

READ The BIBLE Together



EZRA & NEHEMIAH

19th April – 18th July 2015

**SHALOM CHURCH, SINGAPORE
(Upholding the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith)**

Day 1

Biblical History from Abraham to Ezra

After Creation, Fall, Flood and Tower of Babel, **GENESIS 12** begins with the call of *Abraham*, followed by the story of *Isaac*, *Jacob* and finally *Joseph*. **GENESIS** ends with the family of *Jacob (Israel)* in Egypt and that was where we find them when we turn the page to **EXODUS**.

After some good years, *Israel* soon became slaves in Egypt, and in God's compassionate mercy, He sent Moses to rescue them, lead them to cross the Red Sea and finally to arrive at Mount Sinai. At Sinai, God gave Israel His Laws and constituted them into a nation. They were supposed to proceed to Canaan, but in a tragic act of rebellion and foolish fear, they refused to enter Canaan. So God punished them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years till all that generation had died.

After the 40 years of wilderness wandering, *Joshua* replaced *Moses* as their leader and led the Israelites across the Jordan and conquered Canaan. After the death of *Joshua*, a period of chaos and lawlessness ensued (normally called the period of the Judges) and this ended with Saul as king of Israel. After Saul, David and later his son Solomon became king. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was split into two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

All the kings of Israel were wicked, and Israel went into exile in Assyria in 722 BC. Judah in the south continued to exist for another 100 more years. In 605 B.C., the Babylonians attacked Judah and carried away the first group of exiles, among them were *Daniel* and his friends. Another exile took place in 597 B.C. and this time, *Ezekiel* was among the exiles. Judah was finally conquered in 586 B.C. with both the temple destroyed and the walls of Jerusalem broken down.

2 CHRONICLES 36:11-21 provide us with a glimpse into the last days of Judah. Take some time to read it, and then fill in the blanks below:

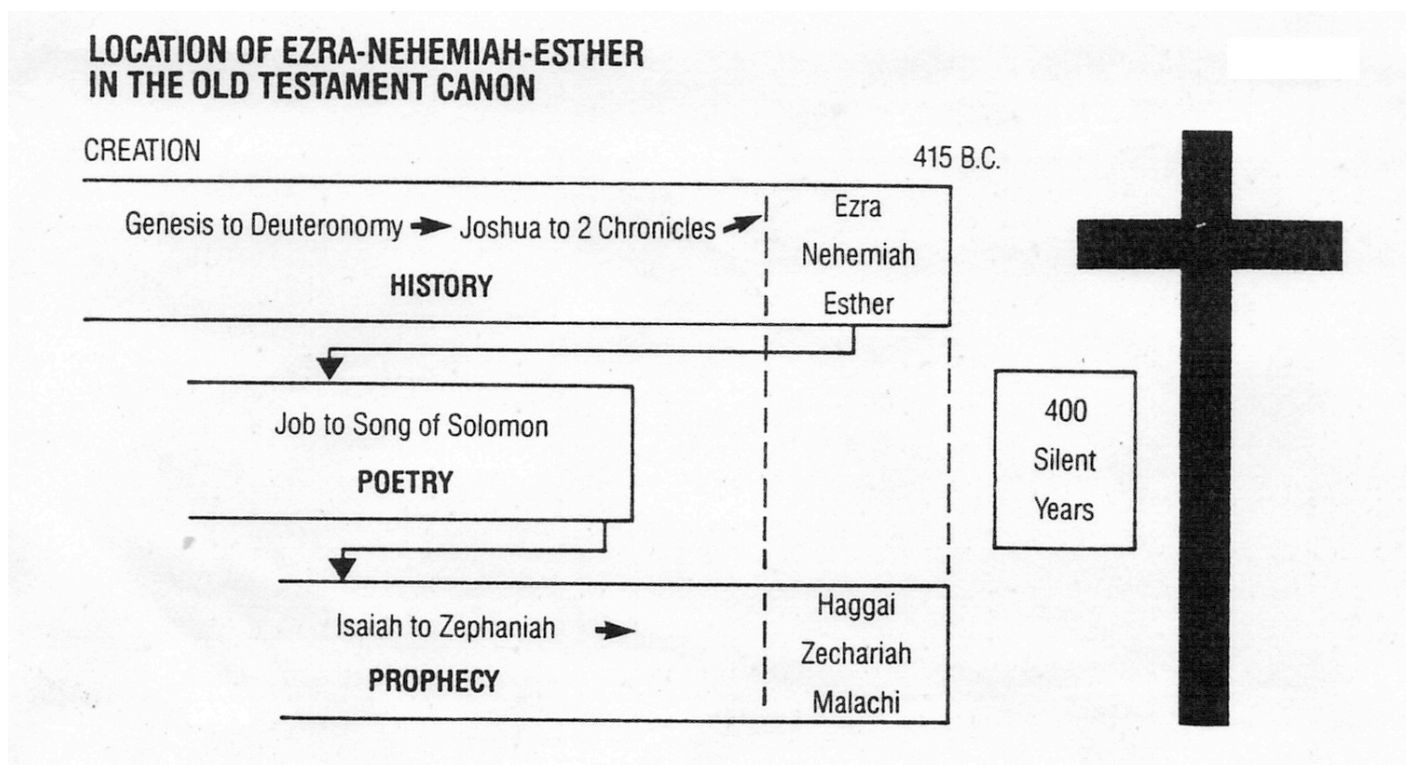
PassageSummarize in your own words**Verses 11-14****Verses 15-16****Verses 17-21**

After 70 years of exile in Babylon, the next big event in redemptive history is about to happen. This is the story of **EZRA**.

1. (a) What lessons have you learnt from **2 CHRONICLES 36:11-21**?

 - (b) How has what you've learnt change your life?
-
2. Are you able to rehearse the Biblical story from *Abraham* to *Ezra*, using your own words? Attempt to do this with your RTBT group members.

A Pictorial Representation



Introduction to the book of EZRA

According to **DANIEL 1:1-4**, some Jews had been deported to Babylon in 605 B.C. In 597 B.C. , more were exiled, among them *Ezekiel*. Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., and many more of the Jews were carried to Babylon. It was a hard time for the Jews to maintain their faith. Both *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* had explained that these calamities came upon them as punishment for disobedience and because they had not returned to God. Their messages called the people to repentance and warned them of God's severe judgment by death and exile. But they also prophesied a message of hope, the promise of a return to their own land. God used these prophecies to keep Israel's faith alive during these years.

Although many Jews in Babylon were comfortably settled and had little desire to return to Judah, others prayed for and desired to return. They longed to worship God together and offer sacrifices in their own temple according to their own law and traditions. So the first chapters of **EZRA** tell the story of a second exodus, one of the most important events in Jewish history and thus in the history of God's redemptive plan.

EZRA opens with the liberation decree issued by *Cyrus* in 538 B.C. The last event of the book occurred in the first month of the eighth year of *King Artaxerxes* — 457 B.C. (**EZRA 10:7**). Thus **EZRA** covers a period of eighty-one years.

EZRA has two distinct divisions. **Chapters 1-6** focus on events surrounding the first return of the Jews to their homeland. This is sometimes called the *Zerubbabel* return since this prince of the house of David was the leader. The first project, after they returned, was the reconstruction of the altar. Then immediately materials were gathered for rebuilding the temple. The foundations were laid. Opposition, however, arose. The work ceased for about sixteen years. Then due to the preaching of two prophets, *Haggai* and *Zechariah*, the work resumed. In the sixth year of *Darius* (516–515 B.C.), the temple project was completed.

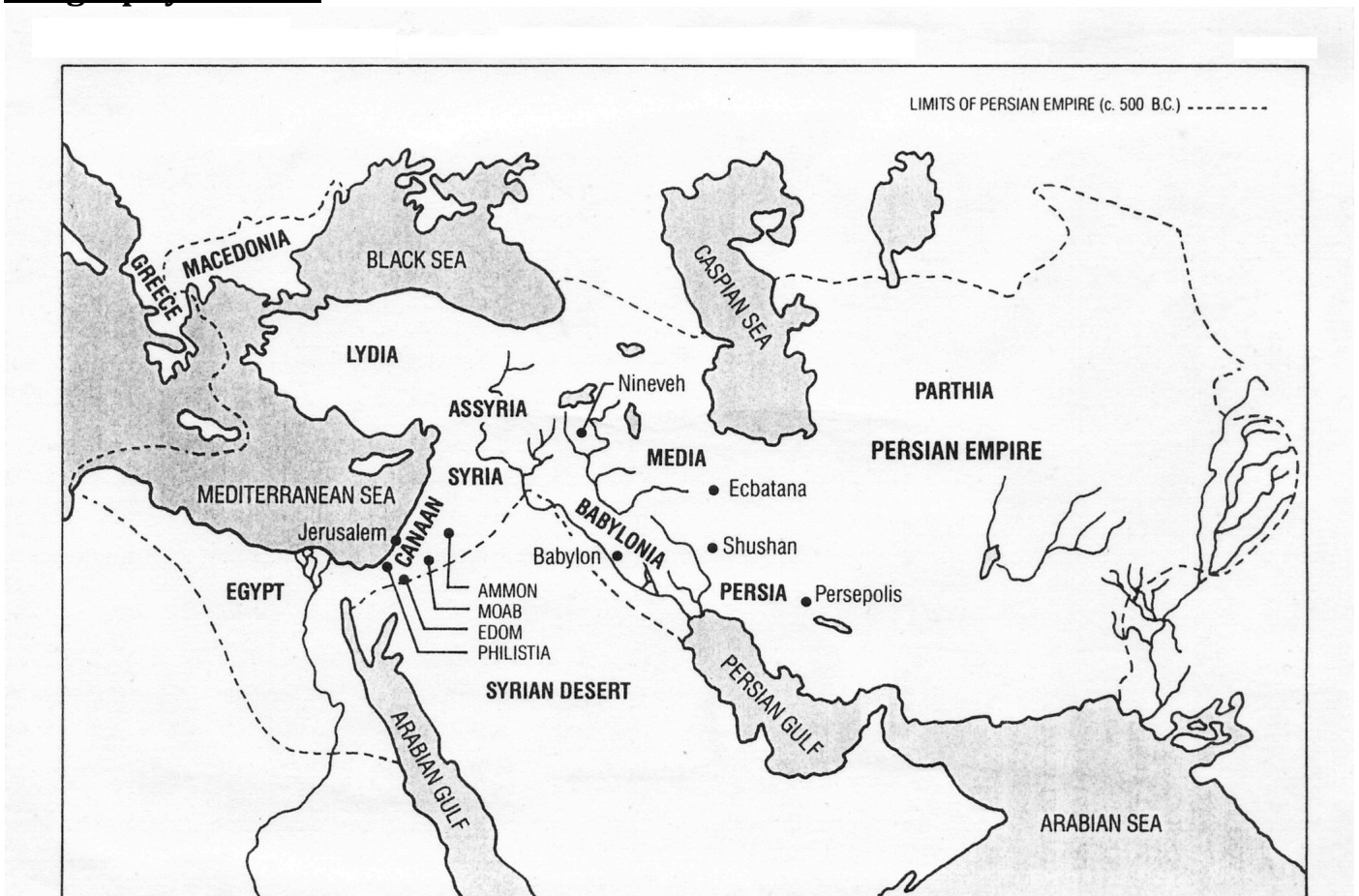
A hiatus of fifty-eight years ensued between **EZRA 6** and **EZRA 7**. Nothing was known of the Jews in Judea during this period except that local enemies wrote yet another accusation to the Persian authorities concerning the activities of the Jews (**EZRA 4:6**). An effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem failed (**EZRA 4:8–23**). Chronologically, the events of **ESTHER** in the Persian capital of Shushan took place during this period.

The second half of **EZRA** (**chapters 7–10**) focuses on only one year. In the year 458 B.C., *Ezra* led a group of Jews back to the homeland. He was empowered to enforce the law of God in the region beyond the river. *Ezra* found that many of the Jews had intermarried with pagans. Before the year was over *Ezra* had addressed this issue decisively.

To help us in our reading of **EZRA**, it would also be helpful to keep the Persian kings timeline in view:

Cyrus II	559-530 B.C.
Cambyes II	529-522 B.C.
Darius I	522-486 B.C.
Xerxes I (a.k.a. "Ahasuerus" in Bible)	485-465 B.C.
Artaxerxes I	464-424 B.C.

Geography of EZRA



After reading **Introduction to the book of EZRA**, write down any questions or comments you might have below:

Discuss your questions or comments with your RTBT group members or your elders.

Note: We are not sure if “*all those who were around them*” refer to Jews or Jews and other people.

4. Besides the decree in **verses 2-4**, what else did Cyrus do? (**Verses 7-8**)
5. List down the articles that Sheshbazzar took back with him to Judah (**verses 9-10**):
- 30 _____
 - 1000 _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - 1000 _____

Why do you think the author of **EZRA** took pains to list these articles here?

6. Take some time to read the following comments by Matthew Henry on **EZRA 1**:
- (A) The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus. Note, The hearts of kings are in the hand of the Lord, and, like the rivulets of water, he turneth them which way soever he will. It is said of Cyrus that he knew not God, nor how to serve him; but God knew him, and how to serve himself by him, Isa. 45:4 . God governs the world by his influence on the spirits of men, and, whatever good is done at any time, it is God that stirs up the spirit to do it, puts thoughts into the mind, gives to the understanding to form a right judgment, and directs the will which way he pleases. Whatever good offices therefore are, at any time, done for the church of God, he must have the glory of them.
- (B) We are here told, how Cyrus’s proclamation succeeded with others.
- (i) He having given leave to the Jews to go up to Jerusalem, many of them went up accordingly, v. 5. The leaders herein were the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, eminent and experienced men, from

whom it might justly be expected that, as they were above their brethren in dignity, so they should go before them in duty.

- (ii) The priests and Levites were (as became them) with the first that set their faces again towards Zion. If any good work is to be done, let ministers lead in it.
- (iii) Those that accompanied them were such as God had inclined to go up. The same God that had raised up the spirit of Cyrus to proclaim this liberty raised up their spirits to take the benefit of it; for it was done, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts, Zec. 4:6 .

The temptation perhaps was strong to some of them to stay in Babylon. They had convenient settlements there, had contracted an agreeable acquaintance with the neighbors, and were ready to say, It is good to be here. The discouragements of their return were many and great, the journey long, their wives and children unfit for traveling, their own land was to them a strange land, the road to it an unknown road. Go up to Jerusalem! And what should they do there? It was all in ruins, and in the midst of enemies to whom they would be an easy prey.

Many were wrought upon by these considerations to stay in Babylon, at least not to go with the first. But there were some that got over these difficulties, that ventured to break the ice, and feared not the lion in the way, the lion in the streets; and they were those whose spirits God raised. He, by his Spirit and grace, filled them with a generous ambition of liberty, a gracious affection to their own land, and a desire of the free and public exercise of their religion.

Had God left them to themselves, and to the counsels of flesh and blood, they would have staid in Babylon; but he put it into their hearts to set their faces Zionward, and, as strangers, to ask the way thither (Jer. 50:5); for they, being a new generation, went out like their father Abraham from this land of the Chaldees, not knowing whither they went, Heb. 11:8. Note, Whatever good we do, it is owing purely to the grace of God, and he raises up our spirits to the doing of it, works in us both to will and to do. Our spirits naturally incline to this earth and to the things of it. If they move upwards, in any good affections or good actions, it is God that raises them.

After reading the above comments by Matthew Henry, what thoughts and comments do you have?

Day 6 & 7 Ponder **EZRA 1:1-11** more deeply . . .

1. Imagine yourself to be a Jew living in exile in Babylon then. What would be your response to Cyrus' decree? Will you go to Judah or stay on in Babylon? Explain your answer.
2. Imagine that you were one of the Jews who joined Zerubbabel and returned to Judah. How would you view your fellow Jews who remained in Babylon? State your feelings and thoughts below:
3. Imagine yourself to be a Jew living then, and you have witnessed the events recorded in **EZRA 1**. How would these events be an encouragement to you?
4. How can **EZRA 1** be applied to us living in 21st century Singapore and be an encouragement to us?
5. How can we see the gospel in **EZRA 1**?

From **LUKE 24:27**, we know that the Old Testament Scriptures tell us about Jesus Christ ultimately. So until and unless we can see Christ/the gospel in our Old Testament passage, we have not read our Bible correctly.

How can we see the gospel in this chapter? Consider how Matthew Henry would see Christ in **EZRA 1**:

“The call and offer of the gospel are like Cyrus’s proclamation. Deliverance is preached to the captives, Lu. 4:18 . Those that are bound under the unrighteous dominion of sin, and bound over to the righteous judgment of God, may be made free by Jesus Christ. Whoever will, by repentance and faith, return to God, his duty to God, his happiness in God, Jesus Christ has opened the way for him, and let him go up out of the slavery of sin into the glorious liberty of the children of God. The offer is general to all. Christ makes it, in pursuance of the grant which the Father has made him of all power both in heaven and in earth (a much greater dominion than that given to Cyrus, v. 2) and of the charge given him to build God a house, to set him up a

church in the world, a kingdom among men. Many that hear this joyful sound choose to sit still in Babylon, are in love with their sins and will not venture upon the difficulties of a holy life; but some there are that break through the discouragements, and resolve to build the house of God, to make heaven of their religion, whatever it cost them, and they are those whose spirit God has raised above the world and the flesh and whom he has made willing in the day of his power, Ps. 110:3 . Thus will the heavenly Canaan be replenished, though many perish in Babylon; and the gospel-offer will not be made in vain."

Another way Matthew Henry would move from **EZRA 1** to the Gospel, is done in this way:

"As the tabernacle was made of the spoils of Egypt, and the first temple built by the labors of the strangers, so the second by the contributions of the Chaldeans, all intimating the admission of the Gentiles into the church in due time. God can, where he pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to his people, and make those to strengthen their hands that have weakened them."

Week 2

[26th April - 2nd May 2015]

Day 1 & 2 Read **EZRA 2:1-70**

EZRA 2 lists the people who responded to Cyrus' decree and returned to Judah (**verse 1**).

1. **Verse 2** lists the Jewish leaders who returned. How many of them are there?

Note that *Jeshua* is the *Joshua* of **HAGGAI 1:1** while *Nehemiah* is not the *Nehemiah* of **NEHEMIAH** and *Mordecai* is not the *Mordecai* of **ESTHER**.

2. **Verses 3-35** list the common people who returned (by families – **verses 3-20** and by locations – **verses 21-35**). What was the total number of the Jews (common people) who returned?

3. **Verses 36-58** list those returnees who served in the temple

(a) The priests are from the tribe of Levi and the descendants of Aaron. How many priests returned to Judah?

- (b) Those who are from the tribe of Levi but not descendants of Aaron are known as Levites. How many Levites (**verses 40-42**) returned?
- (c) What is the ratio of priests to Levites?
- (d) *“All the Nethinim and the children of Solomon’s servants were three hundred and ninety-two,”* says **verse 58**.

Who are the Nethinim?

The term translated “temple servants” (nĕtĭnĭm) literally means “the given” or “the dedicated ones.” Ezra 8:20 says they were given to assist the Levites to perform the more mundane temple duties . . . The many foreign names in the present list confirm that the group probably consisted of individuals of non-Israelite descent. According to Num 31:30–47, some war captives were given to serve the Levites.

Jewish rabbinic tradition identified the temple servants with the Gibeonites whom Joshua had assigned to be “woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the LORD” (Josh 9:27). The group may well have included descendants of the Gibeonites along with others. Along with the priests and Levites, they were exempt from taxes (Ezra 7:24). They were also among those who signed the agreement in Neh 10 (v. 28).

The New American Commentary
Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther
 Breneman, M.

Solomon’s servants – Who are they?

This group is closely related to the temple servants, since both groups are included here in one total. There were only 392 persons for all these forty-five families or clans, or an average of fewer than nine per clan. Many scholars think Solomon’s servants were from the native population whom Solomon used for work on the temple. The names “Hassophereth” (“the scribe”) and “Pokereth-Hazzebaim” (“the gazelle keeper”) could be names of guilds and suggest that these servants, while similar to the temple servants, were involved in more secular tasks. Ezra 7:24, however, appears to call the same group “other workers at this house of God.”

The New American Commentary
Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther
 Breneman, M.

Concerning the Nethinim, hear Ralph Davis:

“It seemed to be a chance occurrence — an ancestor had been captured in war years ago, had been brought into Israel, and had done menial grunt work around the first temple. But that placed them in the very sanctuary of truth, where they might see the gospel of atonement via the sacrifices, or hear priestly instruction. Somewhere in the passing of generations the truth took hold so that these “foreigners” came to be numbered among God’s people in Ezra 2.

Don’t some of you know something of this sort of thing? A disappointment, a change of fortune in your life or in your family, a circumstance radically and sadly altered — yet it proved to be the launching pad for the gospel coming into your life. That’s the providence that leads us.”

4. **Verses 59-63** list the people and priests who cannot prove their descent. Why do you think the author of **EZRA** took the time to list these people here?

5. (a) What did some of the returning Jews do, upon arriving in Judah, and how did they do it? (**Verses 68-69**)

- (b) If you were one of those who returned, would you do as this group of people did? Explain your answer.

Day 3 Review **EZRA 2**

Re-read **EZRA 2** (if needed) and review your observations/answers in Day 1 & 2 of Week 2.

1. What do you think is the message of **EZRA 2**? (In other words, ask: Why do you think this chapter is in the Bible? If **EZRA 2** is missing, how would it affect the message of the Bible?)

2. How can we see the gospel in **EZRA 2**?

Again, we must be reminded that the Old Testament Scriptures ultimately tell us about Jesus Christ. So until and unless we can see Christ/the gospel in our Old Testament passage, we have not read our Bible correctly.

How can we see the gospel in this chapter? Here's how Matthew Henry would see Christ in **EZRA 2**:

“That an account was kept in writing of the families that came up out of captivity, and the numbers of each family. This was done for their honour, as part of their recompence for their faith and courage, their confidence in God and their affection to their own land, and to stir up others to follow their good example. Those that honour God he will thus honour.

The names of all those Israelites indeed that accept the offer of deliverance by Christ shall be found, to their honour, in a more sacred record than this, even in the Lamb's book of life. The account that was kept of the families that came up from the captivity was intended also for the benefit of posterity, that they might know from whom they descended and to whom they were allied.”

In other words, Matthew Henry sees from **EZRA 2** a foreshadow pointing to how God knows each member of His kingdom (**II TIMOTHY 2:19**).

Another way to see the gospel in **EZRA 2** is to realize the huge emphasis put on each Israelite (priest or people) to be able to trace their physical lineage to Abraham. Until and unless they can, they are not fully accepted as belonging to God's people. In the New Testament, the emphasis is not on physical lineage but faith! Those who are of faith are children of Abraham. Hence, to be recognized as a member of God's kingdom, one must show evidence of real faith in Christ. Just like those who couldn't prove their physical lineage were put on a “on-hold” list, so the church likewise may not proceed to baptize and receive into membership those who are unable to demonstrate a credible profession of their faith.

What would amount to a credible profession of faith?

Let us allow the Second London Confession of Faith Chapter 26 Paragraph 1 to help us here: *All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.*

In short, a credible profession of faith consists of:

- (i) belief in the gospel, and not holding to any errors that overthrows the gospel
- (ii) life that matches the gospel, and not having any pattern of conduct that denies the gospel.

3. Write down one lesson you have learnt from **EZRA 2**:

Day 4 Read **EZRA 3**

After reading **EZRA 3**, write down your *first* impressions of this chapter, and any questions you might have:

Day 5 Read **EZRA 3:1-7**

1. **3:1** informs us that the event of this chapter took place in the seventh month. What are the special events that would normally take place in the seventh month? (**LEVITICUS 23:23-44**)

2. What did the people build and why did they build it (**verse 2**)?

“Let us learn hence, to do what we can in the worship of God when we cannot do what we would. They could not immediately have a temple, but they would not be without an altar.” (Matthew Henry)

3. (a) What were the first offerings presented? (**Verse 3**)

- (b) What is the name of the feast that they kept in **verse 4**? Describe this feast and explain its purpose.

- (c) It is said that they kept the feast “*as it is written*” (**verse 4**). What does this mean?

(d) What other service did they offer (**verses 5, 6**)?

4. Who took the lead in these events?

5. What, do you think, is the main lesson from this passage of Scripture?

Some Notes from Matthew Henry

Though they had newly come to their cities, and had their hands full of business there, to provide necessaries for themselves and their families, which might have excused them from attending on God's altar till the hurry was a little over, as many foolishly put off their coming to the communion till they are settled in the world, yet such was their zeal for religion, now that they had newly come from under correction for their irreligion, that they left all their business in the country, to attend God's altar; and (which is strange) in this pious zeal they were all of a mind, they came as one man. Let worldly business be postponed to the business of religion and it will prosper the better.

Day 6 Read **EZRA 3:7-13**

1. Review **EZRA 3:1-6** and summarize the main things that the children of Israel did:

- They built _____ (**verses 2-3**)
- They offered _____ (**verses 4-6**)
- They kept _____ (**verse 4**)

2. Besides the things mentioned in Q1, they also did something else (**verse 7**).

(a) What is it?

(b) Why do you think they did this?

- (c) What do you think is the significance?
3. **Verses 8-13** narrate the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.
- (a) When did they begin work on the temple?
- (b) Who were involved in the building of the temple? (**Verse 8**)
- (c) Who were the supervisors in this building project? (**Verse 8b-9**) Why were they involved?
4. After the foundation was laid, they paused to praise and thank God.
- (a) What did the priests and Levites do in this worship service? (**Verses 10-11**)
- (b) What did the people do in this worship service? (**Verse 11**)
- (c) Ponder what principles can we learn from **verses 10-11** concerning how we should worship God? (Bear in mind where this event is placed in redemptive history)
5. **Verses 12-13** outline two different responses from the people on that day.
- (a) What were they, and what do you think is the reason for the different responses?
-

-
- (b) Consider the response of the older people on that day. Do you think it is right and natural, sinful, or _____? Discuss.

Day 7 Some Devotional Notes from Ralph Dale Davis

Pay special attention to **verses 10-11** (especially **verse 11**) and then look at the promise of **Jeremiah 33:7,10-11**:

"I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first..." Thus says the Lord, "Yet again there will be heard in this place, of which you say, 'It is a waste, without man and without beast,' that is, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say, 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, For the Lord is good, For His lovingkindness is everlasting'; and of those who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first," says the Lord.

Think what it must have been like when the Babylonians finally creamed Jerusalem and the temple (the situation Jeremiah's word presupposes). In that heap of rubble and smoking destruction, who would ever have thought that this day (of **Ezra 3:10-11**) would come? Do you see why the lyrics of **Ezra 3:11** are so important? They show that Jeremiah 33:11 was beginning to be fulfilled! Against all human likelihood, God's people saw God's goodness again! It's very simple in one way, but sometimes you need to hear that word in your despair and sadness: you will yet see the goodness of God again. That is, by the way, typical of God (cf. **Ps. 30:4-5; Joel 2:25** RSV).

Initially, rebuilding the temple here might not strike you as terribly exciting. But you should look at it differently once you realize that from the perspective of the people in Ezra's day, it looked like the temple had no chance of being rebuilt. Christians are no strangers to these things, for our lives are as sin-racked as Israel's and Judah's.

Consider the man who has engaged in pre-marital sex, brought shame on Christ, and decimated his own life. Yet, he is brought to repentance, is restored, and later is able to establish a home with a loving spouse. Or think of a daughter in her twenties who seems to have left behind and forgotten all the claims of Christ. She is long in the far country, and then the Father brings her back. Then there are relationships so marred that it looks like they will never be healed, and yet... Yahweh can make you sing again. This is the restoration you can expect.

1. After reading the Devotional Notes above, write down any thoughts and reflections you might have:

2. (a) What lessons have you learnt from **EZRA 3**?

- (b) How has what you've learnt change your life?

3. How can we see the gospel in **EZRA 3**?

Week 3

[3rd May – 9th May 2015]

Day 1 Read **EZRA 4:1-24**

Recall the Persian king's timeline:

Cyrus II	559-530 B.C.
Cambyses II	529-522 B.C.
Darius I	522-486 B.C.
Xerxes I (a.k.a. "Ahasuerus" in Bible)	485-465 B.C.
Artaxerxes I	464-424 B.C.

1. Read **EZRA 4** with the Persian king's timeline above. Which king was mentioned and where (verse) was he mentioned?

King

Verse(s)

2. Realize that the structure of **EZRA 4** is as follows:

V1-5 The current opposition to the temple rebuilding

V6-23 The unceasing opposition to the Jews

V24 The result of the current opposition

Verses 1-5 report opposition in the time of *Cyrus* and into the beginning of the reign of *Darius* (522 B.C.). Then in **verses 6-23** we read an ongoing description of opposition to Judah down through the years. But in **verse 24** we are wrenched back to the early reign of *Darius*.

If we read **EZRA 4** in chronological order, we would read **verses 1-5**, then **verse 24**, followed by **verses 6-23**. What has happened? Well, it is as though the writer, who is relating the earlier days after the return from exile, began telling us about the opposition Judah experienced right from the first, and then decided that he would simply go on and pile up all the opposition that Judah had experienced through the years. So, he simply kept checking off this accusation, that opposition, down through Artaxerxes' reign. But at verse 24, it is as if he says, "*Now we need to go back to the time-period that my record here in Ezra 4 really concerns; let's get back to about 520 B.C., early in Darius' reign, when the work on the temple stopped because Judah seemed under so much duress.*"

3. Write down your first impressions of **EZRA 4** after you've read it, and also any questions you might have:
4. If **EZRA 4** is missing, how would it affect the message of the Bible?

Day 2 Read **EZRA 4:1-5, 24**

1. What did the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin offer to do? (**Verses 1-2**)
2. What was the response of Zerubbabel and Jeshua? (**Verse 3**)

3. Being rejected by the Jews, what did these people do? (**Verses 4-5**)

4. Do you think Zerubbabel and Jesuhua were right to reject the offer of help from these people? Elaborate.

5. Read **verse 24** and relate it to the Persian king's timeline. How long (at least) did the work of rebuilding the temple stop?

Note #1: The mention of '*Esarhaddon king of Assyria*' suggests that these '*adversaries of Judah and Benjamin*' were the people in **2 KINGS 17:24-41** or their descendants. Their religion was a mixture of the Jewish faith and other religions.

Note #2: The Hebrew text stresses the ongoing, wearing effect of this opposition in that it uses three participles in **EZRA 4:4-5a** (indicating continuing action): they kept on making their hands drop; kept frightening them; kept hiring counselors against them. The intimidation must have occurred on site (**EZRA 4:4**), with the hired professionals working the halls of power back in Persia (**EZRA 4:5**). Apparently all these proved effective; they wanted to stop Judah from building (**EZRA 4:4**), and they did (**EZRA 4:24**).

Day 3 & 4 Read **EZRA 4:6-23**

Recall the structure of **EZRA 4**. Remember that these 18 verses constitute a sort of big bracket piece, breaking up the chronology of **EZRA 4**. The aim of the writer is to overwhelm his readers with a sense of unceasing opposition that Judah has faced through these years.

1. **Verse 6** contains an accusation against Judah in the reign of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes). Who was Ahasuerus? (**ESTHER 1:1, 2:16-17**)

2. **Verse 7** contains an accusation against Judah in the reign of Artaxerxes. Who was Artaxerxes? (**NEHEMIAH 2:1-4**)

3. **Verses 8-16** contain yet another accusation made against Judah during the reign of Artaxerxes. In your own words, summarize the charges they laid against the Jews:

4. What was the response of Artaxerxes? (**Verses 17-22**)

5. What happened as a result of the king's response? (**Verse 23**)

Note: Regarding these 18 verses, Derek Kidner says: *“Without this foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we would not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters (5 and 6) nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages which Ezra would set himself to stamp out (chaps. 7-10).*

Review **EZRA 4**. Write down one lesson you've learnt from this chapter:

Day 5 Read **EZRA 5:1 – 6:22**

After reading **EZRA 5 & 6**, write down any questions or comments you have below:

If **EZRA 5 & 6** are missing, how would it affect the message of the Bible?

William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote the hymn *God moves in a mysterious way* (Hymns of Faith 42). The third stanza reads:

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

This third stanza can be aptly used to summarize the experience of the Jews here in **EZRA 5-6**.

Take time to look up this hymn in our Hymns of Faith, and learn to sing it. As you sing it, meditate on the words.

Day 6 Read **EZRA 5:1-2, cf. 4:24**

1. (a) Who was the Persian king at that time?
(b) What year was it? Around _____ B.C.
(c) What did the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem do? Why?

2. Two prophets were mentioned in **EZRA 5:1**.
(a) What were their names?
(b) Take time to look up their prophecy in the Old Testament Scriptures.

3. **HAGGAI 1:1-15** can be considered as an expanded account of **EZRA 5:1-2**. Take time to read **HAGGAI 1**. What extra information does this chapter give concerning how the Jews re-started their temple-rebuilding project?

4. In his commentary on these two verses, Matthew Henry made these three notes:

(1.) The temple of God among men is to be built by prophecy, not by secular force (that often hinders it, but seldom furthers it), but by *the word of God*. As the *weapons of our warfare*, so the instruments of our building, *are not carnal*, but *spiritual*, and they are the ministers of the gospel that are the master-builders.

(2.) It is the business of God's prophets to stir up God's people to that which is good, and to help them in it, to strengthen their hands, and, by suitable considerations fetched from the word of God, to quicken them to their duty and encourage them in it.

(3.) It is a sign that God has mercy in store for a people when He raises up prophets among them to be their helpers in the way and work of God, their guides, overseers, and rulers.

Day 7 Read **EZRA 5:3-17**

1. As soon as the Jews obeyed God and restarted the temple-rebuilding project, something else happened.

(a) What was it? (**Verses 3-5**)

(b) Imagine that you were one of the Jews then. Would you be surprised by this “something else” that happened? Should you be surprised?

(c) What lesson can you learn from this?

2. To the questioning (and opposition) of Tattenai and Shethar-Boznai, the Jews did two things:

▪ They gave an answer – **verse 4**

▪ They continued the work – **verse 5**

(a) Who enabled the Jews to do so?

(b) What lesson can you learn from this?

3. **Verses 6-17** is the letter that Tattenai and Shethar-Boznai sent to the king in their attempt to oppose the Jews. In it, they quoted the reply of the Jews to their questioning (**verses 11-16**, see also **verses 3-4**).

What did the Jews say?

▪ The temple was originally _____

- The temple was destroyed because _____
- The temple rebuilt by _____
at the command of _____ but it remained unfinished.

Since the Jews mentioned Cyrus, Tattenai and Shethar-Boznai petitioned Darius to investigate their claims (**verse 17**). How will the whole matter turn out? **EZRA 6** will provide us with the answer.

Week 4

[10th – 16th May 2015]

Day 1 & 2 Read **EZRA 6:1-22**

1. In his reply, what did Darius say in his decree?

- He confirmed that the claims of the Jews were true (**verses 3-5**).
- He _____ (**verses 6-7**).
- He _____ (**verses 8-10**).
- He _____ (**verses 11-12**).

How was this an encouragement to the Jews?

Devotional Notes from Davis

This is what we have come to call “vintage Yahweh.” God usually does not exercise a bare providence. There is so often a richness, a “who would have guessed?” aspect to his ways (cf. the argument in **Isa. 49:5-6** around the phrase “too light a thing”). This occasion in **Ezra 6** is very much like that in **Exodus 2:1-10** where Moses’ mother not only got her own baby back, but raised him under state protection, and with a salary for taking care of her own kid to boot! God’s ways seem to be marked with such generosity, such promiscuity. He delights to go far beyond all that we ask or think (**Eph. 3:20**). So too here: they received far more than mere permission to build. Providence strikes again!

2. (a) When was the rebuilding of the temple completed? (**Verse 15**)

(b) According to **verses 13-14**, the successful completion of the temple rebuilding project can be attributed to a number of factors. What are they?

-
-
-
-

(c) Take time to read the following two paragraphs from our Second London Confession of Faith Chapter 5:

Para 1: God the good Creator of all things, in his infinite power and wisdom doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, to the end for the which they were created, according unto his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will; to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.

Para 2: Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without his providence; yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

(d) According to the Confession, the ultimate cause of all events is God. This is borne out by our text: *And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel . . . (verse 14)*.

The Confession also mentioned 'second causes'. What are the second causes in our text?

3. What did the Jews do after the temple was rebuilt?

Verses 16-18:

Verse 19-22:

This is precisely the reason why the temple was rebuilt – so that God’s people may worship Him in the way He prescribed.

4. Write down three lessons you have learnt from **EZRA 5-6** below:

5. How can we see the gospel from **EZRA 5-6**?

Day 3 Review of **EZRA 1-6** and Introduction of **EZRA 7-10**

EZRA has two distinct divisions. **Chapters 1-6** focus on events surrounding the first return of the Jews to their homeland. This is sometimes called the *Zerubbabel* return since this prince of the house of David was the leader. The first project, after they returned, was the reconstruction of the altar. Immediately, materials were gathered for rebuilding the temple. Foundations were laid. Opposition, however, arose. The work ceased for about sixteen years. Then due to the preaching of two prophets, *Haggai* and *Zechariah*, the work resumed. In the sixth year of *Darius* (516–515 B.C.) the temple project was completed. *This was the focus of our study from Week 1-3. We could say that these six chapters are focused on restored worship of God according to His word.*

A hiatus of fifty-eight years exists between **EZRA 6** and **EZRA 7**. Nothing was known of the Jews in Judea during this period except that local enemies wrote yet another accusation to the Persian authorities concerning the activities of the Jews (**EZRA 4:6**). An effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem failed (**EZRA 4:8–23**). Chronologically, the events of **ESTHER** in the Persian capital of Shushan took place during this period.

The second half of **EZRA** (**chapters 7–10**) focuses on only one year. In the year 458 B.C. *Ezra* led a group of Jews back to the homeland. He was empowered to enforce the law of God in the region beyond the river. *Ezra* found that many of the Jews had intermarried with pagans. Before the year was over *Ezra* addressed this issue decisively. *This shall be the focus of our study from Week 4 onwards. We shall see that these four chapters are focused on reformed life of God’s people according to His word.*

As we begin our study of the second half of **EZRA**, we shall find the repeated reference to “*the hand of God*”. Look them up and copy them out in the space provided below:

7:6 ~

7:9 ~

7:28 ~

8:18 ~

8:22 ~

8:31 ~

What do you think is the meaning of this phrase?

Day 4 **Read EZRA 7 & 8**

1. Take time to read **EZRA 7 & 8**, and then write down your first impression of these 2 chapters:
2. Draft a structural outline for **EZRA 7 & 8**. Please try 😊
3. What do you think is the message of these two chapters?

Day 5 & 6 **Read EZRA 7:1-10**

1. In these 10 verses, we are given a brief introduction to *Ezra* the man.
 - (a) *Ezra* was a descendant of Aaron T/F
 - (b) *Ezra* was a priest T/F
 - (c) *Ezra* was from the tribe of Levi T/F

- (d) *Ezra* was a scribe of the Law T/F
- (e) *Ezra* led a group of Jewish politicians to return to Jerusalem T/F
- (f) *Ezra* took 4 months to travel back to Jerusalem T/F

Note #1: In **verse 6**, the word used to describe *Ezra* as a skilled scribe means he is quick and speedy (as opposed to cumbersome).

Notes #2: According to **verse 6**, the Law of Moses is a divine gift (“*had given*”) and apparently complete. Here also we meet the first “*hand of Yahweh*” clause. So in this verse we have an assembly of realities: a completed revelation (torah of Moses) and an ongoing providence (hand of Yahweh), this latter operating in conjunction with human ingenuity/initiative (“*all his request*”).

2. What do you think is the relationship between *Ezra* and the Persian king Artaxerxes?

3. Two things happened from **verses 6-9** because the hand of the LORD was upon *Ezra*. What were they?
 -
 -

4. Verse 10 says, “*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.*”
 - (a) List the three things said of *Ezra* in this verse:

 - (b) Do you think the order of the three things matters, or it is just random? Elaborate.

- (c) The verse begins with “*For Ezra . . .*”, suggesting that what is said in **verse 10** is the reason for what was stated in **verse 9**.

Hear Ralph Davis: “*Note the initial ki (for, because) in the Hebrew text. It explains why the good hand of his God was upon him (Ezra 7:9). God prospered the venture because of Ezra’s purpose. This then is a warning against sloth and carelessness, and a sloppy view of grace.*”

What lesson can you learn from this?

Note: The language of **verse 10** speaks of a ministry that is focused in its objective (*set his heart*) and intense in its labor (*to seek*). It is both anchored and vigorous, not content with a little ministerial piddling. Ezra purposes a total ministry: seek, do, teach; the cognitive, the experiential, and the didactic. Note that there are both academic and existential qualifications before teaching. The process, ever repeated, is: concentration (*seek*), consistency (*do*), communication (*teach*).

Ralph Davis

Day 7 Read **EZRA 7:11-28**

1. **Verses 12-26** contain the letter that *Artaxerxes* gave to *Ezra*.

- (a) What was the mission of *Ezra* in going to Jerusalem, according to the decree of *Artaxerxes*, the Persian king?

Verse 14:

Verses 15-17:

Verses 25-26:

- (b) From where would *Ezra* obtain the finances to fund this mission? (**Verses 20-22**)

(c) What privileges would *Ezra* and his co-workers enjoy? (**Verse 24**)

(d) What was the stated official reason for sending *Ezra* on his mission? (**Verse 23b**)

2. **Verses 27-28** record *Ezra's* response to *Artaxerxes* decree. What were the two things that *Ezra* did?

-
-

Note #1: *Artaxerxes'* decree permitted any Jew living in Babylon then to go with *Ezra* to Jerusalem. In NKJV, it is "*who volunteer to go up to Jerusalem, may go . . .*" However, *Ezra* did not just leave it to the Jews to decide. Instead, from **verse 28**, we see that *Ezra* was pro-active: ***Lgathered*** *leading men of Israel to go up with me.*

Note #2: "*If God gives us his hand, we are bold and cheerful; if he withdraws it, we are weak as water. Whatever service we are enabled to do for God and our generation, God must have all the glory of it. Strength for it is derived from him, and therefore the praise of it must be given to him.*"

Matthew Henry

Week 5

[17th – 23rd May 2015]

Day 1 Read **EZRA 8:1-14**

These 14 verses list the Jews who joined *Ezra* in the second return. Two things stand out:

[1] Those who returned to Jerusalem under *Ezra* tended to be from those families that had come back in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel. Note the following listing as it compares the list in **EZRA 8** to that in **EZRA 2**:

8:3	<i>Parosh</i>	2:3
8:4	<i>Pahath-moab</i>	2:6
8:6	<i>Adin</i>	2:15
8:7	<i>Elam</i>	2:7
8:8	<i>Shephatiah</i>	2:4

8:11	<i>Bebai</i>	2:11
8:12	<i>Azgad</i>	2:12
8:13	<i>Adonikam</i>	2:13
8:14	<i>Bigvai</i>	2:14

Write down your thoughts as you observe the list above.

[2] **Verse 2c** states: *of the sons of David, Hattush.*

This is mentioned in a matter-of-fact manner, without any fanfare:

*“Does this not somewhat parallel **Matthew 1:12-16**, where, during the exilic and post-exilic years, when the sky is often grey and the prospect drab, it is nevertheless clear that the Davidic covenant line keeps going and going? None of them reigns, yet the line continues until it surfaces in Jesus, the son of Mary. So here in **Ezra 8**, does not the mere mention of Hattush, a son of David, hint that the Davidic covenant, though presently eclipsed, is not dead and buried?”*

Ralph Davis

A precious gleanings: God is still at work, although everything seems mundane and nothing exciting! God is present, not just in the extraordinary, but also in the ordinary!

Day 2 Read **EZRA 8:15-20**

1. As *Ezra* began his journey back to Jerusalem, he discovered a problem.

(a) What was it?

(b) Was this a serious or minor problem? Elaborate.

2. (a) If you were *Ezra*, how would you deal with this problem?

(b) How did *Ezra* deal with this problem?

(c) **Verses 18-20** inform us of the happy resolution to this problem. To whom/what did *Ezra* attribute this?

3. What lessons can we learn from this incident?

Day 3 Read **EZRA 8:21-23**

Ezra called upon the people who were with him to join him to fast and pray to God for a safe journey back to Jerusalem.

1. What possible dangers could they face on their journey?

2. Why didn't *Ezra* ask the king for an escort, since *Artaxerxes* was so favorable towards him?

3. Do you think *Ezra's* decision not to ask for an escort is an act of faith or folly? Elaborate.

4. What would you do if you were *Ezra*? Elaborate.

Day 4 Read **EZRA 8:24-30**

1. In your own words, explain what *Ezra* was doing in these 7 verses.

2. Why do you think *Ezra* did this?

3. Can you think of any lessons, arising out of this incident, for the Christian Church today?

Day 5 Read **EZRA 8:31-36**

Verse 31 says, “*Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem . . .*” According to **8:1**, Ezra started his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month. Hence, he and his team had actually stayed at this Ahava river for more than 10 days!

During this period of delay, the people completed three tasks. Can you recall what were they?

-
-
-

Looking back, we have to say that this delay was much needed!

1. “*So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days.*” (**Verse 32**)

Ezra did not give us any details concerning the journey. Instead, he highlighted an important aspect of the journey. What was it? (**Verse 31**)

2. What do you think is the message of **verses 33-34**?
3. Before they delivered the king’s order to the relevant local authorities, what did these returnees do? (**Verse 35**)

Day 6 & 7 Review **EZRA 7 & 8**

1. Write down the most important lesson you have learnt from **EZRA 7 & 8**?

2. How has that lesson changed your life?

3. How can we see the gospel from **EZRA 7-8**?

Week 6

[24th – 30th May 2015]

Day 1 Read **EZRA 9:1 - 10:44**

1. After reading **EZRA 9 & 10**, write down any questions or comments you have below:

2. Why do you think this chapter is in the Bible? In other words, if **EZRA 9 & 10** are missing, how would it affect the message of the Bible?

Day 2 Read **EZRA 9:1-4**

Putting **EZRA 7:9; 8:31** and **10:9** together, it appears that *Ezra* was in Jerusalem for about four and a half months when the problem of **EZRA 9:1-2** was brought to his attention

1. (a) What problem did the leaders bring to *Ezra's* attention?

(b) Who were the chief offenders?

(c) In your view, how serious is this problem? (Give more than just a one word answer, and quote Scripture references if you can)

2. (a) What was the reaction of *Ezra* upon hearing this news?

(b) Do you find *Ezra's* reaction . . .

- i. Too strong?
- ii. Too weak?
- iii. Just right?

If you were *Ezra*, what would be your reaction? Why?

Day 3 & 4 Read **EZRA 9:5 – 10:4**

Here we have *Ezra's* prayer of confession. Notice that he identified himself with the Israelites by using “we/our” from **verse 6b** onwards.

1. What did *Ezra* say concerning their sins? (**Verses 6-7**)

2. Next, *Ezra* proclaimed the marvelous grace of God towards Israel in **verses 8-9**.

Take time to read Ralph Davis exposition of these two verses:

Verse 8 begins “and now,” indicating a significant moment. The next phrase, literally “like a littleness of a moment,” shows that this significant moment is a brief one (“for a brief moment” NASB), and it therefore stands in contrast to the whole dominant history of unfaithfulness and judgment summarized in verse 7. In this brief moment there has been “grace from Yahweh our God.” Observe how this grace is “specked out.”

It is the grace of survival: “grace from Yahweh our God to leave us an escaped group” (or remnant).

It is the grace of security: “and to give us a peg in his holy place.” The “peg” usually means a tent peg, driven into the ground as secure anchorage for a tent; or it could refer, as in Isaiah 22:23, to a peg or nail securely fastened in a wall so that items could be hung on it. Clines takes the “peg” to refer to the rebuilt temple, as the following phrase “in his holy place” might suggest. In any case, the idea is that Israel has been given some degree of security, of ballast, in her otherwise tenuous post-

exilic experience.

It is the grace of encouragement: “that our God may give light to our eyes and give us a little reviving in our slavery.” It is the grace of constancy, implied in 9a: “For we are slaves, yet in our slavery our God has not forsaken us.”

It is the grace of providence: “he has extended his faithful love to us even under the kings of Persia and revived us to rebuild the Temple of our God, restore its ruins” (NJB) — all the drama and history of Ezra 1-6 is packed into that half verse. It is the grace of protection: “to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.” The wall is metaphorical for protection. It is not a literal city wall since it is “in Judah and in Jerusalem.” So, the immensity of guilt (Ezra 9:6-7) is met by the majesty of grace (Ezra 9:8-9).

3. Despite their many sins they’ve committed against the Lord, and that for many decades (**verses 6-7**), God has shown them grace (**verses 8-9**). Now, it is against this backdrop that their current sin is now portrayed as extremely serious in **verses 10-14b**.

Summarize, in point form, what *Ezra* said in **verses 10-14b**:

4. (a) What do you think *Ezra* was saying in **verses 14c-15**?

(b) Did *Ezra* ask God for forgiveness? Why?

5. (a) Who is Shecaniah? (**10:2**)

(b) What did he say?

- He admitted their sins (**10:2b**)
- He _____ (**10:2c**)

- He _____
_____ (10:3)
- He _____ (10:4)

“Perhaps we should add Shecaniah to the Onesiphoruses and Epaphrodituses of the Bible — little-known folks whose faithfulness in their place made a difference for the kingdom of God.”

Ralph Davis

Day 5 Read **EZRA 10:5-17**

1. In response to *Shecaniah's* exhortation, *Ezra* did two things:

Verse 5:

Verse 6:

2. An assembly was called by the leaders of Israel, to be held on twentieth day of the ninth month.

(a) What would happen to those who absent themselves? (**Verse 8**)

(b) What part/role did *Ezra* play in this assembly? (**Verse 10-11**)

(c) What was the response of the people to the command to confess their sins and separate themselves from pagan wives? (**Verses 12-14**)

(d) Was the decision of the assembly unanimous?

3. (a) Explain what is happening in **verses 16-17**.

(b) How long did the whole process take?

(c) What lessons, if any, can we learn from this?

Day 6 Read **EZRA 10:18-44**

In these 27 verses, we have the name list of the offenders. They had probably married these foreign wives after their return to Judah. Note that there were offenders at all levels: priests, Levites and common people.

It is fair to say that the offenders included 17 priests, 6 Levites, 1 singer, 3 gatekeepers, 84 laity, for a total of 111. This would mean pretty careful work, weighing, investigating about 1.2 cases per day, or a little more than that, assuming they took Sabbaths off. It was not done in haste; this was no hatchet job. It took slightly over 3 months to complete these 111 cases.

1. (a) What did the offenders promise to do?

(b) What else did they do?

2. Do you think the measure taken is too drastic? Elaborate.

3. Is **EZRA 9-10** a model for the New Testament church to follow? (The answer is not straightforward, but would require you to think carefully about other New Testament teachings, and carefully note their place and our place in redemptive history).

Discuss your answer with your RTBT group members.

Day 7 Review **EZRA**

We have spent 6 weeks studying **EZRA**. It is time to do some review and reflection.

1. Name one truth that is new to you from this study of **EZRA**:
2. Write down the most important lesson you've learnt from **EZRA**:
3. List down one area of your life that has changed, as a result of this study of **EZRA**:

Acknowledgement

Whatever the weaknesses of this Read-The-Bible-Together guide, they would have been far greater without the kind help of LAU Beng Hwee, PHUA Lai Tee and Monica ONG in giving their time and energy to review the entire guide, asking questions all the way and giving many valuable suggestions. Thank you, sisters!

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another! (Proverbs 27:17, ESV)

=====

Questions or comments concerning this RTBT guide?
Please contact WEI En Yi (HP: 98340509, email: weienyi@shalomrb.org)