

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of Ezra

(These Notes were first printed in May 1975)

The book of Ezra deals with the post-exilic period of Jewish history, and describes the return of the captive people of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem, first under Zerubbabel, during whose time the rebuilding of the Temple took place, and later under Ezra himself, whose ministry among his people led to a considerable and extensive work of reformation. Other post-exilic literature comprises Nehemiah and Esther, dealing with the history of the period, and the books of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, who ministered during this time. Together they form the last section of revealed history before the coming of Christ and the institution of the New Covenant.

I) I:I

The book of Ezra divides into two parts chapters 1-6, which deal with a return of exiles in the reign of Cyrus of Persia in 538 BC under Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest; and chapters 7-10, which deal with the return of Ezra himself in 458 BC with a further contingent of exiles. Only the second section, therefore, is biographical, relating to Ezra the scribe; and his story is continued for us in the latter part of Nehemiah.

The following table will give an indication of the general chronology of the period (the dates are approximate):

Cyrus the Great	539-529
1. Cambyses	529-522
2. Pseudo-Smerdis	522
3. Darius I (Hystaspes)	521-485
4. Zerxes I (Ahasuerus)	485-464
5. Artaxerxes I (Longimanus)	464-424
6. Xerxes	424-423
7. Sogdianus	423
8. Darius II (Nothus)	423-404
9. Artaxerxes II (Mnemon)	404-358

Difference of view has been held as to the dates of the events recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah, but in our study we are going to accept the traditional view as satisfying and correct, and that it was in the reigns of Cyrus, Darius I, Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I that the history recorded in these books took place.

2) I:I

G. Adam Smith makes the following division of the period before us in this study:

1. From the taking of Babylon by Cyrus to the completion of the Temple in the sixth year of Darius I, 538-516. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in this period (cf Ezra 6:14).
2. From the completion of the Temple to the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I, 516-458. This is sometimes called the period of silence. Malachi may have prophesied during it.
3. The work of Ezra and Nehemiah under Artaxerxes I, 458-425. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458, Nehemiah in 445.

The book of Ezra touches upon each of these sections.

3) I:I

A brief resume of the book may help to introduce its theme, and enable us to see the kind of lesson it has to teach us today. Chapter 1 opens with the decree of Cyrus, permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. The remainder of the chapter tells of the offerings made for the project, and of Cyrus's restoration of the Temple vessels. Then, in chapter 2, a record of all who returned with Zerubbabel.

On their return to Jerusalem (3:1-7) the altar of burnt offering was erected, offerings made, and the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated. In the second month of the second year, work was begun on the Temple itself (3:8-23). Adversaries began to interfere (4:1-5) and to frustrate the work of building. This opposition went on for years, with the result that the work was stopped. This state of affairs continued until the reign of Darius I. The people, it appears, lost heart, but Haggai and Zechariah stirred them up to work on the Temple.

Opposition again appeared, and the matter was referred to Darius I (5:1-17), who searched for Cyrus' decree, and himself decreed that the work should go on. This was decisive, and in 516/515 the Temple was completed and dedicated, and the Passover and Feast of Unleavened bread observed (6:1-22).

In the second half of the book, we see Ezra coming to Jerusalem (chapters 7/8). In chapter 9, we read of Ezra's sorrow and mourning when he learns that the people have lost the vision of the earlier years, and had lost their testimony by inter-marriage with the inhabitants of the land. He prays for reviving. In chapter 10 we read of his reforms, and the renewing of spirit that took place. Such is the pattern of the book we are now to study.

4) 1:1-11

The first and obvious lesson that stands out in these verses is that of the sovereignty of God as shown in the decree made by Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. It was God who was behind the tragedy of the Captivity in 586 BC, and it was God who was behind their release. And the best among His people knew this, knew that even in their discipline they were in His hands. 'I will not let them go', God had cried through Hosea (Hosea 11:8, 9). And it was true. But He did not let them off either. And when His time was ready, He manipulated world events to suit His people. He put it in the heart of Cyrus to set them free; He raised up Cyrus to break the power of Babylon for this reason, 'He raiseth up and putteth down'. This is the perspective from which we should view international affairs today. God is in control. This should give us a certain detachment about international situations, and national ones too.

The sovereignty of God means that the spiritual initiative always lies with Him, never with the dark powers of evil. This is especially important in view of what we are going to see again and again in this study, in the difficulties and oppositions that God's people encountered at that time. One thinks of the strange experience recorded in Daniel 10, in which the prophet was assured that his prayer (for his people's deliverance) was heard, but that nevertheless dark powers had resisted the answer's coming, and hindered it. 'The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me', said the angel to Daniel. It is in this context that the sovereignty of God is seen at its clearest, for here, the king of Persia is made willing!

5) 1:1-11

The previous point is relevant and significant in another way and in another connection. Throughout the book we read of difficulty after difficulty, opposition after opposition, which seemed to break the spirit of the people and bring them into bleak discouragement. It is hardly possible not to contrast the situation as it actually developed with how it had been ideally hoped and longed for. Where was the spirit of Psalm 126? Where was the rapture of Isaiah 40-49 (cf Isaiah 41:10-19, 44:23-28, 49:18ff)? What of all these glowing, marvellous promises? It all turned out so differently in reality.

Ah, but God never promised it would be easy or automatic. The great reality of their liberation was a fact, an indisputable truth of their experience. They were back to the land. And, given this, all difficulties and obstacles are worth fighting against, and must be fought against. God had given them their freedom: but now they must possess it, and make it their own, by dint of hard, persevering effort, courage and resolution. It takes hard work and a long time to renew the face of a spiritual situation that had fallen into such a tragic mess as this had done. It is not done overnight. It took the prophet Samuel a lifetime to build up the waste places of Israel after the moral shambles of the days of the Judges. Perhaps the exiles had pined somewhat romantically in Babylon about the future, and had undermined themselves thereby. There is a lesson here for us. Moral and spiritual renewal will never come about without hard and costly work, done in a spirit that refuses to be discouraged by oppositions, difficulties and setbacks.

6) 1:1-11

In this time of crisis and opportunity we should note that God had His men to match the need of the hour, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, men of the Word, to give a lead to the people, to guide them and inspire them in the work of the Lord, amid all the difficulties and besetments that faced them. Nor were these of one kind only. We see another sort in Haggai 2:2-9: 'Is it (the temple) not in your eyes in comparison of it (the former one) as nothing?' They looked back in memory to the first Temple, to the 'good old days', and this was so little by comparison, so insignificant. But there may be a snare in looking back in this way. 'God fulfils Himself in many ways, lest one good custom should corrupt the world'. In Isaiah 40-49 the words 'I will do a new thing' are repeated and emphasised. It may be that they thought too much in the wrong way of the former glow. Wrong thinking about the Temple had led them to ruin anyway. It needed to be a new thing this time. Let us learn from this to look forward, not back. It is renewal we need, not just a particular pattern of renewal. The pattern of 19th century renewal, or 18th, or 17th, may not be sufficient for the needs of the 21st. But we have His promise that 'the glory of the latter house shall be greater than of the former' (Haggai 2:9). Should not that be enough for us?

7) 1:1-11

We have spoken of the sovereignty of God at work in the historical situation. But that sovereignty expresses itself through natural means, and we may very legitimately ponder how it should have been that Cyrus was so willing to release the captive Hebrews. For, let it be noted that he explicitly says, 'The Lord (Jehovah) ... hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem' - what did he know of Jehovah? To this question there can really only be one answer. Let us look back to the story in Daniel 5 of the writing on the wall. The witness of Daniel was one of the main factors, under God, in the overthrow of Babylon. The mention of the Temple vessels desecrated by Belshazzar, both in Daniel 5 and here, is significant in this connection. The knowledge of the living God was made known in the court of Persia through Daniel. 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' cries the exiled Psalmist. This is how, and it teaches us that faithfulness to God tells, in ways far beyond our possible knowledge or understanding, and fits into the grand design of God's purposes for the future. We can trace Daniel's profound influence back to its source in the first chapter of his prophecy, and realise the vast and incalculable implications of his faithful stand thus early in his experience, when he 'purposed in his heart that he should not defile himself with the king's meat'. Such a quality of consecration played a significant part in the ultimate restoration of the exiles, in the fullness of the time!

8) 1:1-11

We should note, in the next place, the expressions used in 1 and 5 to describe both Cyrus' attitude and that of the exiles who returned: 'The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus' (1); and 'All them whose spirit God had raised' (5). There are several things to be underlined here. For one thing, the emphasis is that it was the Lord who wrought upon Cyrus, laying His hand upon him and anointing him for this work. This is important for this reason: there were those who would balk at the idea of a heathen Gentile becoming God's deliverer of His people. The narrow exclusivism of rigid Jewish orthodoxy would be slow indeed to accept such an unpalatable truth. But the scribe recognises that it belongs to the sovereignty of God that He should do His work in His own way. They were to beware - as we must - of substituting for faith in God their own preconceived notions of how God ought to work, or of limiting His activity to our own conceptions of what instruments He ought to use.

For another thing, it can hardly be gainsaid that something else must have lain behind this stirring of spirit. We mentioned earlier Daniel's influence on Cyrus as a factor in the all-important decree. But there was something even more important than Daniel's open witness - the prayer life behind it. In the later chapters of his book we see him wrestling with God in prayer, confessing the sins of his people, and crying to God for their restoration. Is this not significant in this matter? For it is the prayers of the saints that indicate that the decrees of God are beginning to work. Prayer lay behind that moving of Cyrus' spirit by God, and prayer lay behind the raising of the spirits of the people to go up to Jerusalem. What could more effectively underline the importance of prayer in a time of spiritual declension and captivity than this? God is the hearer of prayer, and He can be entreated to move in liberating power, as the history of every revival of religion proves.

9) 1:1-11

But more. Renewal can come only when God Himself moves men and raises their spirits. We cannot have renewal when we like. Having grieved God away, and caused a famine of the Word, the Church cannot lightly say, as they said in Hosea's day, 'Come, and let us return to the Lord; He hath smitten, and He will heal us. In a day or two all will be well' - it does not work out like this in practice. He decreed the time, and the duration, of their captivity.

Furthermore, we need to note that, as G. Adam Smith points out, Cyrus was responsible for sending 'this people back to their land solely as a spiritual people. He did not allow them to set up again the house of David, but by his decree the Temple was rebuilt'. In other words, they were hedged in, by an alien power, to be what God had always intended them to be! What a parable! Can we see applications of this for our time? What of the destruction of organised Church life behind the Iron Curtain or in China? Could not this 'disaster' have been the hand of God making possible a true spiritual destiny for His Church and people, in the same way as the withdrawal of the British Raj from India and elsewhere in the world has made possible a truly indigenous witness, unaffected or uninfluenced by 'western civilisation'?

Finally, in 5-11, we see the provision of the 'wherewithal' for the whole operation. The same Spirit of God that raised the hearts of the exiles to go back to Jerusalem moved those round about them to give freely of their substance, and also moved Cyrus to give the sacred vessels that had been seized by Nebuchadnezzar. God does not do things by halves!

10) 2:1-35

This chapter - a long list of names - records the number of those who returned from the exile of Babylon to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Joshua. There are two points in particular that we need to note. The first is that it was clearly a remnant that returned to the Promised Land: by no means all who had been taken captive went back. So many of them remained in exile. There are two ways of looking at this: on the one hand we may think of the situation in terms of so many who were unmoved by the evident working of the Spirit of God at that time, and were unwilling to, or uninterested in, going back. They were settled down in the alien culture into which they had been transported, and were at home in it. They therefore refused their destiny as the chosen, separated people of God. It is always a 'remnant' that responds to the divine call: there are always those who remain spiritually insensitive. On the other hand, however, we may also think of the situation in terms of those who were permitted to return. One thinks of the much earlier tragedy of Kadesh-barnea (Numbers 14), and those who were not allowed to enter into the rest of God because of their unbelief. Something of this nature surely obtained here also. As was said earlier, we cannot repent or come back, when we like. It is God that calls the tune in this matter.

II) 2:36-70

The second point of note in this long chapter of names relates to the Levites (40-42). The striking thing here is that so few of them were numbered among the returning exiles - 341 only, compared with more than 4000 priests (36-39). Why should this have been? Look at their history, their calling: they were set apart unto God, appointed to bless the Lord's people in His Name. Was their unwillingness to go back to the land a refusal of their destiny, a turning away from His will for their lives? It was a situation full of opportunity: here was a high endeavour before them, the rebuilding of the Temple, and they were men set apart, by their profession of faith and their calling, for God and the things of God, yet they held back from the highest they knew! Who, more than they, should have been in the very forefront of this work? The well-known hymn says,

Take my life; and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

That, in theory, is where the Levites were. But where were they in this work of God? Back in Babylon, settled down in the world, their calling and their destiny forgotten, neglected, refused. The tragedy of it! This would surely be mystifying and inexplicable to us, but for the fact that it is so often reflected and repeated today in the life and service of the Church. What we may have to learn from this chapter is that to 'have something else on' when spiritual priorities lay claim to our allegiance and our loyalty is to run the risk of ultimate disqualification in the work of God.

12) 3:1-3

This chapter continues the narrative, and recounts the setting up of the altar of burnt offering, the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the laying of the foundations of the Temple itself. The first lesson of the chapter lies in the sequence of the events unfolded here. In the work of restoration after captivity, the construction of the Temple was to come first, then the building of the walls of the city - and the principle here is all important: judgment must begin at the house of God. But now, we see the same principle operating within a narrower framework - that of the Temple itself. And before the Temple foundation can be laid, there must be the establishing of the altar of God. The message here is surely clear and plain. It is this: before there can be any rebuilding of waste places, men must first of all get right with God.

But who can fight for truth and God,
Enthralled by lies and sin?
He who would wage such war on earth,
Must first be true within.

The altar of God was for the offering of burnt-offerings, and its rebuilding meant the reinstatement of the way of approach to God, and therefore the re-establishment of right relations with Him. The lesson here is symbolic but unequivocal. Let us consider it in the light of the events of those days. What had happened was that God had moved in power, to deliver His people and release them from bondage, to return to their own land. But it was not enough for them to 'jump on the bandwagon' of a forward movement like this. The literal return from Babylon must be matched by a spiritual return to God. It would have been very easy - and doubtless it was a melancholy fact with many in Israel at that time - to have been carried forward on the crest of the wave, deeply and even wildly enthusiastic about the return, but needing deep and radical soul-surgery to put them really right with God. The two things are not the same! More on this theme in the next Note.

13) 3:1-3

Let us apply what was said in the previous Note to our own situation. We have often spoken of the need for re-establishing the Word of God in the life of the Church. This is all very well, and there has been not a little enthusiasm and stirring in many throughout the land about this. But the re-establishing of the Word, the recovery of the Word in the life of the Church must be matched by a personal re-establishing and recovery of the Word of God in our hearts, in obedience to its disciplines and sharp, sanctifying thrusts. It would be easy - it is easy - to be carried along on the crest of the wave of public stir and comment; but this is not enough. For people could be carried along and deceived thereby into thinking that this was all that was required of them. Not so. We must be really right with God. Let us face this fairly and squarely.

Significantly, this is seen in other times of renewal recorded in Scripture. In 1 Samuel 7:1-13, which tells of the fruit of twenty long, weary years of uphill slogging on Samuel's part, we read of how the prophet called the people to heart-penitence. The drawing and pouring out of water (1 Samuel 7:6) was symbolic of pouring out their hearts to the Lord in humiliation and surrender. An ancient Chaldee version of the text reads, 'They poured out their hearts in penitence before the Lord'. And the burnt-offering wholly dedicated to the Lord is a similar indication of their new, total surrender (cf also 1 Kings 18:30-35, and Elijah's action preceding his great prayer on Mount Carmel). When we read all this into the situation in Ezra 3, we begin to see something of the significance of what is recorded here from the spiritual point of view. This was the need then, and this is the need now!

14) 3:1-3

A further point should be noted in 3. We are told that they set up the altar because fear was upon them because of the people of these countries. What was the significance of this (cf 2 Kings 17:25ff), where the heathen colonists settled in the deserted cities of Samaria entreated the king of Assyria to send them a priest to teach them the manner of worshipping the God of the land, that thus they might be protected from the lions that infested it? What was happening was this: the returned exiles were becoming conscious of the hostile attentions of the people of the surrounding districts. Real threats were upon them, and they were afraid. And this prompted them to build the altar. Things were not going well with them, because things were not right with them. And the moral power of fear moved them to do what they did. This must not be interpreted as a merely superstitious attitude - that would be to miss the point. Rather, it was a recognition and realisation on their part as to why they were being threatened by hostile forces, and a realisation that by their lack of heart-penitence they were laying themselves open to spiritual attack, and giving occasion to evil to gain advantage over them.

This is terribly important: it is fatal to throw down the gauntlet to the powers of darkness, and challenge their power and authority, if we ourselves are not right with God. What is more, when things are not right with us towards God, things tend to go wrong with us in other ways: things happen to us, and God allows them to happen to us, or to threaten us, if so be that very fear and apprehension may drive us to repair the broken altar in our lives. Not only so: to attempt to rebuild the broken-down temple of God's work without inner consecration simply leads to trouble because God is holy. 'Be ye clean', He says, 'that bear the vessels of the Lord.'

15) 3:4-13

Following the erection of the altar of burnt-offering, the people celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. For the proper celebration of this feast an altar was needed; and for right worship an altar is needed too - i.e. worship is dependent on a right relation to God. The celebration of the feast was an expression of the worship of God's people. But like other rites and rituals its real point could be missed, and it could become empty and formal, and barren of spiritual grace. This was the complaint of the prophets against Israel and Judah in pre-exilic times (cf Isaiah 1), and it became sadly true once again later in the Jews' history, particularly in the time of our Lord.

What was the significance of the feast? It was a commemoration of Israel's journeying in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. It was a great occasion, when the mighty works of God on their behalf were brought back to mind. It was also celebrated at the close of the harvest, and was regarded as a foreshadowing of the day of the Lord, and the final harvest home. One of the Scriptures read at the feast in later Judaism was Zechariah 14, which speaks of conditions obtaining in the messianic age - continuous daylight and an unfailing supply of water. In our Lord's time, two ceremonies took place during the festival, connected with the prophetic utterance in Zechariah: one was the drawing of water from the Pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher, to be poured on the altar by the priests, to the accompaniment of the singing of the congregation: 'With joy shall ye draw water from the wells of salvation'. The other was the all-night illumination of one of the Temple courts, so brilliantly that every court in Jerusalem was said to be lit up by it. Water and light - these were the emphases, and this is the background of John chapters 7 and 8, when Jesus made His memorable utterances: 'If any man thirst ...' and 'I am the light of the world.'

16) 3:4-13

Commemoration - this was the operative word in the feast. But from commemoration, it needed to become experience. This is the real heart of the matter, and this is what Christ was underlining in John 7:37, 38. This has point for the Jews in Ezra's time in two ways: on the one hand, they had experienced a new Exodus - from Babylon. The Lord had turned again their captivity, and they had much to rejoice in. On the other hand, however, there was also a spiritual release they needed to experience and celebrate, the release from the sins that had brought them into captivity. Thus, the feast was not simply to be a looking back into history, but the celebrating of a present experience of deliverance, in which they could rejoice in a present salvation, a living reality.

It is the celebration - and experience in the present - of a new exodus, the release from sin that comes by the grace of the covenant God, that provides the impetus and the wherewithal for the laying of the foundations of the house of God in the land - whether then or now. It cannot be done otherwise. So the foundations were laid in Jerusalem: lowly, humble foundations, so unlike the former temple's glory. But laid they were, amid the greatest rejoicing and praising. They were not under any illusions about how far they had got: all the work of building was still ahead of them, and many hard and bitter days awaited them. But they had something to rejoice about, knowing as they did what had gone before, and just how broken and desolate the situation had once been. In this connection, it is not hard to understand the feelings of the ancient men (12) when they wept as they saw the foundations being laid. They knew, as those that were younger could not, the extent of the desolation from which they were only now beginning to emerge. They realised just how great a thing was happening.

17) 4:1-5

This chapter records the opposition that the returned exiles encountered in the work of God. First of all, a 'technical' matter requires to be dealt with. It will be noticed that 1-5 deal with events associated with the building of the Temple in the reign of Cyrus. And we are told in 5 that this hindering campaign continued until the reign of Darius, the next-but-one king (521-485 - see chronology on page 3). Then, 6 speaks of something happening in the reign of Ahasuerus, who was the next king after Darius - the king known in secular history as Xerxes I (486-464), and whom we meet in the book of Esther. Then, in 7-23, we read of something happening in the reign of the next again king, Artaxerxes I (464-423). Finally, in 24, we are back again to Darius I. All this might make it seem that the writer had got mixed up, and that 6-23 were out of their original place. But the simplest solution is to realise that Ezra is collating all the evidence of opposition and hindrance throughout the history of the returned exiles, in all four reigns. This explains why, in 1-5, the opposition is to the building of the Temple, while that in 6-23 relates to the building of the walls of the city. What we are meant to understand is that letters of complaint were constantly being sent to the court against the Jews, but only one of the letters is recorded for us. But all along, and again and again, this opposition continued, and at times stopped the work altogether.

18) 4:6-16

Who, then, were these adversaries of Judah? We find the answer to this question in 2 Kings 17:24-34. After the captivity of the northern kingdom, Israel, there were some Israelites left in the land, the dregs of their society. And into the denuded land came - or were sent - tribes from the north and north-east, imported by Sargon and Sennacherib. These predominated, and the resultant amalgam was a group with a vestigial remnant of Israel's true religion and a large mixture of heathenism. As 2 Kings 17:33 puts it, 'they feared the Lord and served other gods'.

Notice, next, how they became adversaries. They offered their services in the building of the Temple. They wanted to join in. There was an ecumenical spirit, bursting for co-operation. We could even impute the highest motives, and the most sincere, to them. But their offer was firmly refused by Zerubbabel and Joshua. They would have none of it. This is an attitude that would be, and is, roundly condemned as being anti-Christian and against the Spirit of God. But they were right in so doing. If they had agreed to this suggestion, the whole work of restoration would have been jeopardised, and they would have been reverting to those very alliances which had led them into captivity in the past, before the Exile. 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?' Later on in Ezra's, and also in Nehemiah's time, and in the writings of Malachi, we see that unhallowed associations with these peoples crept in and corrupted the work and testimony of the Jews, robbing them of the presence and blessing of the Lord. Here, however, at least, they saw the issues clearly, and refused the dangerous association. It is not without significance that those who were at first intent on helping the Jews in their work became their implacable enemies. They showed up in their true colours, and subsequent events surely show that if they had been allowed to take part in the work, they would have had a disastrous effect upon it. Far better have their opposition from the outside, than have their unhallowed influence at work within!

19) 4:17-24

The lesson of the chapter is that of opposition and hindrance to the work of God, and there are two main points that need to be made: opposition from without, and opposition from within.

It is, of course, of the essence of spiritual work, and particularly a work of restoration and reconstruction, that opposition should arise. Whenever there is a true movement forward, it will draw upon it the fury of the adversary. And the pattern generally follows what we see here. It was a question of opposition coming from the entrenched inhabitants of the land. They had been in possession for years, and they resented the encroachment and the incalculable disturbance that the newcomers might make. The status quo was so much more comfortable - and safe. We could take as an illustration of this the opposition of the Sadducees to the early Church, as they dreaded what this new movement might bring, and felt that they must oppose it at all costs; or, the coming of the gospel to a land that has been in gross darkness for centuries. Deeply entrenched evil will not give in without a fight. Or, the advent of a man of God with a real message to a congregation or community that has never really known an evangelical ministry. Oh the battles, the oppositions there, from men who 'fear the Lord and serve other gods'!

20) 4:17-24

Here, the opposition took the form of slander - of both the work and the workers. 'If you allow this work to go on', they said to the king, 'it will in time prove to be a great menace to your kingdom'. And the father of lies is still peddling this line today - there are never wanting those who wait with avid and watchful eye for the opportunity to do down a work of God that has challenged their consciences and rebuked their lives. And one is obliged to say that this kind of slander is sometimes more bitter and virulent from those 'who fear the Lord and serve other gods' – i.e. those who have a connection with religion, than from those who are right outside!

This opposition proved to be so effective that the work of God was effectively stopped for a number of years, till the second year of Darius. Is the devil stronger than God, then? Hardly! What are we to say, then? Was there sin in the Jews? One thinks of Joshua and the defeat at Ai - sin in the camp gave victory to the enemy. But there is no evidence or suggestion of this here. Rather, the inscrutable providence of God was at work, allowing evil to triumph temporarily (in the sense of giving it its head, so as to draw it out, expose it for what it is, then destroy it). That, for one thing - and this: sometimes God allows the enemy to overcome, not so much because we have sinned, but to test us, discipline us - the discipline of disappointment can be a very effective one - and do something in us and in it, teach us some needed lesson, deepen us, our durability, our steadfastness. If God permits these things to happen to bring evil out in to the open, He may also do it to bring out into the open those who are really worth their salt in His service.

21) 4:17-24

But often, in spiritual life, the fiercest opposition and the heaviest battles are within, hidden in the deepest heart.

Yet who can fight for truth and God,
Enthralled by lies and sin?
He who would wage such war on earth
Must first be true within.
O God of truth, for whom we long,
O Thou that hearest prayer,
Do Thine own battle in our hearts,
And slay the falsehood there.

It is there, in the hidden places, that the oppositions to advance are fiercest - and they are many and varied. In so many ways we can experience the frustrations and hindrances of the enemy, and never seem to get out of the bit, and often advance seems to be completely halted, and out of the question altogether. Is the opposition with us at the stage of the rebuilding of the broken altar? Is it there that we are being so discouraged? We have tried, honestly and sincerely, and it has not worked - the adversary has put paid to it! Or, is it further on, in the laying of the foundations - and no advance seems possible? Or, is it some inward battle we are fighting, which we recognise as all-important for all we are engaged in, and we are not making any headway, but even losing ground? Well, what are we to do? Just give up, in discouragement and despair? Or fight on, get dug in, grit our teeth, and get down to it? Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:9: 'A great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries'. Many adversaries, yes - and so he kept on, and kept at it, refusing to be daunted, until finally he won through to victory, and 'all Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 19:10).

22) 5:1-2

If the cessation of the work of rebuilding the temple was not due to anything being wrong in the people of God, it seems certainly to have led to a situation in which something became wrong. This may not be immediately apparent in these verses, but it becomes clear when we turn to the books of the prophets mentioned, Haggai and Zechariah. The significance of the whole chapter lies therefore in these two opening verses, and there are two main points to be stressed: on the one hand, the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah had a marked and immediate effect, for Zerubbabel and Joshua were moved to begin the building again; on the other hand, there was a further effect produced: in the larger and wider context, there was a stirring in the political situation, and the work of the Jews was vindicated in the sight of the powers that be.

We must try to reconstruct the situation from the records we have. At the end of the last chapter we left the Jews with the work stopped altogether, and this state of affairs continued until the second year of Darius, a period of fifteen years. It would seem that two hazards beset them: that of discouragement first of all, then complacency or apathy. Perhaps they were rather easily discouraged, but it does seem to have bred a less worthy spirit in them towards the work in hand. Then things began to go wrong, and against them: the harvest was poor, and the economic situation became stringent and critical. And it was into this situation that the word of the Lord came through Haggai.

23) 5:1-2

We have no information as to whether these two prophets were ministering earlier than this - perhaps they were, perhaps not - but it is clear that it was the coming of the word of the Lord into the situation that made all the difference. The prophets' messages should be consulted here, especially Haggai 1/2 and Zechariah 1. The post-exilic prophets are sometimes regarded as being less great than their predecessors before the exile, and lacking in the great prophetic inspiration and thrust of these earlier days. This may be; but it is well for us to note that their ministry had a marked effect on the people, and brought them to a new obedience.

We should learn from all this that forward movements are associated with the prophetic ministry of the Word of the Lord. It cannot be done except in this context. The Word alone can give and provide the inspiration (cf 1 Samuel 3, and the coming of the Word into the darkness of the situation, and the twenty years battle for renewal; also 2 Chronicles 34, and the widespread reformation that followed the discovery of the book of the law in the Temple in Josiah's time). Here, it was the obedience of the people in response to the Word that became the practical basis for the work.

It may be somewhat conjectural, but one wonders whether the symbolism of the lessons in chapter 3 about restoring the altar of God was not sufficient to produce a true and sustained right relation to God, whereas the coming of the Word did bring about obedience. It is true that in pre-exilic times a tension arose between the symbolism of the sacrificial system and the inward, ethical character of the prophetic ministry. It may well be that this is reflected here also. At all events, things really did begin to happen when the Word of the Lord broke into the situation.

24) 5:3-17

So much for the impact of the prophets' ministry on the returned exiles. Now we look at the second lesson of the chapter. When this new obedience was established, and the work advanced, the secret operation of the Spirit of God began to be felt, and the natural hindrances which had at the first stopped the work were dealt with and removed. A hidden, secret influence was brought to bear on the whole political situation, moving the heart of the king to support the returned exiles' cause. It is hardly possible to over-estimate the significance of this. The situation at this point was precisely the same as it had been on the earlier occasion when the Jews' enemies had protested to the king (chapter 4); the records of Cyrus' decree were the same; but whereas previously what occupied the attention of Artaxerxes on examining the records was the evidence of the earlier rebellious history of the Jews - and it was all true - now on this occasion, it was the decree of Cyrus, not the Jews' rebellious history, that was the focus of the king's attention. Now, why did the king's attention become concentrated on the decree of Cyrus? And why, even granting the concentration on Cyrus' decree, did this move him to vindicate the Jews' building? He could so easily, in spite of the decree, have taken Tatnai's side, and forbidden. What moved him to do otherwise? Veneration for Cyrus? Hardly. There are two answers to this, both connected, and the connecting link is God. It was He who ordained this crushing blow to the adversaries' hopes. And it was done in two ways: on the one hand, it had to do with the coming of the prophetic word into the situation. It was as if, when the Word came, and the people listened and obeyed, divine energies were released by the giving and receiving of the Word and were brought to bear on the whole situation to its transformation. The second consideration we leave till the next Note.

25) 6:1-14

The second way in which God ordained this crushing blow to the adversaries' hopes was this: Darius was already the object of the divine attention - we should remember who was in his court at this time - the prophet Daniel. It is true that the Darius in Daniel is not the same Darius as in Ezra. But whether Daniel was still alive at this time or not - he could have been - his influence certainly was, and it had done something in that court that was significant and incontrovertible. Daniel had sung the Lord's song in a strange land, and had left a mark for good in the royal palace. We see in this something of the far-sighted strategy of God at work in all this, working His sovereign purposes out, planning ahead patiently and with quiet resolution, creating influences that were to have profound and significant effects when their hour was come. All this was gathered up into the divine strategy, and made use of, in the unfolding of the divine purpose for His people. Let us savour this reality quietly and with growing wonderment and joy, until the very thrill of it grips and masters our hearts, as we see its obvious application to our own situation today. Our God is marching on!

26) 6:1-14

Another lesson emerges from this chapter when we read it in conjunction with Zechariah 3, which records the vision of Joshua the high priest before the Lord, with the adversary Satan by his side, resisting him. What we are meant to take from this vision is that this is the real story behind the situation then facing the exiles. It was Satan who was resisting them and their work, through the Samaritans. And the Lord rebuked Satan, breaking the resistance, and setting it at naught. This is the real story of the victory here: Darius sent a reply favourable to the Jews because the Lord had broken the power of the evil one in the situation. And this was revealed to the people as an encouragement and incentive to go on to complete the work of rebuilding. They did not work towards victory: they worked from victory! Little wonder that it says in 14 that they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah. With this kind of assurance, they could not but prosper.

The relevance of this pattern for the Christian life is surely obvious; and we shall look at it in some detail in the next Note.

27) 6:1-14

The spiritual parallel is indeed an impressive one: for on the world scale, even the cosmic scale, this is what has happened in the gospel. The cross and resurrection of Christ mean that in the most decisive way the Lord has rebuked Satan, and broken his dark rule and power. This is the point Jesus makes in His parable about binding the strong man, then spoiling his house (Mark 3:27), and that Paul underlines in Colossians 2:15 when he speaks of Christ spoiling principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, triumphing over them in His cross (cf also Revelation 12:10, 11, 'The accuser of the brethren is cast down ... and they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb ...'). The lesson, here, then, for us is that we should know the invincibility of our position in Christ, and the wealth of our victory in Him. Why otherwise should Paul pray so earnestly in Ephesians 1 that the eyes of our understanding might be enlightened to know the immeasurable greatness of His power to usward who believe, and that Christ is made Head over all things to His Church?

But how to make this a practical reality in our lives and experience, how to get the victory? By the obedience of faith. This is how it was with Joshua and Zerubbabel in those days. They obeyed the voice of the Lord their God (cf Haggai 1:12ff), and at that Haggai gave them the assurance from Him, 'I am with you'. The Lord's victory would have been just as much a reality the first time (chapter 4), only it was not appropriated. This time it was, by the obedience of faith.

28) 6:15-22

Two words may therefore sum up the lesson of the passage: apprehension, and appropriation. First, know the situation, the fact that Christ has won the victory for us; then lay hold of it, in the obedience of faith. This is always how a work of rebuilding is accomplished and completed - whether the temple of God, or the lost glories of the Church, or a life, or a home, or a family.

For our encouragement, then, given the obedience of faith, let us take some of these wonderful verses to ourselves - 7, 8, 9, 12 - this is the measure of what God can do for us, when He is on our side! Let us savour the sweetness and the assurance of these tremendous statements, and let them seep into our deepest hearts, bringing encouragement and heartening in the battle. Little wonder that the people kept the Passover with joy - it was the Lord Himself who had made them joyful (22)!

29) 7:1-6

We come with this chapter to the part of the book which is immediately concerned with Ezra himself. The first six chapters, as we have seen, have dealt with the first return of the exiles, under Zerubbabel and Joshua, and have described the fortunes of the people as they set about building the Temple of God in Jerusalem. That work, as we saw, was brought to a standstill for some sixteen years, till the second year of Darius, but under the inspiration of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah it was begun again, and completed in his sixth year, in 516 BC. Now, in 458 BC in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, Ezra himself comes on the scene, to lead back to Jerusalem another contingent of the captive people. Later still, as we learn in the book of Nehemiah, a third contingent returned in 444 BC under Nehemiah to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.

First of all, then, a word about the historical picture and sequence. Darius reigned from 521-485 BC, and was succeeded in Xerxes I, 485-464, then Artaxerxes I, 464-425. The Temple was completed in 516 BC. Now, from 516 to 458 is a long time, nearly sixty years; a lot can happen in such a time, and a lot did happen in these years (as we learn from Ezra 9). What did happen was that the dedication and consecration which marked the early movement that led to the rebuilding and completion of the Temple had waned and faded. The cold chill of backslidiness touched the corporate life of the people once more, and when Ezra returned to Jerusalem, he found a situation that caused him much misgiving and dismay, and stirred him to a work of moral and spiritual reform (cf 9:3ff).

30) 7:6-28

A little more filling in of the historical picture is necessary before going further. After the reign of Darius I came Xerxes, who is the Ahasuerus we read of in the book of Esther. That exciting story fits into the period between the building of the Temple in 516 and Ezra's return in 458. Ezra would be in the capital at the time of Esther's and Mordecai's experiences: also, the prophet Malachi exercised his ministry in the later part of Ezra's time, as a comparison of his writings with the last chapter of Ezra and those of Nehemiah will show.

As to Ezra's contribution to the work of God, we shall see once again, as we have seen already in earlier chapters, that renewal came by the way of the Word. For Ezra was a minister of the Word, a ready scribe in the law of the Lord (6).

So much for the historical setting. As to the chapter before us, there are two main lessons that stand out, both connected with each other: one is the character of Ezra the scribe, and the other the extraordinary help given him by the king in his return to Jerusalem.

Ezra, it seems clear, held some official position in Persia, comparable to 'Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs (so J. Stafford Wright). It was as such that he was sent by Artaxerxes to Jerusalem to force the uniform observance of the Jewish law there, and to this end he had authority to make appointments within the Jewish state (25).

31) 7:6-28

One obvious question that arises is how Ezra, and others like him, had come to rise to such official positions? Well, we have seen in our studies in Daniel, how Daniel did. In the ultimate analysis, we must look for the answer to this question in the sovereignty of God: it was God who arranged all this, as indeed He arranged the disposition of these heathen emperors to make them favourable to His people. And we must stress that this is not something pertaining to far-off days only - if it were, men might be tempted to think of them in almost legendary terms, as something to be taken not too seriously. This has been true in all ages. It is one of the most astonishing facts in all history that the Jews have been particularly and specially preserved as a people - not kept scatheless, indeed, for they have passed through unspeakable agonies of oppression and persecution - but preserved as a people. And at significant points, God has intervened for them. Think of 1917, and the Balfour Declaration, by which the Jews were given entitlement to Palestine as their land; think of 1948, and their reconstitution as a nation; think of 1967, and the war that, against all forecasts, went decisively their way.

The more immediate cause of Ezra's prominent position may be deduced from the end of the book of Esther, where the providence of God had put the Jews in favour with the court. That thrilling story shows us just how completely God had His people's interests on His heart, and how He advanced and safeguarded their interests. Even in captivity and under judgment, they were not forsaken, but ministered to in love. He willed them to continue in existence because He willed to work out His purposes through them, whether they willed or not. And this is just as true today. Watch the fig tree, which is Israel, for Israel is God's signpost in world affairs.

32) 7:6-28

What was said in the previous Note only partly explains the situation. It does not completely account for the fact that Artaxerxes was moved to give such remarkable cooperation in the furtherance of the work of God, unless we are to say that God supernaturally wrought on him. But God usually uses means, and the means in this instance was surely the influence of Ezra's life and ministry upon the king. This is not said in so many words in the chapter, but we should particularly note the significant juxtaposition of thoughts in 6: 'He was a ready scribe in the law of Moses' and 'The king granted him all his request'. Is not this significant? And is it not also significant that the king should have had such a working knowledge of things Jewish, as can be seen throughout the chapter? Does this not argue an influence that finally led to action so far as the king was concerned? We do not mean by this that the king had been converted (although he could have been, for it was that kind of influence, and the law of the Lord is quick and powerful, converting the soul); but influence there was, and to some purpose. And it stemmed from the faithfulness of Ezra. It will be well, therefore, to spend some time looking in some detail at this man's character, before going further in his story. This we will do in the next Note.

33) 7:6-28

Ezra, we are told, was a priest, and a ready (or skilled) scribe in the law of the Lord (6). His time in captivity, then, had not been ill-spent! The Psalmist tells us that the people of God sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion. But the weeping was regenerative, and wrought a new spirit in at least some of the people. We know, for example, that synagogue worship came into its own during the exile as a place for instruction in the Scriptures and for prayer (cf Ezekiel 14:1). That was not a small thing for the exile to have done to the people! And in this new thing - very new indeed, for hitherto all their troubles had come because they had neglected and refused the word of God - the office of the scribe had emerged - not, as earlier, a copier of the law only, but an interpreter also. And this particular interpreter, Ezra, was destined for a work of far-reaching significance and importance.

Ezra, then, was skilled and learned in the Scriptures. Is it not significant that this is the kind of man God chose for this new work? Is it not in line with the rest of the pattern in this book? This is always the necessity in a work of renewal - the words, the commandments, the statutes of the Lord - and always the emphasis in a true work of the Spirit of God. We should beware of any movements in modern time claiming to be of the Spirit of God that do not have this emphasis at their heart, if ever we want to be of any use to God in the work of His kingdom. It is not too much to say that not being skilled in the Word is a disqualification for true work for God.

34) 7:6-28

We should note next what it says of Ezra in 10: he had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments. This amplifies the earlier description of him as a skilled scribe. This is how he became skilled, and how he qualified himself for the work he was called to do. We should note well that it was in the heart that this work was done, not in the mind only; it was no intellectual exercise, this, but a matter of allowing the Word of God to go into the deep places of the heart, to do its disciplinary work there, cutting and probing, slaying and healing, knocking down and building up. To seek the law of the Lord in earnest is to let oneself in for an incalculable revolution in one's inmost life. This is the way to service - whether in the full-time ministry or in Christian service in the professions or elsewhere. We can only teach what we have learned, and we can only teach deeply what we have learned deeply. When we are out to build a considerable building, we require to lay a considerable foundation. Too much building on too flimsy a foundation is the explanation of much abortive work and many spent forces in the Christian Church today, and of lives broken and useless when they should be beginning to tell for Christ. They have not allowed the Word to do its appointed work in their lives. This is a timely word to all young Christians - now is the time to be taking in rather than giving out. All too soon comes the time when Christians may be in places where they will have to go hungry, where they will have to be giving out all the time. The limit of our service is how far we ourselves have gone; and significant distances are travelled only by those who have a holy determination that the receiving of the Word will have first priority.

35) 7:6-28

We should note also the further association of ideas in what is said of Ezra: skilled scribe - preparing his heart to seek, do, and teach God's law - the hand of his God was upon him (6, 28). Gods anointing and unction was upon him, and this was the power on his ministry. We should now realise what all this was 'for'. Ezra was sent to a people who had lost their earlier vision, who had grown cold and had backslidden. And he was raised up to give them another chance. It is surely not difficult to apply this to our own situation today: a church, a nation, no longer what it once was, its glories and its greatness lost and obscured. Is it too much to hope that God is calling men today, to send them to our nation, to recall them to former joys and blessedness? Calling them, therefore to prepare their hearts to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and finally to teach it, either in official ministry or in other ways? May not this be the significance of the steady development of evangelical witness in Scotland that we are witnessing in these days, as men are hearing and responding to the divine call to the work of the ministry? If this be so, let us pray that it will grow and develop like this, and that these men will get down to the holy responsibility of letting the Word sift and search them, and do its revolutionary work in them, to make them 'sharp threshing instruments' (Isaiah 41:15) in the hands of the Lord for the harvest to come.

36) 8:1-14

These verses record the number of those who returned to the land at this time – 1,496 in all. In 7:13 we saw that the king's decree was wide and broad, yet less than 1,500 responded compared with the many thousands in chapter 2 (42,360). Were there so few then, who were homesick for the promised land? One recalls the Psalmist's words, 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning ...' (Psalm 137:5, 6). Was this, then, no more than a poetic extravaganza, to be taken with a pinch of salt? This must surely prompt the exclamation: How few there are among those who ought to be engaged in the Lord's work! It is all very well romanticising and sentimentalising about our Jerusalem, but if, when it comes to the point of committing ourselves to decisive action, we are found making plausible excuses for not acting decisively, our pious expressions of love are just so much humbug, and need to be exposed for what they are. We are reminded of one Christian lady who left the congregation to which she belonged 'because it had no prayer meeting or Bible study', and joined another which had both. She did not attend the prayer meeting or Bible study - somehow she seemed always to have 'something else on' most Wednesdays and Saturdays - but it was such a comfort to her, and gave her such a sense of well-being just to belong to such a church! This is the sort of humbug which Ezra encountered on his return to Jerusalem. He gave short shrift, as we shall see, and called it by its proper name. How unrealistic can we be, in spiritual life?

37) 18:15-20

There are two main points in the chapter, the first of which, in these verses, concerns the missing Levites. We have already commented on the fact that so few of the Levites were numbered among the returning exiles (see Note on page 13), and pointed out the tragedy of it. But God does not allow His work to go by default because of this. Sometimes He bypasses the recognised and official servants of the sanctuary, choosing laymen as His instruments. One thinks of the prophet Amos, who was a herdsman from Tekoa, and, in more modern times, the lay evangelists of the 1859 Revival, and men in our own time like Lord Reith and others who have clearly spoken a word from God which should have been spoken by the Church.

The problem of the 'missing Levites' is a recurring one in the life of God's people, whether it be that of office-bearers, or others in authority, who should be showing an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3), conspicuous by their absence; or that of the glaring lack of men, as opposed to women and girls, offering themselves for the service of Christ on the mission fields of the world. Some trenchant words from an article printed in the Record (Holyrood Church, Edinburgh) some time ago entitled 'Wanted - More Men' are so apposite here that we take leave to include them in the next Note, as a comment on the theme of these verses.

38) 8:15-20

'What will move our young men to do a man's job that women are having to do instead? In the next thirty years Europe may add a hundred million to its population, but Asia sixteen times as many. The Church in Asia is far less than five per cent of the population today. What will it be at the end of the century? Do we care?

'Are there no young men who are prepared to stretch their commitments beyond a year or two, to immerse themselves in another culture, learn another language, take the role of a servant, and sit and listen for perhaps as long as four years in order effectively to communicate to another nation? Asia is not going to be won by summer volunteers, welcome as they are.

"But you do not understand. Young people today are not prepared to commit themselves more than short-term. They want to see where they are going". On that basis Abraham would never have strayed from Ur, for God told him to go to "the land that I will show you", and he never possessed more of it than a grave. Life-time service, then, is out? Is this what Jesus meant by taking up the cross?

'When I see what some of our women accept and endure and stick at, I feel like weeping for my own sex. What is wrong with the men? Have we no backbone at all? "We don't like mission organizations". Then what are you doing to show us as a better way? Come and get your hands dirty with us, and then we'll listen to your strictures about structures.

'As I look at the gaps in our ranks and think of hundreds of young men who could fill some of these gaps but will not budge, I can only pray, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they are refusing to do".'

39) 8:15-20

Ezra's reaction in this situation of need is characteristic. He sent to Casiphia for them! This was a recruiting drive in the direct manner, indeed! Moreover, he told the messengers whom he sent exactly what to say, doubtless reminding the reluctant Levites of their duty before God, and challenging them to remember their calling, giving them a word from God. One can readily imagine the tone of that word: 'There is a work to be done, a pressing need is upon us, we are come to the kingdom for such a time as this - and you are dragging your feet, for security's sake, for a career, for material possessions?' In Isaiah 6 we read the words, 'I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? "'. We should remember when it was that Isaiah heard that voice - after his conviction and cleansing. And the question that arises for us is: 'Are we standing near enough to Him, to hear what He is saying in this day and age?'

Another telling question that arises here, in view of Ezra's attitude to the need for men, is: 'Is there a place for men being told that they should go?' One readily thinks of Acts 16:3 in this connection, and of Paul's decision to take Timothy with him on his missionary journey. Ezra apparently thought in much the same way as the Apostle. And, indeed, given men of Ezra's vision and dedication, this might be the way today also. The good hand of God was at work in the situation, at all events (18), and Ezra's initiative paid rich and considerable dividends.

40) 8:21-36

The second main point in the chapter concerns the fast that Ezra proclaimed. The reason for the fast is stated in 21, but its general implications are various. In the first place, it was proclaimed that 'we might afflict ourselves before God'. For what purpose this 'affliction'? Surely it was an opportunity for the consecration of the 'reluctants'. A big and significant work was pending, and no one can go into such a work unprepared. There was need of some afflicting of self, indeed! Remember what they were going to do, in Jerusalem! They needed real consecration.

But who can fight for truth and God
Enthralled by lies and sin?
He who would wage such war on earth
Must first be true within.

In the second place, the fast was that they might seek guidance and the protection of God for the journey. There was to be a real venturing out on God, real trusting in His grace and power. Furthermore, enthusiasm was not enough. There had to be direction from above.

The fact that they 'waited' on God is itself significant. There is a need to beware of over-activism in the work of God. It is surprising just how much emphasis there is in Scripture against it. 'He that believeth shall not make haste', we read in Isaiah 28:16, and 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength', in Isaiah 40:31. These exiles surely needed something to enable them to 'run and not be weary', and to 'walk and not faint', in all that lay before them in Jerusalem. Is it an inadequate understanding of the greatness of our task that makes us impatient of waiting on God for all He can give us?

41) 8:21-36

The evidence of the later verses of this passage is that the fast had its appointed and expected result, for the exiles were safely and successfully brought to Jerusalem, and their desires and intentions completely fulfilled. It will be of use for us to think in more detail at this point about the principle involved in fasting. The practice of fasting is spoken of variously in the Old Testament: in times of national emergency or disaster (cf 2 Chronicles 20:3; Joel 1:14; Judges 20:26; Esther 4:13,16); in connection with penitence, personal or national (cf Joel 2:12-17; Jonah 3:5; 1 Samuel 7:6; 1 Kings 21:27); in relation to waiting upon God (cf Jeremiah 36:9); and in a vicarious ministry, for others or for the nation (cf Jeremiah 1:4; Daniel 9:3). As such it was meant to be the outward expression of an inward attitude of heart. But it is possible to lose sight of this, and divorce outward expression from inward attitude. When this happens, fasting is not only useless, it is hypocrisy, and done to be seen of men. This was the danger in our Lord's day, as well as in Old Testament times (cf Zechariah 7:5; Isaiah 58:3; Jeremiah 14:12). From this last reference in Jeremiah, we see that fasting is analogous to prayer, indeed it is a kind of prayer, and as with prayer, so also with fasting, if we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us. If, then, it is meant to be a help towards a right heart-attitude, we see the principle underlying the whole matter. Affliction of soul, to help towards a right heart-attitude is something that must be applied to all our fleshly appetites, not merely food. The question involved is that of spiritual discipline. As with prayer, the necessity is to live near to the cross, and have a right relationship to the will of God. Just as it is the character of the man who prays that determines the worth and vitality and prevailing of the prayer, so fasting indicates the principle by which that character is come by, in that it shows us the pattern of dying to everything that might hinder in the Christian life. This, it will surely be clear, applies just as much to 'good things' as to 'bad things'. The legitimate things we decide to do without for the Kingdom's sake are a surer index of our spiritual state and stature than we may realise.

42) 8:21-36

One further comment on the idea of fasting before continuing our study. As Christians we are in duty bound to see to it that in grace, and by grace, we are in control of, and not controlled by, our appetites. The question we need to keep asking ourselves is 'Am I free from the tyranny of appetite?' The only way there is of finding out the answer to this is to see if we can 'do without', i.e. fasting. It is a good spiritual exercise to 'do without' just to satisfy ourselves that we can. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12, 'I will not be brought under the power of any'. But to maintain this position one has to fast, and this is a continuing exercise - to be applied indeed to the whole of life, to all desires and appetites, however legitimate and harmless in themselves. The fact is that even simple recreations and joys and any legitimate thing may become a hindrance in the Christian race, if it assumes too much importance in life. There is no other safe way of living than to apply the principle of fasting to them, voluntarily doing without them until we know they have no real hold on us. We might be surprised to know how many devoted and dedicated Christians practise this as a matter of course on every level of life, for their spiritual health and usefulness. The spiritual concentration that it produces, in the sense of 'clearing the decks for action' is very significant indeed. How much do we know about these things?

43) 9:1-4

Ezra, then, proclaimed a fast by the river Ahava, and we see in these verses something of the point of that fast, and the link it provides with what we read here. For he sensed the magnitude and the significance of the work that awaited him in Jerusalem, and the need for a true separation unto God on his part and on the part of those who accompanied him. And it was the principle underlying the fast that he introduced into the situation in Jerusalem, and that was the explanation of the spiritual renewal that took place. The situation that he found in Jerusalem was this: almost sixty years had passed since the days of Zerubbabel and Joshua and the rebuilding of the Temple, and, as we have seen, the dedication and consecration which had marked the earlier movement had waned and faded, and backslidness had touched the corporate life of the people once more. One particular expression of this seemed very glaring and serious to Ezra when he returned to Jerusalem (1). The people had not kept themselves separate from 'the people of the lands', and there had been extensive inter-marriage and mixed marriage, so that the 'holy seed had mingled themselves' in forbidden ways. And the rulers and the princes, the leaders of the people, were chief culprits in the matter.

The issue, then, was one of separation. And this, of course, is the principle underlying the idea of fasting. It is in this light, therefore, that we must consider what is said in these verses.

44) 9:1-4

In our earlier studies in Ezra it was pointed out that of the three prophets who ministered during the post-exilic period, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter, Malachi's ministry, belongs to this period of Ezra's reforms. It is not certain exactly when he ministered - some think a year or two before Ezra and 458 BC, some think some time later, in Nehemiah's time, 444-432, or 432-424 BC. However, Ezra and Nehemiah stand sufficiently closely together in history to make common cause, and Malachi stands to their period as Haggai and Zechariah stood to Zerubbabel's. And Malachi's prophecy certainly reflects the conditions of the people in Ezra's and Nehemiah's time. (An early tradition assigned the authorship of Malachi to Ezra himself. This is not likely to be true, but it does serve to show how closely the two writings are associated.

A glance, then, at Malachi, chapters 1 and 2, will show something of the flavour of the prophet's message and see the kind of problem he - and Ezra - faced. In chapter 1 we see the carelessness of spirit, the weariness at the things of God, the dullness and loss of interest; in chapter 2:1-9 the declension of the priesthood; in 2:10 of the marriage with strange wives and the divorce of Jewish wives. One can understand how it all could have arisen: the completion of the Temple did not usher in the kingdom of God and the Messianic era, and disillusion, disheartening and discouragement set in; and these, coupled with the difficulties and oppositions that persisted from the Samaritans and others turned discouragement and low-spiritedness into carelessness of living and the consequent lowering of former high standards. This is how it was with the people, when Ezra came to Jerusalem.

45) 9:5-15

Ezra's reaction was very marked (3). There is a phrase we sometimes use in this connection: we speak of a man with a burden.

This was Ezra: and the point about a man with a burden is that he draws others to him, and influences them, so that they share his burden. This is what happened in this case (4, and cf Isaiah 66:2, and Malachi 3:16, 4:2). And the issue was - prayer! They prayed. And here we have Ezra leading them in prayer (6-15). Here, then, is the Biblical pattern for renewal and restoration - penitential prayer. This is where revival always begins. But it is something that is always liable to be misunderstood. There is always the possibility of being branded as a 'dismal Desmond', by those who have little time for those who, as they say, 'are always wailing about how bad things are within the Church'. This is a point of view, certainly, but it is not one that would be shared by Ezra!

The burden of Ezra's prayer is twofold: the constant failure of the people, and the constant faithfulness of God. In justice, God could have left them to their sins, so great had they been. But in His great mercy, He had granted them respite (8) and reviving (9), had sent His word to them the second time and renewed their commission as His chosen people (9b). And now, in face of this grace, and in spite of the clear injunction in His Word, they had deliberately transgressed His will again, and had done this thing. It is the enormity of this, and the provocation of it, that weighed so heavily in Ezra's mind. As Psalm 85:8 puts it, God had warned His people 'Let them not turn again to folly'. This is precisely what they had done! As Ezra saw it, the danger now was that of sinning beyond the point of no return, and that God would be angry with them until He had consumed them, so that there would be no remnant nor escaping (14).

46) 9:5-15

It is worth considering this whole pattern as it is reflected in spiritual life. In the first stages of a spiritual movement, you will often find great enthusiasm and dedication, as in Ezra 1-6, and a burden of prayer. Then, as time goes on, the prayer becomes more a duty than a joy and delight. Then, presently, people find they have other important engagements to fulfil, and are no longer able to come to prayer; and finally, excuses are made, and devices employed, to extricate them from what is now an unwelcome and wearisome commitment. They are tired of the whole business!

Also: spiritual life and experience tends to be subject to swings of the pendulum. We all know how, at certain times, a very narrow pattern tends to develop in groups, fellowships, and even communities, and in evangelical life as a whole. There is nothing very wrong in this, in itself. Jesus did say, after all, 'Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life', and such a pattern is often the expression of a great and wonderful spirit of dedication and consecration and separation. But we know also that when the original inspiration for such a spirit disappears, wanes or departs, the outward pattern tends to persist. And what we then find is the crystallisation - even calcification - of a way of life characterised by narrow prejudice and even taboos, which are observed simply because they have been there for years. They become the shibboleths by which not only consecration, but even orthodoxy itself, and standing in grace, are judged. A hard and unattractive legalism holds the field. We shall continue this in the next Note.

47) 9:5-15

The previous Note finished with the thoughts of a hard and unattractive legalism. Many became enmeshed in this and led into bondage, hag-ridden and hamstrung until real Christian life is caricatured. In such a situation nothing is needed so much as the message of Christian liberty; and we should be thankful that a breath of liberty from such bondage has touched evangelical life in our time. But it is possible for the pendulum to swing much too far, and for liberty to pass into, or be mistaken for, licence. And Christian liberty for many Christians tends to become carelessness and indulgence in many of the things of the world that are beguiling them away from the simplicity that is in Christ and corrupting their testimony. There is an urgent need for a new puritanism in life and behaviour among Christian people today - not a recall to the old legalistic bondage and taboos, but a reinvestment of the biblical idea of separation with a new spiritual dynamic that will worthily express the truth that this world is not our home, and that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth, that we look for a city having foundations, whose builder and maker is God. This is the message of Ezra chapter 9 - separation! 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty' (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18).

48) 10:1-8

The final chapter of Ezra really belongs to chapter 9, and is its unfolding and climax. It is interesting to note the chronology involved, as some indication of how the Spirit of God began to work. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month (7:9) having left Babylon on the first day of the first month. The handing over of the treasure for the Temple took place almost immediately (8:33), but its general refurbishing may have taken some time (8:36). The great Assembly mentioned in 10:1ff took place on the twentieth day of the ninth month, and the very considerable re-adjustment of their lives was completed by the first day of the first month - that is, exactly a year after Ezra had set out from Babylon.

Clearly, it was a momentous year for Israel, and so much happened in it! And one of the first lessons to be learned is just what power a living and vital prayer meeting can exert on a situation of this nature. For in 9:4, we saw how Ezra's burden for those who had been carried away communicated itself to others, who were drawn to him in a common bond of prayer. And in 10:1, we read how the power of that prayer drew a very great congregation of men, women and children. This was, obviously, an unusual manifestation of the power of the Spirit of God. It is the kind of thing that happens in times of spiritual awakening - large companies of people unaccountably gather together, in great seriousness of spirit, and with trembling hearts. What a revolution it caused in the life of the people, and what a costly putting right of things that were wrong! And with what thoroughness it was done! It was no emotional flare-up, this, for it went on painfully and painstakingly over a period of three months, until the whole body of the congregation was cleansed and renewed (10:16, 17). This was the measure of the spiritual renewal that took place at that time.

49) 10:1-8

What, then, is the heart of this issue, and what is the principle here that applies to us today as Christians? Well, the people of God were in olden time called by Him to be His own peculiar people, a people set apart from Himself, and for this they were commanded to be separate from all other peoples. The word 'holy' in the Old Testament comes from a Hebrew root which has two significations: (a) separation; and (b) brightness. The two are linked: for Israel's calling was that they should be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and only by being 'bright' and 'radiant' through their separate character could they shine as lights in the world. Now, it is a matter of history that it was in those times when Israel was most separate from other nations, and separated unto God, that she most fulfilled her destiny in the divine purposes in the world. And, conversely, it was when she mixed herself with the nations that she lost her distinctive character, and fell into trouble and disaster. The great calamity of the Captivity, for example, is the supreme instance of this. God's people were punished with this long and tragic captivity precisely because they failed to keep themselves pure from association with the evil of the surrounding peoples. And now, they were falling into the same error once again. This was the explanation of Ezra's deep concern.

The principle is exactly the same for the Church today. It is clear from the teaching of the New Testament (cf 1 Peter 2) that the Church is the new Israel of God. They are God's peculiar people (1 Peter 2:9), and are to be this 'holy nation' in the world of men, separated unto God, and bright with the grace of God resting on them, making them shine, because they are different. More of this in the next Note.

50) 10:9-44

A separated people - this is the great need in every age. In a previous Note we mentioned how in our own day a very proper and healthy reaction against a wrong kind of narrowness in Christian life and behaviour, throwing overboard false taboos and shibboleths that had led many into bondage, has taken place; but it has led to the very serious error of mistaking liberty for licence, and of bringing about a new spirit of worldliness in Christian people which has robbed them of their distinctive character as God's peculiar people, and more, of their testimony in the world. Paul's words in Romans 12:2, 'Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind', are still as necessary an injunction today as they were when Paul wrote them, perhaps more so than ever before. The people of Israel were married to the world, instead of crucified to the world, and this costly crucifixion had to take place before they were right.

In the following Notes, we include two extracts written many years ago but still a challenge today.

51) 10:9-44

Commenting on Paul's words in Galatians 6:14 '... by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world', the writer says: 'The Cross which connects us with God should separate us from the world. The Cross which comes between us and our sins should also come between us and the world. The Cross which brings us inside the veil should put us outside the camp. The Cross which brings us into fellowship with God should set us in hostility to the world. Crucifixion was an ignominious death. The Cross was connected with shame. To be crucified unto the world means to be made hateful and to be a derision to the world. To have the world crucified to me implies that the world becomes an object of hatred and derision to me. The world is crucified to me when I no longer can see attractions in it. The things I used to love I no longer love. The pleasures I used to follow have lost their charm. The treasures I used to seek to amass have been resigned for the treasure that is laid up in heaven. New tastes have developed so that the old dainties now are sickening to me, and the things I once revolted from are my meat and drink.

So the world has been put on the Cross and nailed there, and I look on it and deride it and hate it and abhor it, and I wonder that it ever had any charms for me, the ugly thing that crucified my Lord.

Then I am crucified to the world when the world cannot find in me the charm it once found, nor the attractions it once found, nor the sympathy, nor the service it once found. I do not now yield myself to the world, and the world hates me because I am not of the world. If I am no longer the world's, it has nailed me to the Cross as a malefactor, and it passes by and wags its head in hateful and malicious derision.'

52) 10:9-44

Here is the second extract, making comment on the Apostle John's words, 'Love not the world' (1 John 2:15): 'It is for us who are trying to serve our Lord to treat the world not only in its corruptions but in its legitimate joys as a subject that we should touch with strict reserve and abstinence. If we are caught by its spirit, or fed upon its meat, we shall not feel the breath of the highest, nor receive the manna that falleth from heaven. We are bound to look upon the world with all its delights and attractions with suspicion and reserve. It is not for us - not for us. We are called into a higher kingdom. It is not that our Lord forbids us this or that indulgence or comfort of our life; it is not that He is stern, making upon us the call of the ascetic; but it is that we who love our Lord voluntarily and gladly lay aside the things that charm and ravish the world, that, for our part, our hearts may be ravished with the things of heaven, and our whole being poured forth in constant and unreserved devotion in the service of the Lord who died to save us.'

53) 10:9-44

The question of the mixed marriages was clearly a very serious and distressing one for Ezra and the people. But there are marriages and marriages, and in our necessary application of this word to our own situation we must be concerned with alliances in general - with things (or people) that are unhallowed, and therefore needing to be put right. We need not go into the question of mixed marriages now - obviously there can be no question of believers 'putting away' strange wives in our society. But the spiritual application holds good, for our souls can be wed to unhallowed things, interests, and concerns, and the divine word here is unmistakable and categorical: 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord'.

What are the things in our lives that have dulled our light and testimony, and hidden it under a bushel? Is it, in fact, a bushel, the symbol of business? Has our business life been such that we have compromised with the world and lost our testimony? Or, is it things we do now, that we allow now, that we simply would not, and could not, have countenanced some years ago, when first we saw the Lord? Has there been a lowering of standards - not moral standards, but rather standards of consecration, an imperceptible shifting of position from that earlier totality of commitment, that original wholeheartedness of self-giving, the glad abandonment of heart and soul to the Saviour and to His service? If the Spirit were to come in plenary, overwhelming power, would this be an area of our lives where He would undoubtedly convict us and deal with us? Is He thus dealing with us, through His Word? Do William Cowper's words, 'Where is the blessedness I knew ...?' really describe our position?

54) 10:9-44

None of us can assume lightly as a matter of course that this does not really apply to us. For no one is ever in a position of being immune from this possibility. Even the Apostle Peter, in the context of Pentecostal blessing was not immune - there was a time when that greatly used and honoured servant of the gospel took lower ground than the highest he knew, and Paul withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed (Galatians 2:11).

What God is quietly, firmly, asking us to do in this word is simply to look back over the months - and perhaps the years - to our first trysting with Him and His love, and ask ourselves whether things are as bright and true and dedicated with us today as they were then. And if not, what it is that has dulled our light, what alliance with the world, or what aspect of the world, has compromised our testimony?

And, having asked us this, He also asks us to put things right. In this connection we should remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says that we are to let our lights shine in the world, where He makes it quite clear that the Christian disciple is called to be, and must be, different from the world, and distinct, visibly distinct from the world, He also tells us, in no uncertain terms, how we are to do this, and be this, and maintain this: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you'.

So may I live, that in my daily race
The things of God may have the highest place.

55) 10:9-44

As a postscript to our study of Ezra, we may note (in the words of the commentator, Keil) that 'Strictly as this separation was carried out, this evil (of mixed marriages) was not thereby done away with forever, nor even for very long. After the arrival of Nehemiah at Jerusalem, when the building of the wall was concluded, the congregation again bound themselves by an oath, on the occasion of a day of prayer and fasting, to contract no more such illegal marriages (Nehemiah 10:30). Nevertheless, Nehemiah, on his second return to Jerusalem, some five and twenty to thirty years after the dissolution of these marriages by Ezra, again found Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Moab, and Ammon, and children of these marriages who spoke the tongue of Ashdod, and could not speak the Jews' language, and even one of the sons of the high priest Jehoiada allied to a daughter of Sanballat the Horonite (Nehemiah 13:23-28). It is a measure of the persistence of evil that this problem should have arisen again and again in the life of the post-exilic community, and bears out an oft-underlined lesson in the Scriptures that the price of continuing victory in the spiritual life is constant vigilance, and that there is no level of consecration from which it is not all too possible to fall, unless the greatest care and watchfulness are maintained.

56) 10:9-44

One final thought may be considered before we turn to another study, and it is this: implicit in all that is said in Ezra is the underlying emphasis on the authority of the law of the Lord. All reform that took place was to be fulfilled 'according to the law' (10:3); when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered among the people (5:1ff), they directed the people back to the law; and indeed, later on, in Nehemiah 8:1-8, we see that Ezra's own ministry was specifically and particularly a ministry of the word, expounding the law of the Lord to the people. This is all very striking; and it stands in considerable contrast to many of the 'reform' movements in the pre-exilic period, in, for example, the reigns of Asa and Hezekiah, where the emphasis was often so substantially on ritual reform and the re-establishment of a due ceremonial order in temple worship (this may be seen very clearly in the emphasis the Chronicler makes, particularly in Second Chronicles, on restoring the due patterns of worship as laid down by David, as for example in 2 Chronicles 29:17ff). One is left wondering whether things would have been very different if a greater emphasis had been made in those pre-exilic days on the need for obedience to the law before all else. At all events, the post-exilic community laid its emphasis very decisively on the priority of the law of the Lord and on the need for it to become the basis and foundation of all that was done. Perhaps they discerned - as it is open to us also to discern - that the reason for the failure and inadequacy of the earlier reforms lay precisely in the substantial neglect of such a needful ministry of the Word. And does not this have something significant to say to us today? No work of rehabilitation and renewal that is 'short' on a ministry of biblical exposition is likely to achieve very much of lasting value in the life of the Church. This comes over 'loud and clear' from the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah.