

George Philip Bible Readings

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BOOK OF EZRA

1:1	4:6-16	8:1-15
1:1	4:17-24	8:16-20
1:1	4:17-24	8:21-23
1:2-4	5:1-2	8:24-30
1:2-4	5:1-2	8:31-36
1:5-11.	5:1-2	9:1-5
1:5-11	5:3-5	9:1-5
2:1-70	5:6-17	9:1-5
2:1-70	6:1-12	9:6-9
2:68-70	6:1-12	9:6-9
3:1-7	6:13-15	9:10-15
3:1-7	6:16-22	9:10-15
3:8-13	6:16-22	10:1-5
3:8-13	7:1-10	10:1-5
4:1-5	7:1-10	10:6-8
4:1-5	7:11-26	10:9-15
HISTORY	7:11-26	10:9-15
4:6-16	7:27-28	10:16-44

1:1

This one verse sets the scene for the whole book and should be read together with 2 Chronicles 36:11-23 and Jeremiah 25:3-12; 27:6-17; 29:4-14. In the judgment of God the Jews, because of sin persisted in despite the warnings of the prophets, were carried away out of their land and were captives in Babylon. When the appointed time of their tribulation had run its course, God in His mercy caused the necessary political situation to develop, the necessary edicts to be issued and the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, the city and the land. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return which began in the year 538 B.C. The personalities involved, apart from Ezra and Nehemiah, were Sheshbazzar (1:8), who seems to have been a figurehead, and the real active leaders of the early return, Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel (3:2). All these men were encouraged in their work by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1). The Book of Malachi also seems to date from this time. A quick glance at the familiar passages of these prophecies would be rewarding, especially passages such as Zech. 2:5, 8; 3:1-4; Hag. 1:1-7, 12-14. There is a suggestion, but only a suggestion, that in Daniel 9:1 the king called Darius is in fact Cyrus, and if so we see in the great prayer of Daniel in that chapter the link between the prayers of the saints and the decrees of God beginning to work. God had spoken, and now His mighty Spirit was moving to bring His word to pass among the nations. It is with such broad concepts of God as Lord of history that we must begin our study of Ezra.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

In the studies in Esther we have several times referred to the fact that while that story was being worked out in relation to the Jews in Persia there was another significant development taking place in the history of the Jews elsewhere. This is brought into focus in this first verse of Ezra. The details of history regarding this period can be obtained from any good Bible Dictionary. All we need to remember is that the land of Judah was over-run by the Babylonians and the Jews were carried away captive to Babylon for the period of seventy years prescribed by God as a judgment on His own people because of their persistent sins and spiritual unfaithfulness. In due time another greater empire arose and the power of Babylon was overthrown by the mighty empire of Persia. In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, for reasons that we can never fathom humanly, a significant edict was published allowing the free return of the Jews to their own national territory. It was a political move that no-one expected and it is referred to here as a direct work of the sovereign God of Israel. It was the work of the Spirit of God operating in a totally pagan situation with no apparent spiritual agent on the human level. And it is spoken of as a specific fulfilling of what God had said years earlier through the ministry of Jeremiah. It is all so startling and significant that we must get it into clear focus by reading such passages as 2 Chron. 36:11-21; Jer. 25:8-12 (note the reference to long years of ministry and warnings which were ignored). We cannot understand the present without reference to the past, and this is a lesson we need to remember.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

We need the further reference in Jeremiah 27:6-22; 29:4-14 to see how resolute God was in this stern disciplining of His people and to grasp that, right from the beginning of it, God's plan was set for their restoration. At the same time God had to urge the people to submit to discipline rather than to resist it because even in their manifest spiritual failure they still did not believe that God would be so stern with His own chosen people. But God knew that nothing less than long deprivation would purge from His people their inbred worldliness and idolatry; their corrupting of spiritual purity and worship; and their gross spiritual complacency, whereby they had forgotten their calling to be a light and a blessing to the nations. Here then is a lesson for us. If we forget what we have been chosen, called, saved and blessed for, we also may need to have all that is religiously precious to us demolished and taken from us in order to win our hearts back to God. Of course we must also so have a broader view of history, including church history, than we normally have. No individual or congregation starts from scratch. There is always an inherited situation for good or for ill and there is always a situation to be passed on to those who come after us (John 4:35-38). What is more, when God begins to work significantly, not all who call themselves God's people recognise that He is at work and not all are disposed to

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

have their circumstances changed in order to be part of what God is doing. We shall see this as we go on in the story of Ezra, and we remind ourselves that the Book of Esther concerned the great number of the Jews who had chosen to stay on in Persia rather than go back to the rigours and demands of rebuilding the broken down city of Jerusalem. They loved Jerusalem, but not enough to commit themselves. We say we love our church.... but!

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-4

It was the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, about 539/538 BC. If we remember that Daniel and his companions were taken into exile as early as 605 BC we see that a spell of about seventy years had in fact elapsed. It is difficult to identify the various kings accurately and to sort out their dates, but in Daniel 9: 1-4ff we find Daniel, as an old man, constrained to pray because of the prophecies and promises of Jeremiah. Someone has said that the prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work and it is marvellous to become aware of the fact that after long and costly years of captivity there was still at least one man of faith ready to be a prayer-warrior for the work and people of God. But keep in mind that the story beginning here stretches on to the story of Esther in the third year of Ahasuerus, which was about 482 BC. That means that half a century after the miraculous decree of Cyrus a vast number of God's people still stayed in Persia, still made no move to return to Jerusalem, and still needed to be stirred up into spiritual realism by the threat of extinction. Is it not true that sometimes it is only the threat of a church being closed down that awakens its members to enthusiasm, activity and financial commitment? But often it is then too late to remedy the situation. There are some who now wish with all their hearts that they had committed themselves to the church prayer-meeting in their earlier days because now, when they fain would come, they are no longer able. When spiritual opportunity is given to us, it is important not to miss out. Sometimes there is not another chance.

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-4

It is quite amazing to find a pagan king, a man of military and political ambition, speaking in such a personal way about the Lord, the God of Heaven, and recognising that He has a people, a work, a purpose and a place of significance called Jerusalem. That city had lain in ruins for seventy years and had been totally insignificant in the development of world affairs. But, of course, it was about to be resurrected by the God of resurrection, with whom nothing is impossible. We must not be surprised by this turn of events because it was for this very purpose that Cyrus had been raised to political power (Isa. 45:1-6). He was a man anointed by God. He did not have the right spiritual or religious pedigree, as the Jews would have thought, but he was God's anointed one, sent for the deliverance of God's people. But how did Cyrus know so much about God? Were the stories of Daniel and the interpretation of the dreams of kings recorded in books so that others could read them? We cannot say. God has His ways and we are told in the New Testament that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict and to lead into God's truth (John 16:8). In one sense it must have been offensive to the Jews to hear a pagan speaking so personally about God, claiming to have had a commission from God, and being charged with building the House of God. But this is exactly what happened and, at once, the king passed the direct responsibility on to those of the Jews who were willing to go and do this work. What is more, just as at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 12:35-36) God worked through man to make the necessary provision for the whole venture to begin. It is really a most remarkable story and we can understand how the Jews who were alive to the situation had to pinch themselves to make sure they were not dreaming (Ps. 126). The dreamlike state was soon dispelled when they became aware of the spiritual lassitude and reluctance of so many of their people. It is an up-to-date situation.

[Back to Top](#)

1:5-11.

If v.1-4 tell of how God in His sovereign purpose by the Holy Spirit worked in and through secular rulers to bring to pass His purposes, then v.5ff tell of how God by the same Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of His own discredited but now disciplined, humbled and refined people. They were to be the actual and immediate instruments in carrying out and carrying forward into the future God's gracious and glorious plan. It may be significant that it was the "heads" of the fathers' houses that took the lead, the older generation being able to

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

remember better than the younger generation the grimness and desolation of the time when spiritual life collapsed. To remember spiritual failure, to have learned by long deprivation to recognise and to repent of the causes of it, and to be quickened by the Spirit of God to the possibility of restoration and renewal are things which a younger generation simply, because of its youth, cannot really know. Youth can have enthusiasm and can dream dreams but the solid base of well-trying experience is needed as a foundation for the future. This, of course, places a great burden of responsibility on older believers to give guidance, encouragement and example to the younger generation, and at the same time not to require that everything be done exactly as it has been in the past. Of course, there *are* spiritual principles and patterns that have been tried and proved to be essential to God's work and these must not be despised. God's work must be done in God's way, and that excludes many popular but worldly methods! Do not fail to sense in today's verses what would have been one of the results of the Spirit's quickening of the "fathers". They would tell the younger generation of the battles and victories of former days not least to keep enthusiasm from becoming mere triumphalism.

[Back to Top](#)

1:5-11

Something new was happening and God was in it. Provision was being made for the new venture and some at least were giving sacrificially (6). Then Cyrus released all the treasures from the old Jewish Temple which had been kept in pagan temples for all the time of the captivity. This would have astonished the Jews who must have grieved deeply over the blasphemy of the desecration of their holy things. Now these symbols of their glorious spiritual past were being brought out to view and committed to their keeping. Try to imagine the surge of thrill and enthusiasm. Their God was opening a door of possibility for the future. Their God was making provision for them to go forward. Their God who had used pagan power to send them into captivity was now using pagan power to set them free. Perhaps some of the "ultra-orthodox" had reservations about accepting help from non-Jewish sources. But the way was open. The man Sheshbazzar was recognised as a trusted leader, and the vessels of the Temple were counted out to him. What astonishment there must have been that all these individual treasures of the Temple which had been reckoned as "lost" had in fact been kept by the power of God in preparation for the future. Do we not need to think more than we do about the God who keeps (1 Pet. 1:3-5; Ps. 121: 8)? What a God we have! But to return to the closing comment of yesterday's note, let us remember that success and enthusiasm can lead not only to superficiality but also to unpreparedness. That is why we must think again of the "fathers" telling the younger generation of the battles and costly struggles that were the means by which the work of God had been established in the past. In our own situation in Sandyford, those who have been part of the work since thirty years ago should speak to the new generation, who have inherited a spiritual congregation, to tell them of what it cost and how long it took to re-build a church. If we do not remember this we will not be ready for, nor will we cope with, the battles of the future.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-70

Perhaps only those fascinated by names and with a penchant for statistics and research will read through this whole list of names. Even when names seem familiar we must be careful because the Mordecai in v.2 is not the same person as the great man of the story of Esther. The size of the company of returning exiles (64-67) seems vast, and yet it is nothing compared to the number who *could* have returned, and certainly not in any sense too great for the amount of work to be done. It seems that even in these far off days there was a reluctance among the people of God to allow the pattern of their lives to be disturbed in order to engage in the Lord's service. Think of how, in the congregation we belong to and to which we owe such a spiritual debt, when volunteers are asked for we tend to respond if "we can fit it in" to the rest of our activities. It seems at times that hobbies, social gatherings, friendly invitations and the like take precedence over the call to the service of Christ's church. Zerubbabel, who was to play a leading part in the work, was of the royal line of David (1 Chron. 3:19) and we find his name in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew. Jeshua, or Joshua, named second was to be the first High Priest after the return from exile (Ezra 3:2; Haggai 1:1,12,14; 2:2,4; Zech. 3:1,3,9; 6:11). These last references show that God had prepared His men to serve as prophets, to minister His word to His people, and this is something we should look for and expect in every movement of revival or quickening that claims to be authentic. Indeed, we could say that when we see God raising up men to be faithful

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

spokesmen of His Word, then we have cause to believe God is quickening His work and moving it forward into a new stage. If this be so, then we have to see in this list of names God's record of those who were willing and ready to go forward. God has His records and His books and there are names not recorded (Rev. 13:8).

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-70

Even lists of names are instructive. These are the people who went forward, quickened and commissioned by God. But what of the very many who chose to stay in Persia? There are always those who have so settled down into comfortable, worldly life that they have no appetite for spiritual crusade. But, as some suggest, God may have decided not to *allow* some to share in this new thing that He was doing. Not all who claim to be of the people of God enter into the blessing of God (Heb. 4:3, 5). Some who have earlier proved themselves to be complainers, hindrances and distractors of others, are not allowed to come into a new and exciting stage of the work because, after the first flush of excitement, they would revert to what they had been previously. Note also that in v.59-63 there were those who were eager to join in but who could not at that stage prove their spiritual pedigree conclusively. But they were allowed to go, "on trial" as it were, until they were proved authentic or otherwise later on. Is it not true that some we have doubts about at the beginning prove to be spiritual assets as the work proceeds while some, over whom we have enthused at the beginning, prove later to be spiritually hollow with no constancy? Most commentators observe that very few Levites were in the company compared to the number of priests (36-42). It is suggested that the "status" of the Levites was no longer what it had been before the exile and because it seemed to them that they would have little real "position" in the new work they were not disposed to go. What a terrible thing when desire for place gets between us and God (Mark 9:30-35)! If, as Deut. 10:8-9 indicates, the Levites had been appointed to a significant spiritual service then their reluctance at the time of the return indicates a contracting out, not only from holy service but from the will of God for their lives. Are we where we should be, doing what God has called us to do? Nothing is a substitute for that.

[Back to Top](#)

2:68-70

Pause today with the last verses of the chapter (68-70) and note that there were clear differences among the people committed to God and to His work. In our generation there is an obsession with so-called "equality" and, of course, in the matter of salvation there are no differences. God is no respecter of persons (Rom. 2:11 AV). All are of equal value in His sight (Gal. 3:28). But in the matter of service and function there are differences which should not be confused and which do not, in any sense, devalue anyone. In the work of God every "member" is vital, even those that seem insignificant and unimportant (1 Cor. 12:14-22). But there *are* differences. And God sets different people in different places, sometimes because of their different abilities and capacities, but always in His wise and perfect administration. He sets us where we can best develop and serve and we must be happy and contented with God's dispositions. If we forget that we are in God's hand and in God's place we will soon be looking at people rather than at God, and both jealousy and discontent will infect our spirits and so demolish our service. This would be a victory for the Devil. We are told here that some, not all, were able to give substantial offerings and this is a cause of rejoicing because they actually did give. Not all who are wealthy give substantially. This does not devalue the lesser gifts, as Jesus' story in Mark 12:41-44 shows. The Christian pattern is to give as the Lord prospers (1 Cor. 16:2). Note also that some lived in Jerusalem and its environs, no doubt aware that they were at the heart of things. Others lived in various places, some of them small and insignificant. But visible place and public recognition are not the important things. Those "out front" are not in any sense more important than those who work faithfully "behind the scenes". Indeed front-line soldiers are very aware of their dependence on those who maintain communication and who load and carry the supplies. We shall see more of this as we go through the fascinating story of the rebuilding of the work of God.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-7

As we come to the story of the re-establishing of the work of God in Jerusalem, keep clearly in mind that it had not been the pressures of the pagan world that had brought the work down in the first place. The gates of Hell do not prevail against Christ's church (Matt. 16:18). It was God's discipline that had humbled His people. Now, although the decree for return had been made by a world ruler, the explanation of the reviving of God's work was God's grace, power and provision. God and His work are never dependent on the goodwill of unbelieving people. Nor is God's work administered by the plans and schemes of religious and Christian leaders, no matter how sincere. God alone is the director of His work and one of the first signs of His working is a spirit of prayer among His people. We have seen this and commented on it already. Now we see that the spiritual heart and power of every piece of God's work are centred on worship. With a great Spirit-inspired unanimity the people gathered and the altar of the Lord was built. The altar was set in its place before even the foundations of the Temple were laid. This was the pattern followed by the great prophet Elijah in an earlier time of Israel's spiritual declension. When the powers of evil were being confronted, Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down (1 Kings 18:30). That is where true spiritual life, personal and corporate, starts: at the altar of the Lord, where we meet with and deal with and wait upon God in worship and dedication. This is a word to every backslider and Christian prodigal who has strayed from the path. Go right back to God. Don't wait to sort out other things in your life. Get right with God in your heart and soul, and from that rectified position start dealing with everything else. What a relief it is and what kindling of hope it is to be back with God and to know you are back. Read Luke 15:17-24 and Hosea 14:4-7. God wants us back and takes us back. What a Gospel:

[Back to Top](#)

3:1-7

There is a further lesson here for all who seek to extend God's work, not least in our own denomination. There has been a tendency to build buildings and to establish structures of administration before gathering a people who desire to worship, before being assured of God's practical provision, and before being sure that God's hand is on the whole venture. When this happens and "churches" do not become viable, or when missionary societies cannot pay their way, what does the world of unbelievers think? It is a sad and a bad witness. The first thing the returned remnant did was to build the altar, to draw near to God and to renew their vows and worship. This was done on the seventh month, which was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles when the Jews remembered their pilgrim journeys after the Exodus from Egypt. They would remember also the promise of God as given in Exod. 34:22-24 and repeated in Deut. 16:12-17, a promise rich in the assurance of victory and provision. We cannot tell to what extent all these returned exiles had studied their Scriptures in Persia. But here, right at the start of the new stage of the work, there is an emphasis on obedience to the commands of God's Law. If the building of the altar signified the centrality of prayer and worship, then the keeping of the Feast was a sign of fresh submission to the Word of God. These are the "marks" we should look for in every "work" or "movement" that claims to be the bringer of a new blessing from God. We cannot emphasise too much in all developments of God's work the principle of "back to what is written" (2), and this applies as much to church order and procedure as to doctrine. God wants His work done in His way. This is the way of blessing. This is the way that makes sure that all the glory goes to God. It is also the way that ensures that the work will go on long-term and will not wane or cease when mere enthusiasm declines.

[Back to Top](#)

3:8-13

The introduction to the laying of the foundation of the Temple was recorded in v.6-7 when the funds provided by Cyrus were used to order and provide the necessary materials. We cannot help wondering if there was any dishonest dealing with the various suppliers and tradesmen, not just the Gentile ones but also the Jews. Down the years to this day many a piece of Christian work has suffered in this way. This is not a denial of the providence and protection of God but a reminder that we live and work in a fallen world and that there is a Devil whose craft and deceit are able to corrupt even believers. Note that a year has passed (8) and it would not have been an easy year, waiting to get going, with little evidence of progress, and perhaps with a sense of unease, wondering just what difficulties would yet arise. The Devil is good at getting God's people worried about what *might* happen, That is why Jesus counselled His disciples to live one day at a time (Matt. 6:25-34).

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

But remember that although there was not much to "show" in the work thus far, there was the altar, the place of prayer and fellowship with God. Of course that could have become routine, losing its personal sense of dealing with God, just as using Daily Notes can be routine. Make sure, day by day, that we do in fact meet with God and speak with Him. That is the point of it all. Note also that there was not only oversight of the work but a real fellowship in working together, a sharing of the load, not least in the inglorious slogging of clearing rubble and digging foundations. We need to make sure that we are willing to do the work that is *needed* and not just the work that appeals to us or gives us opportunity to exercise what we think are our "gifts". Jesus spoke of the importance: of faithfulness in the smaller things and of how this indicates who are reliable and can be entrusted with greater things (Matt. 25:14-23), When the way is hard try to remember that we are workers together with God (2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Cor, 3:9).

[Back to Top](#)

3:8-13

There are many people who, almost from childhood or from youth, have never known what it is to be without a living spiritual church to go to. Such people have little idea of what it costs to build a real church in terms of spiritual travail and personal sacrifice, and they can take for granted all the gospel privileges they enjoy. But some, who have known what it is to live and labour in spiritual hardness and barrenness, lacking both ministry and fellowship, have a sense of appreciation and thankfulness and rejoice from the heart when spiritual blessing is restored. How would we feel or cope if we had no expository ministry, no prayer meetings to go to and no helps in Bible study? There was great excitement, glorious praise and much enthusiasm when the foundation was laid (11), and rightly so for the younger generation was aware of their wonderful God who had again shown His love to His people. But there was also weeping (12) among the older people. Why was this? Perhaps they sorrowed because they realised anew just how much they had forfeited spiritually because of their sins and faithlessness. Perhaps they felt that but for their folly God's glorious House and work would never have fallen into ruin. That thought must have caused deep grief and it should cause us to examine ourselves to consider just what effect we are having on God's work at present. We can be builders or underminers. Of course the weeping may have been relief and gratitude on the part of backsliders who were overwhelmed by the realisation that God forgives, restores and recommissions (Hos. 11:7-9; Isa. 1:18-19; Joel 2:25-27 AV). The reference in Joel signifies that God's forgiveness and restoration are in such abundance of grace (Rom. 5:20) that the past is not only forgotten, but the present and future are, and will be, as if no failure had ever happened. What a God we have. Little wonder we both laugh and cry.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-5

If God had worked a wonderful work for and among His people, and if God was purposing to work in their future more gloriously than He had done in the past (as the prophet Haggai declared), then we are not at all surprised that there was an outburst of enemy activity right at the earliest stage of the work. Read Haggai 2:1-9. All they had at the moment was the beginning of the foundations. The significance of what was yet to be was by no means apparent, and perhaps many felt things would never be as glorious as they had been in the past. But the Devil seems to have been more perceptive than the people of God and he launched his attack. We may refer here to the experience of our Lord Jesus Christ who, right after His baptism, in which He identified Himself with the people He had come to save, was led into confrontation with the Devil (Luke 4:1ff). And, even though the enemy was overcome decisively, from that point onward the Devil sought by any and every means to assail, and so to hinder the work of salvation. This is exactly what we have here. The "powers of the world", who had held sway in the territory of Judah for so long, saw their kingdom beginning to be taken away from them and they resented it, and sought the best means of stopping the process. The same kind of resentment and resistance appears when a new biblical and evangelical ministry enters a "religious" congregation. People are aware instinctively that changes are coming, and people who have "run the show" for years see that this will not be so any more, and they take action. Note, of course, that the enemy did not begin with open confrontation, resistance and contradiction. The Devil is often far wiser than Christians! The adversaries' first technique was to offer co-operation, claiming that they worshipped the same God. That seemed reasonable until it was seen how they identified themselves (2). They were not Jews. They had been brought in from other lands to populate the

territory after the collapse of Judah. They were, in fact, the ancestors of the Samaritans with whom in Jesus' time the Jews would have no dealings.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1-5

It is necessary to stay with these verses lest we fall into the snare of thinking that Zerubbabel was guilty of mere religious prejudice. If we read the history of the situation in 2 Kings 17:23b-34, 41 we will see that these people had simply a veneer of "religion" in respect of the God of Israel. They feared the Lord and *also* served graven images. This was exactly the confused and compromised kind of dealing with God that had seventy years earlier led to the collapse of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was quick to see the danger. We also must be careful in our own day, not just in respect of "sharing of faiths" and "comparative religion", in which areas the uniqueness and exclusiveness of the Christian Gospel is lost sight of. This confusion can also happen in areas of "evangelicalism" where co-operation can lead to a dilution of the message, a neglect of basic salvation doctrine, or a degeneration into either "legalism" or a frothy "emotionalism". On the other hand, as is clear from Jesus' teaching, we must be careful not to allow our own shallowness and spiritual incompetence to blind us to the fact that God works in ways, and in areas, and through people who do not walk our way (Lk. 9:51-56 plus footnote (f) RSV). Note how plainly Zerubbabel spoke in v.3 of today's passage and how wisely he referred to the commission of Cyrus. There is a time to appeal to governmental powers, just as Paul appealed to Caesar when the safety and integrity of the Gospel were at stake (Acts 25:11). These lessons are important in our day when "co-operation" is the popular catch-word and when refusal to co-operate seems to be the greatest of sins. Inevitably those whose "offer" is refused will react by resistance and denigration. Zerubbabel faced a long-term policy and practice of the enemy manipulating public opinion against these "fundamentalists", setting barriers of every kind in the way of the work, and psychological warfare in terms of demoralising those who had set themselves to do God's will. It is all very contemporary.

[Back to Top](#)

HISTORY

We have already commented on the great difficulty in being accurate about dates and about the identity of various kings. This list from the Record of 1971 will help. It is not meant to be a Bible study note.

- . BC 722 - Fall of Samaria, the Northern Kingdom
- 605 - Battle of Carchemish. Daniel and others taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar
- 597 - More Jews exiled, including Ezekiel
- 587 - Fall of Jerusalem, and exile
- 539 - Babylon falls to the Persians. Jews begin to return to Jerusalem
- 539-530 - Cyrus, King of Persia
- 530-522 - Cambyses
- 522-486 - Darius I
- 486-464 - Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)
- 464-423 - Artaxerxes I

The "70 year captivity" is reckoned roughly from the year 605 to 539 (the first year of Cyrus).

This list covers the whole period of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Persian empire remained supreme until it was overthrown in 331 by Alexander the Great from Macedon. After Alexander's reign the empires of both Egypt and Syria impinged on Palestine, but by the time of our Lord all had fallen under the sway of the Roman Empire.

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-16

Those with an interest in history may wish to work out the time-scale indicated by v.5, 6, 24. Keep in mind that the story is not being written up day by day as in a diary, but written in retrospect by a historian. In v.1-5, 24 he views the first spell of the work and then in v.6-23 the spell during the two kings, Ahasuerus (the time of Esther) and Artaxerxes. If this is so then we are dealing with a spell of sixty-two years. This is something we

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

tend to forget and when we are reminded of the time-scale of God's working we are sometimes staggered and even disheartened, because we have succumbed to the spirit of the age which clamours for immediate results. We need the reminder of 2 Pet. 3:8-10. God is neither slow nor careless. He has His times and seasons (Acts. 1:7). He works down the ages of history in well planned stages (Heb. 1:1, 2) and in His eyes a thousand years is but a day (2 Pet. 3:8). There is neither hurry nor panic with God and it is because He is at peace within Himself that He counsels us to let the peace of God rule in our hearts (Col. 3:15). Think of the returned exiles, with a mountain of work to accomplish, with enemies pressing in on them, and with a veritable tidal wave of slander against both their persons and their motives. Only faith that looks to God can cope with this and can enable people to go on working. The odds often seem virtually too great to cope with, but if Zerubbabel kept in mind the well known stories of the past, and if he and his ministers brought the people back to these stories, faith would be strengthened and hope maintained (2 Chron. 20:1-17). If we focus on the enemy and *his* activity we will soon be drained of spiritual vitality, and that is exactly the Devil's intention. Watch out for the Devil and guard your whole way of life so that he is given little or no opportunity (1 Pet. 5:8; John 14:30; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11).

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-16

We stay with these verses because they make us aware of an evil spirit of opposition to the work of God and they show us the technique always used by the Devil and his agents. It is the weapon of slander, making sweeping accusations against people and their motives, hoping that the accusations will be "swallowed whole" without anyone taking time to examine what is being said to see if it is true or false. There is no suggestion that the complainers loved the king or served him gladly. Their "crawling" to the king with their claim to be concerned only for the good of the country was simply a way of seeking to make use of the "powers that be" to gain their own bitter end. An example of this was seen on television the day this note was being written. The discussion was about the Abortion Bill to be debated in Parliament and an accusation was made about "imposing fundamentalist, evangelical religion" on innocent people to their hurt and degradation. This is typical of those who resent any suggestion that God has a declared opinion, or that there is objective Christian truth and there are Christian moral standards. Think of how Jesus' opponents reviled Him constantly, accusing Him of being in league with the Devil (Jn. 7:20; 8:48) and of being treasonable to the state (Lk. 23:1, 2). The same kind of slander was levelled against the apostles and the extravagance of it and the bitterness in it marked it out as coming from Hell. The same kind of thing is found among the people of God who are still prone to murmur and complain as they did in Moses' time (Ex. 15:22-24). That too was of the Devil. And, when we find professing Christians in the context of an on-going work beginning to utter the familiar words, "Lots of people are unhappy about how things are...." we know who is behind that. No doubt Zerubbabel and his colleagues were very aware of their own faults and failures, and yet God had laid His hand on them. God had opened the door of opportunity for them. God had caused the foundation of the work to be laid. Would God now abandon it and them to the enemy? The gates of Hell cannot prevail.

[Back to Top](#)

4:17-24

No doubt the Jews in Jerusalem prayed. But when the news came from Artaxerxes that the work had to stop they must have been shattered. Was there a court of appeal? Could someone plead their case and show that a mistake had been made? Who conducted the search of the archives? It is so easy to be selective from old records and to produce only the facts that are useful for your own case. Think of how hurt, disappointed and baffled the Jews must have been. Was the work to be ended when it had scarcely started? Had evil prevailed? Was God being thwarted? It is sometimes very difficult to square theology with experience. That is where faith comes in. We have to learn to trust in the dark.

"When darkness seems to veil His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;

When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay." (Mote)

It was indeed a taxing time. They had been worn down with persistent opposition but had held their ground and gone on. Now they were faced with the enemy exulting in triumph. Was it all their fault? Had they failed? Had they gone wrong somewhere? Should they have accepted the offer of co-operation in the first place? Were they out of God's will? The answer to all the questionings is in the negative. They were the objects of hellish enmity simply because they were *in* God's will and doing His work. Why then this reverse which (if my calculations are correct) lasted some sixteen years? (Compare 4:1.-5, 24; and 3:8 with the list of dates.) There is no answer available to us except in the mystery of God's providence. God does move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, and He makes plain in Isa. 55:8, 9 that His thoughts and methods are higher than ours. Have faith in God (Mk. 11:22). If a work is of God neither men, nor women, nor devils, nor governments can make it fall (Acts 5:33-39; Heb. 10:35-36).

[Back to Top](#)

4:17-24

It is interesting to note that so early in the development of a work that was manifestly of God the people were tested so radically. The discipline of disappointment can teach us many things and we are taught in Scripture that it is tribulation that works patient endurance (Rom. 5:3). And the grace of perseverance is necessary if we are to be involved in long-term work. But the discernment of faith and an understanding taught by the Word of God are also needed because this is the only way in which we can handle the ever-changing situation. We know we must watch out for the Devil and that we must stand against him (Eph. 6:10ff). We know we must resist the Devil and expect him to depart (Jas. 4:7). But things do not always work out simply. That does not mean the Devil is victorious. Paul spoke quite calmly of how Satan hindered him from a certain course of action which he believed was inspired by God (1 Thess. 2: 18). He also spoke of how what seemed to others to be a disastrous imprisonment and a devilish hindrance to his ministry had in fact turned out to be a fresh advance of the Gospel and an encouragement to Christians (Phil. 1:12-14). In that same epistle he speaks of having learned to be content whatever circumstances he found himself in (Phil. 4:11-13). This can only be because he was persuaded that, no matter the reverses and contradictions in the work, God was active and positive and furthering His great plan of salvation. The greatest reverse of all, or so it seemed to be, was the situation that caused the Son of God to cry out from the Cross and ask why His Father had forsaken Him (Mk. 15:34). We know the answer now. But the explanation was not given at the time. It may be that some Christian workers find themselves in Zerubbabel's position right now. Opponents of the Gospel may seem to have blocked the way forward and there seems to be nothing you can do. But God is not hemmed in. Perhaps it is the most significant and positive stage in your life's work. You cannot see it, and God may not be telling you, perhaps partly because you would not believe it at present (Hab. 1:8; John 16:12; Acts 1:7).

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-2

This is the first mention in the whole story of the preaching of the Word of God and it is significant that it should come at this point. We do not know if these ministers of the Word, these spokesmen of God, had just recently arrived in Jerusalem or if they had been with the people from the start. The former seems the more likely, and yet preachers may be present and simply be unable to preach because there is no disposition to listen.

God's people do not always welcome God's messengers (2 Chron. 36:15- 16; Acts 7:51-53). Here it is clear that in response to the preaching the people were stirred and enabled to begin the work again. To understand the whole situation better we need to turn to the writings of the two prophets and there we are given details of the situation among God's people. Whether the sad situation of worldly preoccupation was the result of spiritual declension or the cause of it we cannot say. But it is disturbing to read of how so early in this new work, and so soon after the thrill and enthusiasm of "revival" and "renewal", the people had lost their spiritual edge. Read Haggai 1:1-11 and let us all examine *ourselves*. How easy it is to be preoccupied with our own "houses" and our own "activities" to such an extent that the Lord's House and its work lie neglected, receiving from us only the tired-out remnants of our energy and our constant excuses that "the time is not ripe", meaning that "we will get round to it when we have all the important things done." How we need Jesus' words urging us to seek first the kingdom of God. (Matt. 6:33) Note how Haggai says that the reason why lots of things in their

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

life and work were not running well and productively was because God was countermanding their efforts because of their spiritual neglect. Congregations do not like sermons like this, but on this occasion the Spirit of God used the sermon to awaken the people to repentance and obedience.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-2

Turn now to the opening section of Zechariah's ministry (Zech. 1:1-6) and see the same kind of emphasis as in Haggai. Zechariah challenged the people and warned them that they were going the same way as their fathers and that the result would be the same if there was no change of heart. How deeply they must have been obsessed with their own worldly affairs to need such a rebuke. If the prophets had been in Jerusalem for some time their silence must be explained by the fact that God, who knows our hearts, saw that the people would not receive spiritual ministry because they would not acknowledge their spiritual shallowness. That shallowness and danger would not come home to their consciences unless they were revealed by the shattering experience of their work being stopped and their hopes dashed. How grieved the loving heart of God must be when He has to humble His people in this way before He can get them to listen and to respond. After all, many of these people must have sat under the glorious spiritual ministry of the prophet Ezekiel during the captivity. Such thoughts bring home in a new way the exhortations in the New Testament about redeeming the time; about waking up out of sleep; and of being careful to listen to God's Word in the right way lest its message slips into the background noise of our over-busy lives and we fail to respond to it (Rom. 13:11; Eph. 5:15-16; Heb. 2:1; 3:12-19; 4:1-2). In many ways the ministry of the two prophets broke in on the life of Jerusalem like the blast of a trumpet. It must have been very disturbing to be told by the messengers of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that you are spiritually adrift. There is not much preaching like that these days, and not much listening like that. Perhaps it is time to recognise with alarm just to what extent ministers and their ministry have been devalued. It is a solemn thought.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-2

It is very important to note that the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah was rich in encouragement as well as in challenge. This is very necessary because backsliding has a demoralising effect and it is necessary to raise morale if the Word of God is going to get the people on the move again in the interest of spiritual service. We could describe both the prophets as men who were enthusiastic for God and His work and when ministers lose this glad spirit their ministry loses a vital ingredient. This enthusiasm has little to do with personality or eloquence. It comes from hearts gripped by God. Read Haggai's words that are so encouraging that they seem impossible in the face of the situation (Hag. 2:1-9). The future was to be greater in glory than the past. It is God who was saying so, and He should know. Think also of Psalm 102:13-18. (Both these references were used at the time of the start of the new ministry in Sandyford in 1956). Turn now to Zechariah and read about God's supervisory patrols (1: 7-11); God's plan for a Jerusalem beyond human measurement, protected by His power and blessed by His presence (2:1-5); God's great High Priest (3:1-5); God's inexhaustible supply of power and grace by His Spirit (4:1-6); and God's eyes that watch over all (4:10). With that kind of God, who has any right to be disheartened or to feel that the work cannot be done simply because evil men, agents of the Devil, seek to stand in the way? With that kind of plan and purpose entrusted to us so that we have a vital share in it, who has any right to turn away to other and lesser things? Did not Jesus speak of "all the other things" that are good for us being added (Matt.6:33)? Did not Jesus speak to Peter to the effect that no-one who had made sacrifice for Him and His Kingdom would ever be the loser (Mk. 10:28-30)? This was the ministry that got the work going again. But we must remember what came next.

[Back to Top](#)

5:3-5

As soon as the work was re-started the enmity and opposition began again. Note the emphasis in v.3, "at that time" (at the same time RSV). It could have been a devastating blow psychologically because the situation was full of threat and the Jews were just beginning to recover their spiritual composure and motivation. The Devil really knows his job, and knows how and when to strike. But this time there was divine over-ruling. We are told

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

that the eye of the Lord was on the elders of the Jews, not on the workers of evil, although they were by no means out of God's sight. The generality of the people were impressed and encouraged by the attitude and determination of the elders who showed no weakness even though their names were being noted for report to the authorities. The confrontation was, in some senses, quite a diplomatic one and there seems to have been a suggestion and an agreement that the whole matter should be referred to higher authority and only when the reply came would decision be taken. In the meantime the Jews would go on with their building. There was nothing the governor and his associates could do about it and they agreed to the plan being, no doubt, quite sure that the decision would go their way, the same as last time. But God is the God of surprises, as we shall see later. This is an example of how, in faith, a whole situation and its issue should be committed to God. This is humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6). Think also of the statement in 1 Pet. 3:13. It is not a nice thought to have God's face against you. These wicked men did not know that it was so. Read also Psalm 2 and Psalm 21:11. Then go to the gospels and read how at times when evil men would have destroyed Jesus He passed through the midst of them untouched, because His hour had not come (Lk. 4:29-30; John 7:30). The eye of His God was upon Him. And our God is the same yesterday, today and forever.

[Back to Top](#)

5:6-17

The wonder of this passage is not the well worded political letter with its balanced statement of the case and its powerful request that the royal archives be searched. These politicians were wanting increased favour from the throne as well as wishing spite against the Jews. The great thing about the passage is that it gives us the marvellous testimony made by the elders of the Jews (11-16). They were no longer ashamed to own their Lord and they had no wish to conceal their commitment. to God and to His work. They spoke honestly about their past history, confessing the failure of their fathers, and acknowledging that what had befallen them for seventy years had been the gracious discipline of God on the people He owned as His chosen ones. Then they bore testimony to the sovereign and supernatural way in which God had accomplished their restoration through the decree and the provision of Cyrus. They even admitted that they had been back in Jerusalem a long time and had, in fact, not made the progress they should have done. Right through these words there is a spirit of dignity, grace and worthiness. Perhaps it was the bearing of the Jews that so impressed the governors that they agreed to the procedure of appeal. These Jews, knowing once again that the hand of their God was on them, had no desire to have anything hidden; no desire to say or do anything that their God could not bless. What a way to live and to deal with God and with His work. This is indeed walking in the light (1 John 1:7), walking with open face, with nothing to hide (2 Cor. 3:18). What encouragement to put ourselves into God's good hand, and to remind ourselves that our times are, in fact, in His hand (Ps. 31: 15). Perhaps we should all remind ourselves of Isaiah 54:17. But that is a verse for those who are walking in obedience.

[Back to Top](#)

6:1-12

The result of the governors' appeal to the king was totally different from what they expected. The tables were turned. The command with royal authority in v.7 must have rung in the ears of the Jews like the bells of Heaven, and in the ears of the governors like the tolling of doom. This was indeed an astonishing answer to prayer, but we should not be surprised, especially we who have the New Testament which tells us that God is able to do far above anything we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). But there is also here an illustration of how, before we even begin to pray, God has taken action to redeem our situation (Isa. 65:24). It is only now that we begin to see just how exact and comprehensive the decree of Cyrus had been, giving instruction as to the dimensions of the Temple to be rebuilt (3-5) and with regard to government expenditure to finance the whole venture. We have to be made aware that God thinks of everything. There are no flaws in His plans. Of course, a great deal of the complications in the situation facing the Jews would have been avoided if they had had in their possession some documentary evidence of the decree of Cyrus. Many difficulties can be avoided if we can produce a valid "passport". Perhaps in the excitement of the initial return everyone was so "spiritual" they forgot to get the certificate of planning or the formal authorisation in writing. It is easy to despise formalities and to rush on into new situations. It is interesting to look ahead to Nehemiah 2:4-10 and to see how carefully this new leader of the work asked for written authorisation in relation to local and national government. The "powers that be" are

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

ordained by God for a variety of good reasons (Rom. 13:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-4). That is why we must pray for those in authority and why all that we do in God's name must be done decently and in order.

[Back to Top](#)

6:1-12

We have an encouraging example here of how evil tends to over-step and to bring about its own downfall. It must have shattered and angered the governors to read the letter of the king that put a total ban on their opposition to the building of the House of God. We are reminded here, as in other places in Scripture, that evil does not in any sense hold the initiative. We say, all too lightly at times, that the Devil is a defeated foe, but it true, gloriously true (Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8) and we must learn to hold to the truth even when it seems the whole of Hell is raging against us successfully. God always says to Satan, "thus far, and no further," (Job 1:12; 2:6; 38:8-11). But we must also note here how the men of evil were not only defeated in their plans, they were by royal decree conscripted into the service of the people of God as they built the House of God. They had to provide from the public funds they administered all that was necessary to guarantee that the work went on and that the religious and spiritual aspects of the work should lack for nothing. The order was for provision on a daily basis and the order carried with it dire penalties for any refusal or neglect. These evil men had challenged God and they now found themselves facing the solemn power of God. This is all very practical, especially for those to whom is entrusted the leadership of any work of God. There will be opposition. There are procedures in church law and in civil law that are there for the safe preservation of what is right. And there is a watchful God who sets great value on His people and on their work. He is the Rock and Refuge of His people (Ps.46). He is the one who covenants to keep and who promises that evil will not stand (Josh. 1:3-6). And He is the God who says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." (Deut. 32:35; Heb.10:30). But never forget that this solemn God is also the God of exquisite tenderness. Read Psalm 147 and be glad that you are in His hand.

[Back to Top](#)

6:13-15

When a significant spiritual victory has been won and when the enemies and opposers of the work of God have been put to flight and humbled publicly, it is very easy for the people of God to give way to a totally carnal spirit of rejoicing. The Jews would have been less than human if they had not found pleasure in the manifest discomfort of the governors and their associates as they carried out the king's orders. Day by day these men who hated what the Jews were doing had to see to it that the Jews had everything they needed (9). No doubt there were sullen looks, icy-cold attitudes and veiled threats that they would get revenge some day. That could have caused the Jews to be somewhat distracted from the work, and that is always the design of the Devil. If he cannot stop us serving the Lord He will certainly distract us, usually by filling our minds with worries about things we can do nothing about, and in this way he tries to make our work poor quality. But the safeguard was there. The two prophets continued their comprehensive ministry of challenge and encouragement and the workers, inspired by their elders, got on with building God's work. It is clear from some of the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah that the prophets spoke not only of the immediate generation but of things stretching far into the future and it may well have been that the earnest working of the Jews was inspired in measure by the thought of being involved in something that was part of God's plan for the fullness of time (Eph. 1:10). If this is so then they would be very aware that the work was God's work and had to be done in God's way with no mere human intrusion or experimentation. It was not any kind of temple that was being built. It was God's Temple, being re-built on the pattern that had been set by God as far back as when Moses built the Tabernacle (Heb. 8:5). In our own generation, obsessed with novelty, we need to see the wisdom and importance of getting back to old and well tried ways (Jer. 6:16).

[Back to Top](#)

6:16-22

It was by the will of God and His over-ruling through the government decisions of pagan kings that the work of God was begun, progressed and completed (14-15). It was not a case of secular governments interfering in God's work, nor a case of unholy government money being used to pay for the work of the church. It was God working sovereignly through human channels. Everything belongs to God (Ps. 50:10) and He simply channelled

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

resources as He saw fit. There is a lesson here on how important it is that we should pray for *all* rulers and authorities, whatever our own political thoughts and allegiances may be. This is in fact a command of Scripture (Rom. 13:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-4), as we have emphasised many times already. A great thing had been done and the people celebrated with tremendous joy and thanksgiving. But we must note how spiritual this celebration was. There was an emphasis on the twelve tribes of Israel (17) as if to remind themselves of how the present and the future were firmly anchored in the past. There may be new phases in the work of God but it is never a *new* work. The work of God is one work from beginning to end. At times it may be submerged and out of sight. At times it may seem hopelessly corrupted. It may seem totally dead, like a valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37: 1ff). But God is able by the quickening power of His Holy Spirit to bring glorious life and hope to what seemed beyond remedy. Not many of the older generation were left (Haggai 2:3) and the new generation seemed fired with desire and dedication, determined that they would not let things slide as their fathers had done. But only time would tell how deep and how radical their dedication was. Yes, it was a “Back to the Bible” movement (18) and a “Back to the Fundamentals of the Faith” movement (19). But would the enthusiasm last?

[Back to Top](#)

6:16-22

Note finally in these verses how the people brought themselves and the work right back to the foundation and heart in keeping the Passover. They made the specific point of reminding themselves that they were a people redeemed by God through the shed blood of the Passover Lamb. Apart from God’s glorious act of redemption they would have remained nothing, a people in everlasting bondage to sin, self and Satan. It was God who had saved them in His sovereign act of grace (Exod. 12: 12-14; 13:3; Eph. 2:8). It was God who paid the price of their salvation and our salvation, for Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:18-20). This is what we must remember and stand on. We are a redeemed people who belong to God (1 Pet. 2:9-10). We are not our own and cannot ever be our own. We belong to God, and He has worked for us a salvation that cannot be countermanded by men or devils. There is no condemnation and no separation for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8: 1, 37-39). This is our peace, assurance and hope. This is why there was such a note of joy among the people (22). They gave thanks to God who had given them the victory (1 Cor. 15:57). Having tasted the thrill of obedience they were eager for the future, determined to trust and obey. In such a frame of mind, heart and spirit it is little wonder that they had a significant evangelistic impact, drawing people to themselves and to God from the pagan and polluted surroundings (21). Right there in Jerusalem where once the people of God had failed so significantly they began to witness, to work and to win others for God. What a testimony to the God who had healed their backslidings (Hos. 14:4 AV)! What a challenge to holy and dedicated living! Read Ezek. 36:22-23, especially in the A.V. "I will sanctify my great name....and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord....when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes."

[Back to Top](#)

7:1-10

We begin now the second stage of the re-building of Jerusalem, and Ezra becomes the significant figure. Keep in mind that this is history and the years are rolling past. From the first year of Cyrus (1:1), when the whole story began, down to the sixth year of Darius (6:15), when the Temple was finished, twenty-three years have passed. Some of the older people who had been involved from the beginning would have died without seeing the building finished. They would have died in faith (Heb. 11:13). Now we are told (7:1, 7) it is the seventh year of Artaxerxes and another fifty-nine years have passed and only the very, very old would remember the first early stages of the work. The House of God had been built. The people of God had been successful. But as the years went past, as we shall see, there came a spirit of complacency and carelessness on the part of those who had not been involved in the costly battles and work of the early stages. People who inherit a spiritual work and who come into it after it has been established seldom have a true appreciation of the work or the need for on-going, costly dedication. During these years back in Persia a whole generation of Jews who had settled down and who had chosen not to be part of the initial return to Jerusalem in the time of Cyrus were being awakened to spiritual reality by the danger of imminent extinction, which we read of in the story of Esther. In the “fires” of

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

difficulty new leaders were being forged to take over the work in Jerusalem. At the end of the story of Esther the Jews were in high favour with the king and this led to men of calibre being in the king's trusted service. One such man was Ezra and another was Nehemiah. Like Esther, these men were raised up and laid hold on by God for such a time as this. Ezra (14) could be regarded as Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs. God had His man ready and in the right job.

[Back to Top](#)

7:1-10

Consider the kind of man Ezra was. Apart from being a trusted and competent high-ranking civil servant he was also a man of God who had gone through the rigours of an anti-Jewish pogrom. He was a man skilled in the Word of God (6), for the simple reason that he had set his heart to study the Word and to obey it (10) in order to be a teacher and guide to the people of God. We are not surprised to be told that the hand of God was on him (6). It is only when we come to 9:1-5 that we realise what a mighty task was going to face Ezra, a situation of spiritual decline and compromise that shattered him. It is just as well that he was so grounded in God and in His Word, or else he would never have coped. It is suggested by some commentators (with good grounds) that the spiritual situation faced by Ezra can be seen best by reading the prophecy of Malachi. We see there what can happen if a movement of spiritual revival is not grounded and continued in obedience to the Word of God. Malachi speaks of careless ministers (1: 6); casual and unworthy sacrifices (1:7-10); mixed marriages (2:11); easy divorce, which is unfaithfulness to God (2:15-16); a poor level of financial giving and therefore a financial crisis hindering spiritual blessing (3:8-10); and an argumentative spirit linked with an unwillingness to serve (3:13-15). In such a situation it is no wonder that there was no sense of urgency, responsibility or judgment (Mal. 3:1-3). Obviously Ezra was going to face a monumental task and, as we shall see in due time it, was a spiritual task that broke his heart as he mourned over the shallowness and backsliding of God's people. But Ezra was a chosen and well prepared man. God saw to that.

[Back to Top](#)

7:11-26

It seems clear from the Book of Ezra that powerful political world leaders played a significant part in the development of the work of God. Cyrus (1:1), Darius (6:1) and Artaxerxes (7:15) each made a decree enabling the work to proceed, although earlier in his reign Artaxerxes had made a decree that stopped the work (4:23-24). None of these kings were believing men, although Cyrus seems at least to have had an awareness of God (1:2). We sing at times that "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform" and certainly His ways are surprising and past finding out (Rom. 11:33). But all through Scripture we find expressions of the glory and wonder of the sovereign providence of God. One example is Rom. 11:33-36. We find the same emphasis in Eph. 1:22 which affirms that Christ is made head over *all* things in the interest of the church. We need to remember this because it is so easy to panic when circumstances seem confused and seem to be turning against God's people and work. There is a grandeur in this decree of permission, provision and protection (13, 15, 26) and it makes us think of the God who does far above what we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). But it also makes us think of the prayer and intercession that lay behind this remarkable development in God's work. If Ezra was the kind of godly man we spoke of yesterday, then there are good grounds for believing that he and others with him will have prayed, perhaps for a long time. Certainly they will have prayed with earnestness, their hearts burdened by a longing for the good of the House of God and the honour of God's name. It was a burden given by the Holy Spirit. We need to be sensitive to the constraints of the Spirit and, when people or situations are laid on our hearts by God, then we must pray, and keep on praying. The words of 2 Chron. 7:14 have come again and again to mind as these notes have been written.

[Back to Top](#)

7:11-26

The Shorter Catechism says, "God's works of providence are His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions." Think of that in terms of the details of this passage, not least v.25-26 where a pagan king, who knew a lot about keeping a kingdom stable, instructed that Ezra had to make sure that the work in Jerusalem was a work firmly rooted and grounded in the Law of God. The king saw the

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

need for the people of God to be thoroughly taught in the Word of God, and his strictures in v.26 are no doubt a reflection of how he would deal with any of his executives or administrators who did not conform to the laws and principles of his earthly kingdom. The lesson is plain. If there are in the church, in any work of God, those who do not stand by the basic truths and principles of God's word, they will become sooner or later a danger to the work, undermining it from within. This is a danger warned about in the New Testament in such passages as Acts 20:29-30; Jude 3:4; Eph. 4:13-14. Note finally that the open door of opportunity required that there should be a people willing to go with God. If they were willing, then there would be a new injection of eager, dedicated people into a long-standing work that had grown weary and had virtually ground to a halt in the city of Jerusalem. True revival is always the reviving of the church, and it is the quickening of the life of the people of God that leads to the power of the Gospel reaching out to the world. But the church can be so lazy, complacent and spiritually sluggish that God has to send in a new generation of people if there is to be any hope for the future. Think of Jesus' words in Matt. 21:43 and of Paul's words speaking of being disqualified from further service (1 Cor. 9:27).

[Back to Top](#)

7:27-28

Two things about Ezra are made plain here. We see first the spirit of worship in his heart. Read Psalm 118:1-6, 19-24, 28-29. This was indeed the Lord's doing and Ezra was filled with admiration for his God. He was also thrilled at the thought of going up to Jerusalem and to the re-built Temple, the House of God. Think again of the Psalms and how the godly loved the house of God, the tabernacle of His grace. Think of how many love to sing the Metrical Versions of Psalms 84 and 122. Of course, it is not the building itself that matters, but the fact that it is there, so that the people of God can gather to worship and to know themselves to be in the presence of God. Yes, God is with us wherever we go and we are able to worship and be blessed in places that are not very conducive to spiritual awareness or feelings. Psalm 139 makes that plain. But there is in fact no substitute for the people of God meeting together in a place set apart and sanctified, a place where prayer is wont to be made (Acts 16:13). The New Testament urges us to be diligent in meeting together (Heb. 10:25) and we must recognise the individualism and the anti-church spirit of many professedly evangelical believers to be contrary to God's Word. The other thing we see here about Ezra is his humanity. He took courage. He needed it. He had been through a lot and he knew a great deal of work and responsibility lay ahead of him. The awareness of God's hand on him and the gathering round him of significant men ready and willing to go with him, gave him heart. Never think that spiritual leaders can "go it alone". Jesus looked for human encouragement in Gethsemane, but did not get it from his sleeping, unaware friends. Paul needed it, and got it, when Christians came to meet him on the way to Rome (Acts 28:15). The ministry of encouragement is important, and it has to be at the right time.

[Back to Top](#)

8:1-15

Answered prayer; a quickening of God's work and the opportunity to move forward; and a spirit of worship. praise and thanksgiving such as we read of in the previous chapter are exciting and thrilling things. But faith without works is a dead thing (Jas.2:20,26) and "surges" of spirituality have to be put to the test. Today's verses bring us down to earth. The number of volunteers who came forward to go with Ezra on this spiritual crusade number just under 1,500 individuals (or perhaps families). This compares poorly with over 42,000 in the first phase of the return to Jerusalem (2: 64). This should not surprise us for the same kind of thing is seen today. People sing heartily, "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee", and with equal fervour declare, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." But when the call to practical service comes, especially if it is liable to disturb ordered and comfortable life, many are significant by their absence. Note, of course, that the names of those who went with Ezra were recorded. The absentees could never hide the fact of their absence. God knows. He always knows when reasons are simply excuses (Lk. 14:18). But special mention is made of the absence of the Levites, men set apart to minister in holy things, and who should have been in the forefront, not least to give an example to others. This is a word to elders in congregations, to all office bearers and leaders, and indeed to all the men who claim to be Christians. Why is it that so often men are few in number compared to women in prayer meetings? Why in prayer meetings do men not take the lead that is right for them

to take? Why are so many areas of the mission field staffed by women? Are we where we should be or are we otherwise engaged?

[Back to Top](#)

8:16-20

There is evidence here of the courage of Ezra and also of his deep spiritual awareness. He was not prepared to allow the defaulting Levites to be absent without being challenged and he sent a responsible delegation to plead the case for "ministers" for the House of God. It was indeed strange that the very people set apart for service in God's House were so unwilling to be part of this new phase of God's work, when it was so clear that God's hand was on it. Some suggest that, over a spell of time, the position of the Levites had been devalued, that the calling of the Levites was no longer regarded as an honoured position, and that this was why they were reluctant to come forward. As the result of Ezra's challenge some did come. Perhaps we should all search our hearts on this issue. Do "place" and "recognition" and "status" affect our willingness to serve God? Think of the Son of God who washed the disciples' feet (John .13:1-5) and who was willing to forfeit all His rights and position in order to serve (Phil. 2:5-8). Think also how necessary it is at times to challenge others, family and friends, when they are not doing what they should be doing in relation to the work of God. This was the courage of Ezra. His spiritual awareness is manifest in that he saw the need for the spiritual heart of this venture to be right and to be properly provided for before any move forward was made. Again we need to search our own hearts. Efficiency, organisation and forward planning on a practical basis can take so much time and energy that we simply forget the preparation of the heart. But if we are not right spiritually, if our fellowship and walk with God are neglected, then our work is likely to be barren.

[Back to Top](#)

8:21-23

Ezra's companions may well have been impatient with him at this delay but he knew the importance of waiting upon God. We have emphasised often that what we are in the secret place of our hearts, what we are in our personal dealings with God, that and no more we will be in terms of public spiritual service. Think of how at a significant crisis earlier in Israel's history, Elijah the prophet, in symbolic action, repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down (1 Kings 18:30). If the place of fellowship and meeting with God in our lives is neglected, then that spiritual decline will spread to all our activities. In the New Testament we find Paul renouncing all wrong attitudes and activities lest these hidden things, which people may not know about, should in any way cloud the proclamation of the Gospel. (2 Cor.4:1-5). In 1 Cor. 1:17 Paul speaks of how the preaching of the Cross can be made of no effect by our wrong handling of it. These are the reasons why Ezra was so concerned that he and his colleagues should fast, and humble themselves before God. To humble oneself is not to humiliate or devalue our persons, capacities or service. It is rather an unqualified yielding of ourselves and committing ourselves and our work to God *before* we start. As a leader Ezra knew the burden of responsibility resting on him in respect of all the people involved. There would be dangers as well as demands and he sought from God a clear, safe way forward. He was also concerned about, the public witness of this new work. People would watch and God's reputation would be at stake. After all, Ezra had testified to the king that God's hand was on them. He had made it plain that their trust and hope were in their God. He could not go now and ask for a king's escort. He prayed and he committed the work to God. He was sure prayer was heard and would be answered.

[Back to Top](#)

8:24-30

Note that Ezra did not ask for volunteers but made specific choice of those he considered to be trustworthy and capable. Note also that the men concerned did not argue the point. This is how it should be. If we are part of God's work, and if God has set a leader over us, then we should be willing to be led (Heb. 13:7, 17). When Paul and Barnabas began their missionary service, it was not a case of their offering to go, but of their being set apart by the church at the command of God (Acts 13:1-3). Perhaps in our "liberated" day we are too concerned with "our" decisions and with "our" offering for service. Volunteers are not necessarily the best suited to a specific work, because it is easy to over-estimate our capacity (Matt. 20:20-22). Of course, we can also under-estimate

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

our capacity, as Moses did when he argued with God (Ex, 3:11; 4:1), In today's verses it is the man who had waited on God who took the decisions and the men chosen did not hesitate. They may have had other thoughts about the service they might render but these were laid aside. Their willingness must have been a great encouragement to their God appointed leader. Note what Ezra said to these men (28-29). He did not emphasise that they had been conscripted nor that they had at first, been unwilling. He told them they were holy, set. apart for God, and that what was entrusted to their care was likewise holy and precious to God. What a privilege to men who had been reluctant but who had responded when challenged! They had been given a second chance to prove themselves. Imagine their reaction when told to guard the treasure until they finally handed it over in the House of God. Guard the Gospel! (1 Tim.6:20) Guard the work entrusted to us, because it is God's work and we will all answer for our stewardship when we stand before God (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

[Back to Top](#)

8:31-36

In our day when travel can be so swift and largely free from danger if not from hazards, we tend to forget just how slow, costly and dangerous it was for people to make such a journey as Ezra and his companions made. We must not fail to note the indication in v.31 of dangers and threats faced by the Jews. They bore testimony that God delivered them and brought them to their destination. Only those who travelled really knew all that the journey demanded. Only they could tell how often they were driven to prayer, and they would be the first to acknowledge that the time of quiet, spiritual preparation (15, 21) had been very necessary. Chapter 7:9 tells us that the journey of four months started on the first: day of the first month, and 8:15 tells of three days at Ahava and 8:31 says that they departed from Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month. It seems that Ezra led them out from Persia and then after journeying eight days the whole concourse was stopped for three days of fasting and prayer. It is difficult to get all the details in the correct sequence but there seems to have been wisdom in getting the people on the move; detaching them from the entanglements of worldly life; then curbing their natural enthusiasm, bringing them consciously into an attitude of mind and heart: that looked to God in total dependence. After all, in our human enthusiasm, it is easy to rush on and to press ahead even in Christian activity in such a way that God is forgotten. Ezra, being a wise man, looked for and was given assistance from God step by step. It is only when we know what we are .doing, and know we are doing it by the will of God, that we are able to cope with the attacks of the enemy. Note that, when they came to Jerusalem, before rushing on, they again waited three days. They needed that pause physically, emotionally and spiritually. Wait, I say, on the Lord (Ps. 27:14).

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-5

From this point right to the end of the book we have a sad story which exposes just how far the people and the work of God had slipped and had been compromised. It must have been a shattering experience for Ezra and his colleagues after a long, arduous journey in which they had looked forward to taking their places in the work of God at Jerusalem, to discover they were faced with a mountain of difficulty. There could well have been a reaction of criticism from Ezra's company against their leader, complaining that he had brought them under false pretences to a work that was anything but a great and promising crusade. This was the kind of reaction Moses often got from a discontented people (Ex. 17:3). But this is not the emphasis here. In fact, the arrival of Ezra and his godly company had the effect, by the Holy Spirit (who is not mentioned but who was undoubtedly working), of bringing out into the open the sins and failures of the people of God. The officials (8:33 who maintained religious ordinances but who had seemingly been unable to check the wrongs of the people, came to Ezra and told him the story of spiritual backsliding. If Ezra had not been spiritually prepared this would have demolished him, but in fact it seems that he was instantly aware that this was the very reason why he had been laid hold on by God and sent to Jerusalem. At the same time his distress was deep and painful, because he loved God and desired for the work of God the very best. This situation had to be recognised at once as a work of Satan and had to be dealt with radically. But before any action was taken, Ezra went to God in prayer.

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-5

There are various kinds of sins that grieve God and take us away from God, quenching the Spirit and bringing to a sorry end our usefulness in God's service. False spirituality can do it (Matt. 23:13-15); immorality can do it (1 Cor. 5:1-6); and wrong relationships can do it, and do it on a long-term basis if the relationship leads to a Christian marrying a non-Christian (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). It was this last situation that Ezra found in Jerusalem, but we need to recognise also that two Christians getting married does not necessarily mean a Christian marriage if they are not meant for each other in the will of God. The Jews must have known the Law of God concerning relationships as it is stated so clearly in Deut. 7:1-11, a passage that is full of the redeeming love of God. But it seems that in spite of all that God had done for them and all the rich grace of His blessing, when the Temple had been re-built and things became settled and established, the people gradually lapsed into spiritual complacency and carelessness. They lowered for themselves the standards of commitment and behaviour required of a people who were named with the name of God. All classes of people seem to have been involved in this mingling with the heathen. Perhaps as the work got established some of the heathen were attracted to the liveliness and success of the work and wanted to join in, regardless of whether or not they were in any sense believers, and they were accepted. Then the association became deeper and inter-marrying began, regardless of the testimony of past experience that this kind of thing led to spiritual disaster. It is difficult to say whether it was the involvement in marriages with the heathen that led to spiritual declension or if it was spiritual declension that led to the blindness that led them so far away from God. The warning is clear. Walk in the light with God (1 John 1:7) and keep yourself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

[Back to Top](#)

9:1-5

We spend one more day with these verses to grasp the final lessons. We must note the deep distress and the openly expressed spirit of repentance on the part of Ezra. Even though he was not involved in the sins he was the spiritual leader of the work and if it was to have a future there had to be a new realism and an abandoning of sin. That was to be costly, and would involve ending deep emotional relationships (10:44). Repentance is not spoken about much these days even in evangelical circles and it is often confused with feelings of distress when our sins have found us out. Read 2 Cor. 7:8-11. True repentance is practical and it gets rid of things that are wrong. Ezra was very much a man who stood in the gap for the nation (Ezek.22:30) and the reality of his concern, repentance and prayer brought to his side all who sensed the seriousness of the situation (4). Note, all did not feel as Ezra did. Some would feel he was being too serious, but when dealing with sin it is best to be appalled. The last thing to note is that with great deliberation, with a sense of the issues involved, and recognising that a work of Satan had been established among the people of God, Ezra went to God in prayer. If you feel there is need for another passage of Scripture today read Daniel 9:3-19 and ask the Lord to teach us all to pray. Note that it is not just a sense of sin, nor a sense of the danger threatening the work of God, that led these great men to pray. It was a sense of the greatness, the holiness and the goodness of God. What grieved Ezra (and God) was the thought of how this people who had received so much blessing from God could possibly deal with Him in such a graceless way. Let him who is without this sin cast the first stone.

[Back to Top](#)

9:6-9

This note was written for Good Friday, God's Friday, and our thoughts must be at the place called Calvary where they crucified Him who is the Son of God. Ezra's words at the start of his prayer are totally suitable for today for we too should be ashamed to lift up our faces and to look on the Man of Sorrows. There is no place where our sins are more exposed and condemned. This is the price that had to be paid for our sins in order that we might be forgiven. We cannot be told too often that He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and that it was through His stripes that we are ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven. He loved us and gave Himself for us without qualification, but do we give ourselves to Him with the same glad surrender? God so loved us that He gave us His own Son, not sparing Him but delivering Him up for us all; but do we not spare ourselves the pain of true consecration? This sinless Saviour, His head crowned with thorns, His body carrying on the tree the load of our sins, His Person mocked and reviled, is the one who freely and gladly surrendered all His rights and liberties in order to bring us to God. This is the One we so often forget to

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

honour with our love, loyalty and service. On Good Friday all who passed by the Cross mocked and reviled Him. But from His lips came the words, "Father, forgive them." What a Saviour! Turn to Scripture and read one of the Gospel accounts of Good Friday, perhaps Matthew's account which in the AV records that "sitting clown they watched Him there."

"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

[Back to Top](#)

9:6-9

Two things dominated Ezra's thinking as he prayed. He was deeply convicted of and aware of personal sin and the sin of God's own people. He was also aware that a shallow attitude to sin very soon paralyses the whole of spiritual life. Although the "mixed marriages" were the obvious issue, Ezra's concern was not with any one specific sin but rather with the easy attitude of the people and the absence of any real fear of God. The A.V. translation of Ps. 66:18 declares that if we regard iniquity in our hearts the Lord will not hear. Indeed there will be a barrier between us and God, and the result will be all manner of complications and reverses. Think of the story in Joshua 7:1-13. When sin is in personal life or in the fellowship, spiritual decline and disorder follow inevitably. But note how, in his prayer, Ezra did not point the accusing finger at others. He identified himself with his people and said, "We have sinned. We are guilty. We have denied our Lord and compromised our testimony." He looked back over the years (7) and said tragically, "Lord, we have not changed. Like our fathers before the nation collapsed into captivity, we have played the fool; we have resisted your grace." (2 Chron. 36: 15-16; Acts 7:51-53). Part of Ezra's concern was for the new generation of Jews who had come with him to Jerusalem and he feared lest the older generation which had degenerated so far spiritually would infect the young and make them casual and careless. What a responsibility rests on those who have been on the Christian way a long time! Does our attitude and pattern of life quench the enthusiasm and qualify the dedication of younger Christians so that we draw them away from God? Read Ps. 139:23-24.

[Back to Top](#)

9:10-15

Easter Day brings the message of renewed hope to those who have failed. The Easter Gospel tells of forgiveness, restoration to service, and glorious deliverance from the powers and passions that have held our lives in bondage. Of course, the Emmaus story in Luke 24:25-27 brings a rebuke to those who have been slow to believe and understand what has been written in the Scriptures. There is no excuse for unbelief nor is there need to remain in defeat, because the great Resurrection chapter tells us we have been given the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-56). Easter is a glorious message to all those who have blundered and failed; those who know they are not what they once were spiritually; and those who feel they have lost out on every level. Easter is all about being raised to newness of life with the sure promise that sin shall not have dominion over us (Rom. 6:4-14). Ezra seems to grasp this message of hope when he speaks in v.8 of yet another chance by the favour of God. He seems to sense that God had not cast them off for ever. He speaks of the God who brightens our eyes and revives us in our bondage. Ezra thought of all that had been happening in this new release from Persia, their safe journey and arrival, and the provision and protection promised to the work. His whole heart seems to say that God had not done all this simply to abandon them now, even though they deserved it. He was aware of God's love. He was aware that God remembers His people and extends His love to them. This is indeed the Easter Gospel. It tells of the risen Christ who comes to His people and opens the door of hope. Read one of the Easter passages such as Luke 24.

[Back to Top](#)

9:10-15

Having spoken in the first part of the prayer about the wonderful goodness and grace of God Ezra now confesses that the people had responded to God's generous love with disobedience. He acknowledges that God's truth and God's laws and principles for the life and service of His people were written clear and plain by Moses (10). All the warnings were there, and they were given not to deny the people of God life and fulfilment, but to protect them from harm and to lead them into true and full life. In v.10 Ezra also refers to the fact that there was

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

a land to be possessed, a work to be done, and no one could do it but God's chosen people. But (12) they would never be spiritually and morally strong enough to claim the nation and the land for God unless they were right with God. If we are right with God, and do not do right by God, then we will leave a legacy of complication, weakness, danger and disaster for our children after us (Ex. 20:5; 34:7). When we come to the last chapter of Ezra we may see that already fathers, sons and grandsons were involved in these unholy marriages with pagans. The challenge is clear. Even if we are not prepared to do right by God for our own sakes, please God we will do it for our children's sake. There is no suggestion in Ezra's prayer that God is hard, harsh or demanding. Indeed he says that God had been gentle and kind and had not punished as sternly as He might have done. Read Ps. 103:10-14. But at the end of the prayer Ezra recognises the possibility of spiritual loss that can never be recovered. It is all very solemn, but if it brings us back to God the end will be rejoicing.

[Back to Top](#)

10:1-5

We are reading the story of how a situation of great revival in the initial return to Jerusalem and the building of the Temple had, within about fifty years, become a situation of apostasy. Think of how the church at Ephesus, which received Paul's glorious epistle of that name, is spoken of in Rev. 2:1-7 as a church that had left its first love and was in danger of being removed from its place. This was the kind of situation Ezra faced and he cried to God in prayer. The amazing thing is that while he was still praying the answer was beginning to be given, for a great company of people gathered to him and they too began to weep because of their sins. They began to seek God with their whole heart and they came right to the point when they confessed that they had broken faith with God. This was the plain truth which God declared about His people in Joshua 7:1. It is a bad thing to break faith with a faithful friend; a worse thing to break faith with a marriage-partner who has given us love and loyalty; but a terrible thing indeed to break faith with God from whom we have received all we have, even life itself. Think what we would have been and where we might have been but for the grace of God. Don't forget to think of how God Himself feels when His people break faith with Him. Read, for example, Isa. 1:2-3; 5:1-4; Micah 6:1-4. God asks His people if *He* has failed *them*! What we are reading here in Ezra is, without doubt, the work of God's Holy Spirit in answer to prayer. But we must consider these verses more fully to see just how closely repentance is associated with revival.

[Back to Top](#)

10:1-5

The call to repentance is a constant one in Scripture and it has to do with putting right specific things that are not pleasing to God. Repentance is not just being sorry for our sins, but being sorry enough to stop. We see this specific attitude in the words of Shecaniah (2) who spoke for the people. Note that there has been no indication that Ezra preached. Perhaps he knew that when lives are already committed to relationships that dishonour God, and when the spirit of worldliness has trapped and blinded believers, there is a devilish insensitivity to spiritual issues. Sermons can be listened to and even appreciated without any actual conviction or response. The spirit of worldliness is indeed an evil spirit (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Tim. 4:10). It was intercessory prayer that brought the result. It may well have been that Shecaniah was the first man to be awakened to God and he perhaps began to speak to and to counsel others even as Ezra still prayed. Only God could bring the radical result expressed in v.3. Such was the costly nature of the remedy (and our minds stagger at it) that the conviction about it had to come from God alone. Think how costly it can be for a wrong romantic relationship to be brought to an end even when there is no clear intention to marry. We are dealing here with marriages that should never have taken place; marriages that had been a deliberate denial of people's commitment to God; marriages that had introduced confusion into the community of the people of God. Little wonder there was a trembling before God. If there was to be hope for the future, moral and emotional surgery had to be performed. Marriages cannot be severed in this way now, but the principle of separation from sin is clear. If we would have a future of spiritual hope: Get right with God.

[Back to Top](#)

10:6-8

Look back to v.4 and see how obvious it was to all that if this renewal of the work was to go forward a leader was needed. But note also the words, "we are with you" (v.4 RSV). Do we always stand with God's leader and do we make it plain to him that we do so? There can be a tendency, when spirituality is low and shallow, for many to hold back, reserving their position and waiting to see if the leader is going to be successful and then, only when the success of the movement seems guaranteed, do they join in. It was not so here, and such a commitment from leading men signifies something of the conviction and realism which only God's Holy Spirit can produce. Ezra's immediate reaction (6) indicates something of the deep burden of his heart and his awareness of the costly road to be followed, costly not only for himself but for all concerned. We cannot but think of our Lord's tears over Jerusalem as He viewed the sad spiritual situation and the coming desolation (Matt. 23:37-39; Lk. 19: 41-44). We must think also of Jesus in Gethsemane, so aware of the costly way before Him (Matt. 26: 36ff). Think of Paul's burden for his converts in 2 Cor. 2:4 and Gal. 4:19.20. Spiritual leadership, pastoral concern and a commitment to do the will of God are costly. We could well imagine Ezra shrinking from what had to be done and that is why he sought the presence of God, no doubt reassured by the thought that others stood with him and prayed for him. Then the whole process was set in motion. The edict was made (7) and the note of urgency was sounded. There was a time limit. In the business of getting right with God there comes a time when delay is simply sin. If you are troubled about things in your spiritual life, put them right today. You could well lose you place in the on-going work of God.

[Back to Top](#)

10:9-15

It is quite awesome to read how all the men gathered at Jerusalem in the open air, at the time of year when it would be cold and the rain heavy (9). This spirit of concern, this awareness of having to deal with God, and this conviction of sin could never have been brought about by man, not even a man of Ezra's spiritual stature. This was the work of God, and this is the kind of widespread conviction of sin and earnest desire to deal with God that can be read about in the stories of great revivals. This is what is meant by an "awakening" and it is all the more astonishing here because it was the awakening of backsliders, who are notoriously hard to reach. Those who have known what it is to walk and to work with God, who then drift spiritually because of wrong relationships and marriages, tend to be tremendously indifferent and insensitive to spiritual issues. No doubt part of the reason is an instinctive awareness of what it will cost and what disruption of life there will be if a return to God is contemplated. Note in today's passage how the men trembled because they knew they were not right with God. This was a concern that took precedence over all the other practical matters of life. It was something that had to be faced, and Ezra did not waste any words. He came right to the point, declared their personal sin and charged them with sinning against and harming the whole life and work of the people of God. Think of how, when we are challenged about wrong things in our lives, we tend to say that we are harming no-one but ourselves. This is not so. Just as Eve in the Garden sinned and then took her husband astray with her (Gen. 3:6), so when we sin in wrong relationships we take our partners away from God and an element of wrong and an infection of sin are introduced to the life of the fellowship.

[Back to Top](#)

10:9-15

Ezra made plain that the wrong situation could not be rectified by praying about it, but only by action. He called on the men to put things right. This was going to be costly to the women and children involved and we assume that rightful provision would be made. But our concern on this level must not make us lose sight of the fact that we are being taught spiritual truth. The first step in getting right with God is to acknowledge that we have gone wrong (11a). The next step is to put right what is wrong (11b). What we read of in v.13 could suggest procrastination and that is always a temptation. But the people were not really making excuses but were rather recognising that the rectifying of the situation would take time. Verses 16-17 make plain that the thorough going investigation and action took three months, and this indicates the realism with which the people set themselves to get. their lives and their work back into God's good will. It is disturbing to see in v.15 that even in such a significant movement of the Spirit of God there were those who opposed. Two men protested and resisted this interference in their love lives, and they incited two others to do the same. What a terrible thing it is

George Philip Bible Reading In Book Of Ezra

to lead another Christian away from true spiritual obedience! And it can be done by influence without speaking a word. Think of the people you have chosen to be closest to. Are they helping you to get nearer God or, since your relationship with them, are you slipping away from the spiritual commitment and freshness that once marked your life? Always remember that if you have slipped spiritually you are a hindrance not a help in the ongoing work of God.

[Back to Top](#)

10:16-44

A list of names does not seem to be promising material for meditation. But if we consider the last verse we see that a public record had been made of all the defaulters, those who had backslidden, those who had married out of the will of God. It was a public memorial to the transgressors and, in our modern language, we would say it included the names of ministers, elders, office-bearers, Sunday School teachers and Youth Leaders. Now look at v.19 and see how they pledged themselves to put right the specific thing in their lives that was wrong. The hurt and sorrow and perhaps bitter recrimination must have been great, and no doubt there would be men who lived with the memory of this for the rest of their days. They would know that it was their sin that had caused the hurt to those they had loved. There is no such thing as easy repentance. But if we are to be God's people to do His will and to know His blessing for ourselves and those we seek to serve, we must be right. To be out of God's will is to lose everything that is of value. That is why we must guard our decisions lest we lose our place in the service of God (1 Cor. 9:27). The issue here was believers marrying unbelievers. But we can get out of God's will by marrying the wrong Christian or by refusing to marry the right person. Some actions cannot be remedied. Sometimes we have to live out our lives with the consequences of our actions. But always there is forgiveness with God. He restores the backslider and loves him still. But there is a time and an opportunity to put things right and we must not miss it. Today, if we hear God's voice, we must not harden our hearts (Heb. 3:8).

[Back to Top](#)