year Artaxerxes orders Ezra to go down into Israel with more Jews
- It makes sense that the Persian king would send a well-funded group of pro-Persian Jews into the land to shore up his southern flank against the Greeks
 - And this group would be led by a hand-picked leader with the backing of the king to rule over the land
 - Ezra is essentially the Judean satrap, or governor, for Persia
 - He is sent to rule Israel for Persia and hold the territory for the king
 - Furthermore, the king's strategy is to keep the Jewish inhabitants of Judea in line
 - They knew their family members still resided back in Persia
 - Which gave them added incentive to remain loyal to the Persian king
 - As it happened, a few years later, the Persians and Greeks signed a peace treaty to end hostilities for a time
 - The king authorized more utensils and wealth be given to Ezra for the priests' use in the temple
 - These may be additional artifacts not originally given, or new works of the Jews living in exile
 - Additionally, the king authorizes tax breaks and a support line
 - In fact, Ezra was granted a stipend to continue teaching the Law to the people
 - In the end, the king authorizes whatever will keep Israel content, strong and on his side
- Ezra's effect on Israel will be to organize a government, a system of justice and rule of law
 - First, Ezra is to appoint magistrates and judges to judge the people of Israel
 - But if there are to be judges, then the people must first know what is expected of them under the Law
 - So they need to be taught concerning the Word of God

- And so Ezra's second purpose is to establish religious education as a principle of Jewish society
 - He is to teach the people who are ignorant of God's laws
 - Where lawlessness exists, then Ezra is to bring punishment, according to the king
- Remember the way God brought discipline to the nation of Israel?
 - First He removed leadership, then the literary class (the teachers), then He eliminated the false worship
 - Now in the restoration step, we've seen God working in reverse order
 - He's restored worship both in their hearts and in the physical form of the temple
- And now, He is restoring His Word through instruction and justice and calls to obedience
 - There was a similar pattern in the Exodus
 - The people were moved out of captivity to a place of worship
 - And then, they were given a Law
 - Later, they were given judges to instruct and command them
 - Eventually, they were given leaders, kings
 - This is God's way of building up His people
- In this period of restoration, we see God re-establishing godly forms of learning
 - God is re-educating His people on the truth after centuries of false teaching
 - But with teaching comes accountability
 - Ezra comes with authority to hold the nation of Israel accountable, should they fail to hold to it
 - Consider how God will bring this same pattern to bear in your own life
 - We've already said that God will discipline His children so that we might be rebuilt in a new way, according to His desires
 - And that God's first priority in restoration is to produce a heart of worship within His people
 - We understand it's not just a weekly gathering with singing and study
 - It's a daily life of living in praise and service to God
 - Then comes step 2 of restoration, which is to re-engage our minds in a pursuit of God through His Word
 - In other words, our desire to worship God in Spirit must be matched with a commitment to know God in Truth
 - To know Him according to how He has revealed Himself
- If you want a simple picture of how God's call to worship is always followed by a command to know and follow His Word, consider your own salvation

- In coming to faith, a new Christian is typically prone to focus initially on praise and worship and proclamations
 - We're taken over by grace and the awareness of God's love
 - We praise His Name
 - We call out to the Lord in repentance and thanks
 - We begin to understand some details of our faith
 - The cross, the resurrection, the grace of God
 - And your heart responded in worship and thanks
- This phase of worship and praise was probably the full extent of your Christian experience for a time...until it was time to mature
 - Then, God began to place new expectations on your heart
 - Having come to faith, you were challenged to get into God's Word
 - Perhaps someone encouraged you
 - Or perhaps you discovered it by yourself
 - Either way, it was the Lord leading you into step two, because the times are short

Eph. 5:15 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,

Eph. 5:16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

Eph. 5:17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

- The proper and expected course of development for any Christian is a careful, disciplined study of God's Word
 - Combined with a diligence to obey that Word
 - And it's no different for the nation of Israel
 - God is bringing Ezra to educate them on His Word, and then gives him authority to ensure it is followed
 - A knowledge of God's truth, combined with a commitment to follow it, are essential to a godly life that pleases God
- We might ask what would have happened to Israel had God not sent Ezra to Israel?
 - They might have continued their pattern of worship for a time longer
 - But it couldn't have lasted
 - In time, their hearts would grow cold, their worship would become lifeless and self-serving
 - Their flesh would have led them away to serve other gods
 - And the progress would have been lost
 - This happens to Christians today

- Christians can be drawn away into experiences that emphasize emotion and style over knowledge and substance
- They were drawn by the love of God and responded in worship
- But they find themselves in settings where they're never challenged to move beyond the infant stage of Christianity
- As the writer of Hebrews warns, they are not pressing on to maturity

Heb. 5:11 Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Heb. 5:12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

Heb. 5:13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant.

Heb. 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

- The effect of remaining stuck in step one of restoration, or of Christian growth, is to become dull or lazy of hearing
- We don't progress to teach; we regress to infants
- And in that infantile condition, we lack the ability to discern good from evil
 - Leaving us vulnerable to false teaching and the schemes of the enemy
- When the meat of God's Word isn't a staple in our spiritual diet, we are subsisting on junk food, and eventually, it will catch up with us
 - When God sent Ezra to teach, the expectation was that the Nation of Israel would learn through his influence and grow stronger spiritually
 - And that's the lesson for us
 - God restores his children patiently, carefully
 - And once the heart has begun to worship, it's time to work on the mind
 - And so, God will send us teachers
 - This is further evidence of the Love of God, as Ezra notes

Ezra 7:27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem,

Ezra 7:28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

- The return of Israel to Jerusalem was the fulfillment of the Lord's promise through Jeremiah
 - Nevertheless, it was a miraculous event that Israel should be freed to return to their land
 - What's more, the fact that their own captors would not only permit the exodus, but finance it, was even more remarkable
 - It's certainly evidence of God's hand at work, and as such, it serves as proof that the Lord was at work to fulfill His promises to Israel
 - This isn't luck or chance
 - This is providence
 - So Ezra leads a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem
 - And that leads us into Chapter 8

Ezra 8:1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes:

Ezra 8:2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush;

Ezra 8:3 of the sons of Shecaniah who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males who were in the genealogical list;

Ezra 8:4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah and 200 males with him;

Ezra 8:5 of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him;

Ezra 8:6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him;

Ezra 8:7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him;

Ezra 8:8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him;

Ezra 8:9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him;

Ezra 8:10 and of the sons of Bani, Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him;

Ezra 8:11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him;

Ezra 8:12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan and 110 males with him;

Ezra 8:13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jeuel and Shemaiah, and 60 males with them;

Ezra 8:14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud, and 70 males with them.

- And just as with the first group of exiles that departed Persia, we see a list of names of those who accompanied Ezra on the trip back
 - The main thing we learn in studying this list of names is the similarity between these names and the ones in the original list, in Chapter 2
 - It would seem in many cases, these names are relatives of those who left in the first group of exiles 80 years earlier
 - These families are at least one or two generations later than the original exiles
 - So they probably have heard of the exploits of uncles and grandfathers and wish to join them
 - We might interpret this as proof of God visiting His blessing on successive generations, as He promised to do

Ezra 8:15 Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.

Ezra 8:16 So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers.

Ezra 8:17 I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia; and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God.

- The group eventually camps on the banks of a river called Ahava in a province of Babylon of the same name
 - At this point, Ezra realized he didn't have any Levite volunteers to accompany him for the work in Jerusalem
 - Since the Levites had the unique responsibility to maintain the temple and carry out certain aspects of the Law, they were crucial to Ezra's mission
 - So he stops here, while still in the region of Babylon, to recruit Levites to join his expedition
- Imagine the difficulty of that task
 - It's hard enough to round up volunteers to serve in the church nursery
 - Imagine recruiting men to leave their entire way of life to leave for a Jerusalem in shambles?
 - It reminds us of another time when fishermen were asked to leave their nets and follow an itinerant preacher
 - In other words, apart from a call of the Spirit, no one would likely respond
- In the end, 38 Levites and 220 temple servants respond and join the exiles headed to Jerusalem

Ezra 8:18 According to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men;

Ezra 8:19 and Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men;

Ezra 8:20 and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.

Ezra 8:22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.”

Ezra 8:23 So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.

- At this point, Ezra has the men he needs and is ready to undertake the rest of the trip
 - It's at this point, he proclaims a fast among all who are traveling to Jerusalem
 - The purpose of the fast is to humble themselves and seek the Lord's protection
 - This trip was indeed a dangerous journey
 - The kingdom was not a stable place and the territory they would travel through was not secure
 - Between the Greeks and the rebellions and general lawlessness, the Israelites had much reason to fear for their lives
 - Never mind the fact they would be in possession of a lifetime of riches in the form of gold and silver
 - Despite their fears, Ezra had apparently refrained from asking the king for protection for the trip
 - He says in v.22, that he was ashamed to request troops to protect him
 - When Ezra says he was ashamed, he means it felt shameful to make the request
 - It shamed him because earlier, Ezra had convinced the king to let him go by maintaining that the Lord had the power to hold Artaxerxes accountable should he refuse Ezra's request to leave
 - Imagine the irony if in one moment, Ezra declared that the God of creation commanded King Artaxerxes to let Israel go, or else
 - And the next moment, Ezra says “Oh by the way, I need some troops to make sure I get there.”
 - Ezra was sensible enough to recognize the contradiction, so he never made the request

- Similar to the way Moses left the land of Egypt vulnerable, yet under the Lord's protection
- But now that he has reached the brink of departing the Empire and facing the dangers of the road, Ezra realizes that he truly is dependent on the Lord for protection
 - He fasts and he entreats God on the matter
 - Verse 21 was the subject for the final sermon preached by John Robinson in the Netherlands before the Pilgrims sailed for the New World in 1620
 - Ezra is following the Bible's pattern for seeking God's will under circumstances where we can't move forward without God's reassurance
 - First, we subdue and restrain the flesh
 - If we are truly going to discern the Lord's will, we need to make sure we are not slaves to our flesh
 - We need to discipline the flesh, make it our slave, and by doing so, diminish its influence on our thinking and desires
 - I think of it this way...imagine you are a child lying in bed and you think you hear a faint noise outside the window
 - You begin listening intently to hear it again
 - But the sound of your own heart beating and your own breathing drowns out the faint sounds from outside
 - You hold your breath and try to lower your heart rate so you can more clearly detect any sound from the boogie man outside
 - In a way, that's what fasting achieves
 - It is a practice of self-discipline, designed to lower the influence of the flesh, so we can more clearly hear from God
 - It is a sacrifice done in love, as a sign of our desire to grow closer to God by hearing Him more clearly
 - That's Ezra's first step
- Next, Ezra sought God
 - Simply put, Ezra prayed, seeking God's will on whether there would be protection for the people
 - If God isn't going to protect the people, then there is little reason for the people to move forward
 - So seeking His will is paramount
 - That's why the Bible so often pairs fasting with prayer
 - Fasting is the process of turning down the noise
 - While prayer is a process of turning up the volume on God's voice
 - We do both in an earnest desire to seek the Lord and expect a reply, because we've made the sacrificial effort to seek His will

- Having received confidence of the Lord's protection, Ezra and the camp depart for Jerusalem

Ezra 8:24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers;

Ezra 8:25 and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes and all Israel present there had offered.

Ezra 8:26 Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and 100 gold talents,

Ezra 8:27 and 20 gold bowls worth 1,000 darics, and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold.

Ezra 8:28 Then I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.

Ezra 8:29 "Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD."

Ezra 8:30 So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

Ezra 8:31 Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.

Ezra 8:32 Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.

Ezra 8:33 On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui.

Ezra 8:34 Everything was numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time.

- Ezra comes up from his period of fasting and prayer with a plan to ensure everything of value is set aside for the Lord, even before they begin the journey
 - He assigns to trustworthy individuals responsibility for about 28 tons of precious cargo destined for the temple
 - The gold, silver and bronze utensils for the temple represented immense wealth
 - The Jews of Babylon had apparently become quite wealthy in the course of their lives
 - Remember, the Jews were not always slaves in Babylon
 - But they were forced to remain as citizens in the land until the kings released

them to return to Jerusalem

- As the company moves toward Jerusalem, we're told the Lord was faithful to protect them
 - Interestingly, we're not told what happened, but it seems that they experienced ambushes along the way
 - Nevertheless, the Lord did protect them
- After resting in the city three days, the people go to the house of the Lord to inventory all the materials brought down from Babylon
 - Among those who greet the party are the son of Jeshua
 - But notice, there is still no clear leader, like a king
 - Ezra will become a leader of sorts on account of his commission from the king and his teaching authority
 - But the nation still awaits a leader who will guide them into greater works of faith
- Meanwhile, Ezra will begin to make an immediate impact on the people as he comes to learn of their sin and the need for correction under the Law of God

George was 28 years old, single, and still living with his parents. One Sunday morning, George told his mother he wasn't going to church. "First," he said, "I'm tired. Second, the people there don't like me. And third, the sermons are dull."

But George's mother wouldn't take no for an answer. "George," she said, "you have to go. First, we always worship on Sunday. Second, it doesn't matter whether they like us or not. And third, you are the pastor!"

- In serving the Lord, we don't seek out positions of leadership; they seek us
 - Ezra has come to Israel to serve the people by teaching them to know and obey the Word of God
 - It's a role he embraced as the Lord revealed it to his heart
 - And he has made personal sacrifices to leave behind his way of life and return to Jerusalem
 - His return marked the second stage of God's purpose in restoring the people of Israel in their land
 - First, they re-learned to worship with true hearts
 - So now, it's time to worship through a life of obedience
 - Because worship can't just be a one-day per week activity
 - But as we saw last week, Ezra's commission to teach in Israel came with a demand to judge Israel
 - Ezra came, hoping to instruct the people into righteous living
 - But when that fails, Ezra has the authority to compel compliance with the Law of God
 - Disciplining disobedience is the hard part of leading God's people
 - Ezra may not have signed up for this duty, but nonetheless, he can't shrink back from it
 - He can't look the other way
 - He can't worry whether someone likes him

Ezra 9:1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.

Ezra 9:2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in

this unfaithfulness.”

Ezra 9:3 When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.

Ezra 9:4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

- Shortly after arriving, Ezra discovers a problem in the camp of Israel
 - Ezra says “now when these things have been completed...”
 - He is referring to the events at the close of Chapter 8
 - The traveling party has arrived in the city and presented their gifts to the temple authorities
 - They also delivered the king’s edict and they made an offering of bulls, rams, lambs, and goats
 - And now at the conclusion of those events, which may have taken a few days, Ezra hears the shocking news
 - The princes of Israel, which refers to the tribal leaders or elders, inform Ezra that the people of Israel had not kept themselves separate from the people of the land
 - The people were intermarrying with the various enemies of Israel, including Canaanites, Egyptians and Moabites
 - This behavior was a direct violation of the Law and Covenant the Lord established with Israel

Ex. 34:10 Then God said, “Behold, I am going to make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform miracles which have not been produced in all the earth nor among any of the nations; and all the people among whom you live will see the working of the LORD, for it is a fearful thing that I am going to perform with you.

Ex. 34:11 “Be sure to observe what I am commanding you this day: behold, I am going to drive out the Amorite before you, and the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite.

Ex. 34:12 “Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst.

Ex. 34:13 “But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim

Ex. 34:14 — for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God —

Ex. 34:15 otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice,

Ex. 34:16 and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods.

- The Lord specifically named the people of the land of Canaan
 - There are numerous sub-tribes of Canaanites
 - You can always distinguish the Canaanite peoples by the “ites” ending to their names
 - So in the list of Ezra 9, we find the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, and Amorites
 - These are all Canaanite peoples, which the Israelites were specifically prohibited from marrying
 - The Lord forbade the Israelites from marrying these peoples because they were a cursed people
 - The Canaanites descended from Canaan, the grandson of Noah
 - Canaan’s father was Ham, the son of Noah who showed disrespect for his father’s nakedness
 - Because of his behavior, Noah spoke prophetically in cursing Ham’s line through his grandson Canaan
 - A curse is a pronouncement by the Lord of eternal damnation
 - When someone is cursed, they will never be redeemed
 - And when a people are cursed, then they are all assured of destruction
 - Ham himself was spared being cursed because he was a believer, according to Scripture
 - The Lord will never curse His children, for we are saved for eternity
 - But the Lord cursed Ham’s line in Canaan
- Therefore, the Canaanites are a cursed people with no future in God’s providence
 - They were specifically called out for destruction so that the land Israel entered would have a worthy enemy due destruction by God’s decree
 - Furthermore, the Lord instructed Israel to not intermarry with these cursed people as they entered the land
 - Instead, the Lord called the nation to destroy the people in the land, as He intended by His curse
 - Israel was to be the instrument God used to do His will concerning the Canaanites
 - The Lord told Israel in advance that if they succumbed to the temptation to marry the Canaanites, they would be cut off as well
 - Furthermore, since the Canaanites were an ungodly and cursed people, they would lead Israel into idolatry if given the opportunity

- So the nation was told never to marry with the Canaanites
- Unfortunately for Israel, the people did intermarry in a previous time
 - That decision produced the outcome God foretold
 - Israel played the harlot and was carried away by idolatry
 - As a result, they were judged and scattered outside their land
- But now, a remnant has returned to Israel
 - The Lord has been gracious to provide for them in many ways
 - He has permitted them to rebuild a temple and re-establish their lives in the land
 - He has sent them wealth
 - And He provided a teacher, in Ezra, to teach and judge them
 - But now, in fewer than 100 years, the people have reverted to the very problem that led them to be scattered in the first place
 - They are intermarrying with Canaanites
 - Moreover, they have intermarried with two other enemies of Israel: Moabites and Egyptians
 - In these cases, the issue isn't a curse, but still, these people are historical enemies of Israel and likely to corrupt the people in the same way
 - At the end of the day, the issue is maintaining Israel's purity and holiness, which is lost when they disobey the Word and marry idolaters
 - And once again, the sin runs all the way up to the top of the chain
 - Even the princes and the priests had participated in the sin of intermarrying
 - It seems the people are quickly in danger of repeating the sins of the past
- Ezra reacts in the predicable way, especially for a man who devoted his life to knowing, teaching and obeying the Lord
 - He mourns in the traditional fashion
 - He tears his clothing, pulls hair from head and beard
 - And then he sits down appalled
 - The word "appalled" means "astonished and ruined"
 - We can imagine what Ezra was thinking, can't we?
 - Haven't they learned anything?
 - Was their worship sincere?
 - Were their hearts still true?
 - Or perhaps these people are no better than their forefathers
 - And what would God do next?
 - Will this test His patience to the point of breaking?

- What kind of punishment awaits the people for this sin, especially in light of what the Lord had done the first time?
- Ezra collapses, seemingly without a hope
- Or maybe this is exactly the reason the Lord sent Ezra down to Jerusalem in the first place?
- I'm reminded of another book of Scripture, one that is set in virtually the same point in history
 - Mordecai tells Esther, who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?
 - He was saying she must understand her circumstances as having been orchestrated by the Lord to ensure Israel's preservation
 - Likewise, Ezra has just arrived in the city for the preservation of Israel
 - So, we know the sins of the exiles had been ongoing well before Ezra was called to go to Jerusalem
 - Clearly, the Lord brought Ezra back here, knowing exactly what he would find when he arrived
 - So we can conclude that Ezra's intervention is the response the Lord planned for Israel's sin
 - Here's an important distinction between how the Lord works with the rebellious vs. the foolish
 - Israel's forefathers had been given the Law, and they chose to disobey
 - Then, the Lord brought them prophets to warn them and call them to repent, but they killed them
 - Then the Lord brought famines and allowed Israel's enemies to attack them, but they persisted in disobedience
 - So the Lord drove the rebels out of the Land
 - Just as the Lord drove Adam out of the Garden
 - But here, we have a remnant of Israel who remain largely ignorant of the Law and the penalties for disobedience
 - And they have yet to receive the counsel of teachers and prophets
 - And they are without judges and leaders to hold them accountable
 - They are led by their flesh into sin, but then aren't we all?
 - They certainly realized that intermarriage wasn't approved
 - Just the fact that some princes brought the matter to Ezra's attention, tells us that some knew better and wanted Ezra to intervene
 - But overall, the people were in a far different situation than their forefathers
 - Which led God to respond in a far different manner
- God sends Ezra to Israel as a response to their sin, so he can bring them out of it

- Of course, that doesn't mean there won't be a consequence for their sin
 - They must be taught the right thing to do
 - They must be called to repent
 - And they will be expected to act in keeping with repentance
- It begins as soon as the people take note of Ezra's response to the news
 - In v.4, the people tremble at the words of the God of Israel
 - Ezra recites the Lord's Word to the people, concerning the prohibition of marrying Canaanites
 - Perhaps the words of Exodus 34
 - And as the people hear the Word of the Lord and see a man of God react to their sin, they are convicted on the spot
 - And so they tremble in fear for what the Lord might do in response
- This response, recorded in v.4, is an important verse to understanding all that follows in this chapter and the next
 - The union of the Word of God and the admonishment of a godly man, combine to bring the fear of God to the people of Israel
 - By the Word of God's Law, the people came to understand their sin
 - As Paul says, where there is no Law, there is no knowledge of sin
 - And then, when they see a man of character and authority demonstrate horror at their behavior, they come to realize the seriousness of their actions
- In a nutshell, this is the role of a teacher in service to God's people
 - A teacher must bring the truth of God's Word to arm them with a knowledge of God's expectations
 - He explains the rules and corrects mistaken understandings
 - He reminds them when they forget and answers their questions along the way
 - Secondly, he sets an example through his own life, so that his words carry weight
 - In leading by example, he becomes a model to show the truth lived-out
 - Without a testimony of obedience, the teacher lacks the authority to command others
 - Finally, he exhorts and admonishes when necessary, to prompt repentance
 - This last step is entirely dependent on the first two working together
 - A teacher can't compel obedience to standards his students don't know
 - And he can't critique disobedience of standards he won't keep himself
 - Ezra's teaching of God's Word, and his principled display of disgust over their disobedience, leads to their conviction
- Equally important, their willingness to demonstrate a fear of God in response is itself a huge departure from their forefathers

- While their forefathers mocked and persecuted the prophets sent to correct them, these people show immediate remorse at their actions
 - God delights to see His people acting righteously in the first place
 - It is better that we obey, rather than we sacrifice for sin
 - But should we sin, He calls us to repentance so that we may be restored in fellowship
 - Teachers are a means for God to bring us to the place of repentance
- In fact, the process of restoration presupposed relapses and missteps, which is why the Lord provides teachers in the second step of restoration
 - He is fully aware that our hearts are prone to wander
 - He knows we need correction from time to time
 - And He sends us those who can instruct and guide us as we continue to strengthen in our walk with Him
- The thing to remember is to make full use of the teachers the Lord sends our way, especially as we may emerge from a period of discipline in our lives
 - Instruction involves, by definition, a reshaping of our understanding
 - And so, if we are to benefit by God's instruction, we must remain prepared to change our thinking, even on issues we assume are settled fact
 - Surely, someone in Israel must have argued with the leaders that it was permissible to marry these foreigners
 - But now, they are learning the truth from Ezra, and the question is how would they respond to learning they were wrong?
 - If they were to benefit from the Lord's grace, they must be ready for conviction and respond with repentance
- But in the case of Israel, the outcome is far from certain
 - They are presently married to foreign wives and some have children
 - They feel sorrow, but that doesn't address the real issue
 - There's no indication the Lord is prepared to forgive
 - So Ezra takes another step on behalf of the people

Ezra 9:5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

Ezra 9:6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.

Ezra 9:7 "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder

and to open shame, as it is this day.

Ezra 9:8 “But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

Ezra 9:9 “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:10 “Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments,

Ezra 9:11 which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.

Ezra 9:12 ‘So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’

Ezra 9:13 “After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this,

Ezra 9:14 shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?

Ezra 9:15 “O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this.”

- As the teacher and a leader of sorts, Ezra offers an intercessory prayer for the people
 - Remember, Ezra is also a priest, so he is especially qualified to make this intercession
 - He rises at about 3:00 PM, the time of the evening offering
 - He’s in a disheveled state, clothes torn and head and face bleeding from torn hair
 - And he stretches out his arms to his sides in prayer
 - Does anything about Ezra’s situation strike a bell in your memory?
 - Mid-afternoon sacrifice?
 - Torn clothing?
 - Bleeding body?
 - Arms outstretched?

- Interceding for the sins of Israel?
- Ezra's actions are a clear picture of the Christ to come
 - Jesus was crucified to win forgiveness for the sins of the people
 - He was a sacrifice at 3:00 PM
 - His clothes were torn
 - His body bloodied
 - And His arms outstretched
- Ezra is the priest, the prophet and the leader of Israel in this moment
 - And in these similarities, he pictures the work of the Lord in a future day
 - Another time when Israel was astray and needed someone to save them from their sins
- Ezra's prayer is one of the great intercessory prayers in the Old Testament
 - In a heartfelt and impassioned voice, Ezra calls upon the Lord to overlook Israel's sin
 - He begins his prayer by associating himself with the people and their sin
 - Ezra did nothing wrong
 - Nevertheless, he throws himself in with their lot
 - He's recognizing an essential characteristic of the Covenant between Israel and the Lord
 - It bound everyone in the nation to meet the same standard, or suffer a common penalty
 - In other words, Ezra was going to suffer in whatever response the Lord took under the terms of the Covenant
 - Just as righteous Daniel suffered when Israel sinned in a previous generation
- Then, Ezra recounts the mercy and patience of the Lord through past generations
 - Israel had sinned in this very way before, Ezra says
 - And in that earlier moment, the Lord brought the people to discipline
 - And following that, the Lord showed the people mercy and restored them to the land
 - In v.8, Ezra says for a brief moment, the Lord has shown grace to Israel
 - It resulted in a remnant escaping their captors
 - Ezra is emphasizing that all this mercy could evaporate in an instant
 - Israel had been taking the Lord's mercy and grace for granted when they sinned
 - The Lord kept their enemies at bay
 - He brought them wealth from the kings of Persia
 - But all the while, the people were sinning against the Lord, daring Him to

remove His favor from them

- Then, in v.10, Ezra offers a group confession and appeal for mercy
 - He asks “what can we say?”
 - We have no excuse or defense
 - We have disobeyed your commandments
 - If you only permitted a remnant to remain following the last time we sinned, how can we expect you to allow even one to remain now?
 - And still, we throw ourselves on your mercy
- Here’s a wonderful model for confessional prayer
 - Admit your guilt and shame for having disobeyed the Word
 - Recognize that your sin was a matter of disobedience, not ignorance nor circumstances
 - Acknowledge the Lord’s right and willingness to punish sin
 - Confess your sin of testing the Lord’s patience and kindness
 - And seek His mercy, conditioned on a sincere desire to repent
- So in the final chapter, we find the people’s response

Ezra 10:1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.

Ezra 10:2 Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.

Ezra 10:3 “So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

Ezra 10:4 “Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”

- Even as Ezra is interceding for the people, the large assembly recognizes they must act in accordance with repentance
 - They are weeping bitterly at the recognition of their mistake and at the prospect of what they must do to avoid the Lord’s wrath
 - Two men step forward to speak on behalf of the people
 - They admit their unfaithfulness to the Lord in marrying foreign women
 - And then, they spontaneously stir the people to act courageously to bring themselves back into compliance with the Covenant

- Specifically, they know they must put away the foreign wives and children
 - The term “put away” is a term that always carries the same meaning, wherever it appears in the Bible
 - It means to permanently separate or divorce
 - It’s the same word used in Deuteronomy, in conjunction with a certificate of divorce
 - This is the act that Abraham took to separate from Hagar and Ishmael
 - And in this case, it’s for a similar purpose: to put an end to an illicit relationship that stood in the way of obedience to the Lord
- These two men make this proposal to Ezra and the people, so now it remains for Ezra to decide how to respond

Ezra 10:5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.

Ezra 10:6 Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

Ezra 10:7 They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem,

Ezra 10:8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

Ezra 10:9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain.

- Ezra rises, and as a priest, he leads all the priests in accepting this proposal
 - They take an oath on the spot that any who have foreign wives and children would put them away
 - Next, Ezra calls an assembly of all Israel in Jerusalem so that the rest of the nation could address this sin as well
 - In fact, if a man refuses to come in response to the call, he will be automatically excluded from the commonwealth of Israel and forfeit his possessions
 - So one way or another, the nation was going to be purged of their foreign wives and disobedient families
 - Next, Ezra begins a period of fasting and prayer in the home of a fellow priest
 - He is seeking the Lord’s wisdom and mercy in the midst of this process
 - Meanwhile, the people are assembling in a mere three days

- They assemble and are trembling out of fear over the matter and because of the heavy rain
- The mention of the rain is an interesting detail
 - Falling rain presents a consistent picture in Scripture
 - It's used in parables to represent the grace of God
 - And in the Old Testament, the Lord withheld rain when His people were in rebellion
 - But he brought beneficial rain when fellowship was restored
 - The detail of heavy rain serves as a commentary on God's point of view on the proceedings
- Then Ezra addressed the assembly

Ezra 10:10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel.

Ezra 10:11 “Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.”

Ezra 10:12 Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, “That’s right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do.

Ezra 10:13 “But there are many people; it is the rainy season and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter.

Ezra 10:14 “Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us.”

Ezra 10:15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.

- Ezra’s command to the people of Israel is simple, yet bold
 - He says they have sinned and they must confess that sin and do His will
 - In other words, the only solution to their problem is to admit they are wrong and then do the right thing
 - No wonder Ezra has been in fasting and prayer for the past three days
 - He must have been terrified at what the nation might do in response to his call
 - It could have divided the nation, led to further rebellion
 - Prophets have been killed for less
 - But Ezra demonstrates the courage to call for the people to do God’s will
 - Anytime we call for God’s people to do God’s will, we’re risking alienating

ourselves from them

- Inevitably, some people will respond favorably, while others will reject us in response to the conviction God's Word creates
- If we can't stomach the rejection that comes from preaching God's Word, then we need to be in a different line of work
- God's people can't repent from sin while persisting in the sinful relationships that got them into trouble in the first place
 - This was especially true, given the reason for the prohibition in the first place
 - God's instructions were for their good, to protect them from idolatry
 - Had they been allowed to continue in these relationships, it meant the end of Israel
 - There was simply no compromise possible
 - Remember Jesus' own commands

Luke 18:29 And He said to them, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,

Luke 18:30 who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life.”

Matt. 10:34 “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Matt. 10:35 “For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW;

Matt. 10:36 and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.

Matt. 10:37 “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

- In light of the eternal ramifications, allegiance to the Lord must take precedence over any earthly, fleshly relationships
 - While we can be sure these men loved their wives and their children
 - Their relationships were the consequence of disobedience to the Lord and they had to be put to an end
- Ezra's courage is rewarded in v.12, when God's people respond in unison that they must act according to the Word of the Lord
 - There is no more pleasing response for any teacher of God's Word than the people of God responding in this way
 - However, the people do seek one minor concession

- Since it's the rainy season (late Autumn) and since there are many families impacted by this decision, they needed time to carry it out
- In other words, the process of separating and sending the family away required some time to carry out
 - And given the cold and rainy season, travel would be more difficult
 - Also, it would be inhumane to send wives and children packing in cold, wet weather
 - So they are asking for an orderly process, with appointments before judges and time to set their affairs in order
- The process was one of legal divorce
 - We know the Lord declares elsewhere that He hates divorce
 - And New Testament Scripture forbids it
 - So, we can safely assume the Lord was not pleased to watch these divorces taking place
 - Nevertheless, it was Israel's sin that prompted the need for this outcome
 - These marriages were the sinful consequence of an earlier sin
 - In a sense, we can say that Israel had already made this sin necessary when they chose to enter into illegitimate marriages in the first place
 - Furthermore, these marriages couldn't stand without doing even greater damage to Israel's future and God's plan for His people
 - Those marriages were illegitimate
 - And as long as they persisted, the sin would continue
 - Only separation would end the sin once and for all
 - There were a few dissenters, as we might expect, under these circumstances
 - But their objections didn't overrule the majority
 - So the separations were ordered and carried out obediently

Ezra 10:16 But the exiles did so. And Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of fathers' households for each of their father's households, all of them by name. So they convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter.

Ezra 10:17 They finished investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first day of the first month.

Ezra 10:18 Among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib and Gedaliah.

Ezra 10:19 They pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense.

Ezra 10:20 Of the sons of Immer there were Hanani and Zebadiah;

Ezra 10:21 and of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel and Uziah;

Ezra 10:22 and of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad and Elasah.

Ezra 10:23 Of Levites there were Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah and Eliezer.

Ezra 10:24 Of the singers there was Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem and Uri.

Ezra 10:25 Of Israel, of the sons of Parosh there were Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah and Benaiah;

Ezra 10:26 and of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth and Elijah;

Ezra 10:27 and of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad and Aziza;

Ezra 10:28 and of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai and Athlai;

Ezra 10:29 and of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal and Jeremoth;

Ezra 10:30 and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui and Manasseh;

Ezra 10:31 and of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon,

Ezra 10:32 Benjamin, Malluch and Shemariah;

Ezra 10:33 of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh and Shimei;

Ezra 10:34 of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel,

Ezra 10:35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi,

Ezra 10:36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,

Ezra 10:37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu,

Ezra 10:38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei,

Ezra 10:39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah,

Ezra 10:40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,

Ezra 10:41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah,

Ezra 10:42 Shallum, Amariah and Joseph.

Ezra 10:43 Of the sons of Nebo there were Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel and Benaiah.

Ezra 10:44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

- Obviously, these separations were difficult, reinforcing the truth that sin has consequences
 - These families suffered as a result of the fathers' sins

- The wives suffered, the children suffered
- They endured the pain of separation
- But it's not unexpected that putting away sin would be painful
- In the end, this moment is a reminder that a people restored without a leader is a people ripe to fall again
 - They needed to be restored in worship
 - They needed to be reminded of the truth of God's Word
 - And now, they need a leader who can build their character and perseverance in the face of temptation to sin
- Step three of restoration is about to begin...