

66 Kindles of Matthew Henry Commentary

Buy all the 66 Kindles for \$2.99 on a secure website

THE BIG BOOK OF CHRISTIAN QUOTES Kindle Edition

Let's Celebrate Advent Every Day!: Through Practicing God's Presence! Kindle Edition

Practicing The Presence Of God — The Best Rule of Holy Life Kindle Edition

LIKE US ON FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/BrokenByHim>

Let's Celebrate Advent Every Day!: Through Practicing God's Presence! Kindle Edition

More books you might be interested in checking out

The Art of Prophesying with The Calling of the Ministry

MEMORIES OF PATMOS: A Study Of The Apocalypse & Exposition Of The Revelation Of Jesus Christ

A Lamp Unto My Feet:366 Bible Verses & Prayers - Tools for the Believer's Daily Renewal [Kindle Edition] \$1.49
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00AUN6DC6>

Practicing The Presence Of God \$0.99

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00DJYQSDC/>

The Sinful Desires Of The Flesh! \$1.49

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Sinful-Desires-Flesh-ebook/dp/B00EEPZAN4/>

Copyright © 2014 Public Domain Work

Kindle edited by: M. J. Andre
Fearless Eagle Publishing, Toronto, Ontario

Table of Contents

No table of contents entries found.

Preface

An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of The Book of Ezra

The Jewish church puts on quite another face in this book from what it had appeared with; its state much better, and more pleasant, than it was of late in Babylon, and yet far inferior to what it had been formerly. The dry bones here live again, but *in the form of a servant*; the yoke of their captivity is taken off, but the marks of it in their galled necks remain. Kings we hear no more of; *the crown has fallen from their heads*. Prophets they are blessed with, to direct them in their re-establishment, but, after a while, prophecy ceases among them, till the great prophet appears, and his fore-runner. The history of this book is the accomplishment of Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the return of the Jews out of Babylon at the end of seventy years, and a type of the accomplishment of the prophecies of the Apocalypse concerning the deliverance of the gospel church out of the New-Testament Babylon. Ezra preserved the records of that great revolution and transmitted them to the church in this book. His name signifies a helper; and so he was to that people. A particular account concerning him we shall meet with, ch. 7, where he himself enters upon the stage of action. The book gives us an account, I. Of the Jews' return out of their captivity, ch. 1, 2. II. Of the building of the temple, the opposition it met with, and yet the perfecting of it at last, ch. 3-6. III. Of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem, ch. 7, 8. IV. Of the good service he did there, in obliging those that had married strange wives to put them away, ch. 9, 10. This beginning again of the Jewish nation was small, yet its latter end greatly increased.

Chapter 1

In this chapter we have, I. The proclamation which Cyrus, king of Persia, issued out for the release of all the Jews that he found captives in Babylon, and the building of their temple in Jerusalem (v. 1-4). II. The return of many thereupon (v. 5, 6). III. Orders given for the restoring of the vessels of the temple (v. 7-11). And this is the dawning of the day of their deliverance.

Verses 1-4

It will be proper for us here to consider, 1. What was the state of the captive Jews in Babylon. It was upon many accounts very deplorable; they were under the power of those that hated them, had nothing they could call their own; they had no temple, no altar; if they sang psalms, their enemies ridiculed them; and yet they had prophets among them. Ezekiel and Daniel were kept distinct from the heathen. Some of them were preferred at court, others had comfortable settlements in the country, and they were all borne up with hope that, in due time, they should return to their own land again, in expectation of which they preserved among them the distinction of their families, the knowledge of their religion, and an aversion to idolatry. 2. What was the state of the government under which they were. Nebuchadnezzar carried many of them into captivity in the first year of his reign, which was the fourth of Jehoiakim; he reigned forty-five years, his son Evil-merodach twenty-three, and his grandson Belshazzar three years, which make up the seventy years. So Dr. Lightfoot, It is charged upon Nebuchadnezzar that he *opened not the house of his prisoners*, Isa. 14:17. And, if he had shown mercy to the poor Jews, Daniel told him it would have been the *lengthening of his tranquillity*, Dan. 4:27. But the measure of the sins of Babylon was at length full, and then destruction was brought upon them by Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian, which we read of, Dan. 5. Darius, being old, left the government to Cyrus, and he was employed as the instrument of the Jews' deliverance, which he gave orders for as soon as ever he was master of the kingdom of Babylon, perhaps in contradiction to Nebuchadnezzar, whose family he had cut off, and because he took a pleasure in undoing what he had done, or in policy, to recommend his newly-acquired dominion as merciful and gentle, or (as some think) in a pious regard to the prophecy of Isaiah, which had been published, and well known, above 150 years before, where he was expressly named as the man that should do this for God, and for whom God would do great things (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, etc.), and which perhaps was shown to him by those about him. His name (some say) in the Persian language signifies the *sun*, for he brought light and healing to the church of God, and was an eminent type of Christ the *Sun of righteousness*. Some was that his name signifies a *father*, and Christ is the everlasting Father. Now here we are told, I. Whence this proclamation took its rise. *The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus*. Note, The hearts of kings are in the hand of the Lord, and, like the rivulets of water, he turneth them which way soever he will. It is said of Cyrus that he knew not God, nor how to serve him; but God knew him, and how to serve himself by him, Isa. 45:4. God governs the world by his influence on the spirits of men, and, whatever good is done at any time, it is God that stirs up the spirit to do it, puts thoughts into the mind, gives to the understanding to form a right judgment, and directs the will which way he pleases. Whatever good offices therefore are, at any time, done for the church of God, he must have the glory of them.

II. The reference it had to the prophecy of Jeremiah, by whom God had not only promised that they should return, but had

fixed the time, which set time to favour Sion had now come. Seventy years were determined (Jer. 25:12; 29:10); and he that kept the promise made concerning Israel's deliverance out of *Egypt to a day* (Ex. 12:41) was doubtless as punctual to this. What Cyrus now did was long since said to be the *confirming of the word of God's servants*, Isa. 44:26. Jeremiah, while he lived, was hated and despised; yet thus did Providence honour him long after, that a mighty monarch was influenced to act in pursuance of the word of the Lord by his mouth.

III. The date of this proclamation. It was in his first year, not the first of his reign over Persia, the kingdom he was born to, but the first of his reign over Babylon, the kingdom he had conquered. Those are much honoured whose spirits are stirred up to begin with God and to serve him in their first years.

IV. The publication of it, both by word of mouth (he *caused a voice to pass throughout all his kingdom*, like a jubilee-trumpet, a joyful sabbatical year after many melancholy ones, proclaiming liberty to the captives), and also in black and white: he put it in writing, that it might be the more satisfactory, and might be sent to those distant provinces where the ten tribes were scattered in Assyria and Media, 2 Ki. 17:6.

V. The purport of this proclamation of liberty.

1. The preamble shows the causes and considerations by which he was influenced, v. 2. It should seem, his mind was enlightened with the knowledge of *Jehovah* (for so he calls him), the God of Israel, as the only *living and true God*, the *God of heaven*, who is the sovereign Lord and disposer of all *the kingdoms of the earth*; of him he says (v. 3), *He is the God*, God alone, God above all. Though he had not known God by education, God made him so far to know him now as that he did this service with an eye to him. He professes that he does it, (1.) In gratitude to God for the favours he had bestowed upon him: *The God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth*. This sounds a little vain-glorious, for there were *many kingdoms of the earth* which he had nothing to do with; but he means that God had given him all that was given to Nebuchadnezzar, whose dominion, Daniel says, was *to the end of the earth*, Dan. 4:22; 5:19. Note, God is the fountain of power; the kingdoms of the earth are at his disposal; whatever share any have of them they have from him: and those whom God has entrusted with great power and large possessions should look upon themselves as obliged thereby to do much for him. (2.) In obedience to God. He had *charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem*; probably by a dream or vision of the night, confirmed by comparing it with the prophecy of Isaiah, where his doing it was foretold. Israel's disobedience to God's charge, which they were often told of, is aggravated by the obedience of this heathen king.

2. He gives free leave to all the Jews that were in his dominions to go up to Jerusalem, and to *build the temple of the Lord* there, v. 3. His regard to God made him overlook, (1.) The secular interest of his government. It would have been his policy to keep so great a number of serviceable men in his dominions, and seemed impolitic to let them go and take root again in their own land; but piety is the best policy. (2.) The honour of the religion of his country. Why did he not order them to build a temple to the gods of Babylon or Persia? He believed the God of Israel to be the *God of heaven*, and therefore obliged his Israel to worship him only. Let them *walk in the name of the Lord their God*.

3. He subjoins a brief for a collection to bear the charges of such as were poor and not able to bear their own, v. 4. "Whosoever

remaineth, because he has not the means to bear his charges to Jerusalem, *let the men of his place help him.*" Some take it as an order to the king's officers to supply them out of his revenue, as ch. 6:8. But it may mean a warrant to the captives to ask and receive the alms and charitable contributions of all the king's loving subjects. And we may suppose the Jews had conducted themselves so well among their neighbours that they would be as forward to accommodate them because they loved them as the Egyptians were because they were weary of them. At least many would be kind to them because they saw the government would take it well. Cyrus not only gave his good wishes with those that went (*Their God be with them*, v. 3), but took care also to furnish them with such things as they needed. He took it for granted that those among them who were of ability would offer their *free-will offerings for the house of God*, to promote the rebuilding of it. But, besides that, he would have them supplied out of his kingdom. Well-wishers to the temple should be well-doers for it.

Verses 5-11

We are here told,

I. How Cyrus's proclamation succeeded with others. 1. He having given leave to the Jews to go up to Jerusalem, many of them went up accordingly, v. 5. The leaders herein were the *chief of the fathers* of Judah and Benjamin, eminent and experienced men, from whom it might justly be expected that, as they were above their brethren in dignity, so they should go before them in duty. The priests and Levites were (as became them) with the first that set their faces again towards Zion. If any good work is to be done, let ministers lead in it. Those that accompanied them were such as God had inclined to go up. The same God that had raised up the spirit of Cyrus to proclaim this liberty raised up their spirits to take the benefit of it; for it was done, *not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts*, Zec. 4:6. The temptation perhaps was strong to some of them to stay in Babylon. They had convenient settlements there, had contracted an agreeable acquaintance with the neighbours, and were ready to say, *It is good to be here*. The discouragements of their return were many and great, the journey long, their wives and children unfit for travelling, their own land was to them a strange land, the road to it an unknown road. Go up to Jerusalem! And what should they do there? It was all in ruins, and in the midst of enemies to whom they would be an easy prey. Many were wrought upon by these considerations to stay in Babylon, at least not to go with the first. But there were some that got over these difficulties, that ventured to break the ice, and feared not the lion in the way, the lion in the streets; and they were those whose spirits God raised. He, by his Spirit and grace, filled them with a generous ambition of liberty, a gracious affection to their own land, and a desire of the free and public exercise of their religion. Had God left them to themselves, and to the counsels of flesh and blood, they would have staid in Babylon; but he put it into their hearts to set their faces Zionward, and, as strangers, to ask the way thither (Jer. 50:5); for they, being a new generation, went out like their father Abraham from this land of the Chaldees, not knowing whither they went, Heb. 11:8. Note, Whatever good we do, it is owing purely to the grace of God, and he raises up our spirits to the doing of it, *works in us both to will and to do*. Our spirits naturally incline to this earth and to the things of it. If they move upwards, in any good affections or good actions, it is God that raises them. The call and offer of the gospel are like Cyrus's proclamation. *Deliverance is preached to the captives*, Lu. 4:18. Those that are bound under the unrighteous dominion of sin, and bound over to the righteous judgment of God, may be made free by Jesus Christ.

Whoever will, by repentance and faith, return to God, his duty to God, his happiness in God, Jesus Christ has opened the way for him, and let him go up out of the slavery of sin into the *glorious liberty of the children of God*. The offer is general to all. Christ makes it, in pursuance of the grant which the Father has made him of *all power both in heaven and in earth* (a much greater dominion than that given to Cyrus, v. 2) and of the charge given him to *build God a house*, to set him up a church in the world, a kingdom among men. Many that hear this joyful sound choose to sit still in Babylon, are in love with their sins and will not venture upon the difficulties of a holy life; but some there are that break through the discouragements, and resolve to *build the house of God*, to make heaven of their religion, whatever it cost them, and they are those *whose spirit God has raised* above the world and the flesh and whom he has made *willing in the day of his power*, Ps. 110:3. Thus will the heavenly Canaan be replenished, though many perish in Babylon; and the gospel-offer will not be made in vain. 2. Cyrus having given order that their neighbours should help them, they did so, v. 6. All those that were about them furnished them with plate and goods to bear the charges of their journey, and to help them in building and furnishing both their own houses and God's temple. As the tabernacle was made of the spoils of Egypt, and the first temple built by the labours of the strangers, so the second by the contributions of the Chaldeans, all intimating the admission of the Gentiles into the church in due time. God can, where he pleases, incline the hearts of strangers to be kind to his people, and make those to strengthen their hands that have weakened them. *The earth helped the woman. Besides what was willingly offered* by the Jews themselves who staid behind, from a principle of love to God and his house, much was offered, as one may say, unwillingly by the Babylonians, who were influenced to do it by a divine power on their minds of which they themselves could give no account.

How this proclamation was seconded by Cyrus himself. To give proof of the sincerity of his affection to the house of God, he not only released the people of God, but restored the vessels of the temple, v. 7, 8. Observe here, 1. How careful Providence was of the vessels of the temple, that they were not lost, melted down, or so mixed with other vessels that they could not be known, but that they were all now forthcoming. Such care God has of the living *vessels of mercy, vessels of honour*, of whom it is said (2 Tim. 2:19, 20), *The Lord knows those that are his, and they shall none of them perish*. 2. Though they had been put into an idol's temple, and probably used in the service of idols, yet they were given back, to be used for God. God will recover his own; and the spoil of the strong man armed shall be converted to the use of the conqueror. 3. Judah had a prince, even in captivity. Sheshbazzar, supposed to be the same with Zerubbabel, is here called *prince of Judah*; the Chaldeans called him *Sheshbazzar*, which signifies *joy in tribulation*; but among his own people he went by the name of *Zerubbabel—a stranger in Babylon*; so he looked upon himself, and considered Jerusalem his home, though, as Josephus says, he was captain of the life-guard to the king of Babylon. He took care of the affairs of the Jews, and had some authority over them, probably from the death of Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, who made him his heir, he being of the house of David. 4. To him the sacred vessels were numbered out (v. 8), and he took care for their safe conveyance to Jerusalem, v. 11. It would encourage them to build the temple that they had so much rich furniture ready to put into it when it was built. Though God's ordinances, like the vessels of the sanctuary, may be corrupted and profaned by the New-Testament Babylon, they shall, in due time, be restored to their primitive use and intention; for not one jot or tittle of divine institution shall fall to the ground

Chapter 2

That many returned out of Babylon upon Cyrus's proclamation we were told in the foregoing chapter; we have here a catalogue of the several families that returned (v. 1). I. The leaders (v. 2). II. The people (v. 3–35). III. The priests, Levites, and retainers to the temple (v. 35–63). IV. The sum total, with an account of their retinue (v. 64–67). V. Their offerings to the service of the temple (v. 68–70).

Verses 1-35

We may observe here, 1. That an account was kept in writing of the families that came up out of captivity, and the numbers of each family. This was done for their honour, as part of their recompence for their faith and courage, their confidence in God and their affection to their own land, and to stir up others to follow their good example. Those that honour God he will thus honour. The names of all those Israelites indeed that accept the offer of deliverance by Christ shall be found, to their honour, in a more sacred record than this, even in *the Lamb's book of life*. The account that was kept of the families that came up from the captivity was intended also for the benefit of posterity, that they might know from whom they descended and to whom they were allied. 2. That they are called *children of the province*. Judah, which had been an illustrious kingdom, to which other kingdoms had been made provinces, subject to it and dependent on it, was now itself made a province, to receive laws and commissions from the king of Persia and to be accountable to him. See how sin diminishes and debases a nation, which righteousness would exalt. But by thus being made servants (as the patriarchs by being sojourners in a country which was theirs by promise) they were reminded of the *better country, that is, the heavenly* (Heb. 11:16), a *kingdom which cannot be moved*, or changed into a province. 3. That they are said to come *every one to his city*, that is, the city appointed them, in which appointment an eye, no doubt, was had to their former settlement by Joshua; and to that, as near as might be, they returned: for it does not appear that any others, at least any that were able to oppose them, had possessed them in their absence. 4. That the leaders are first mentioned, v. 2. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were their Moses and Aaron, the former their chief prince, the latter their chief priest. Nehemiah and Mordecai are mentioned here; some think not the same with the famous men we afterwards meet with of those names: probably they were the same, but afterwards returned to court for the service of their country. 5. Some of these several families are named from the persons that were their ancestors, others from the places in which they had formerly resided; as with us many surnames are the proper names of persons, others of places. 6. Some little difference there is between the numbers of some of the families here and in Neh. 7, where this catalogue is repeated, which might arise from this, that some who had given in their names at first to come afterwards drew back—said, *I go, Sir, but went not*, which would lessen the number of the families they belonged to; others that declined, at first, *afterwards repented and went*, and so increased the number. 7. Here are two families that are called *the children of Elam* (one v. 7, another v. 31), and, which is strange, the number of both is the same, 1254. 8. The children of Adonikam, which signifies *a high lord*, were 666, just the *number of the beast* (Rev. 13:18), which is there said to be *the number of a man*, which, Mr. Hugh Broughton thinks, has reference to this man. 9. The children of Bethlehem (v. 21) were but 123, though it was David's city; for Bethlehem was *little*

among the thousands of Judah, yet there must the Messiah arise, Mic. 5:2. 10. Anathoth had been a famous place in the tribe of Benjamin and yet here it numbered but 128 (v. 23), which is to be imputed to the divine curse which the men of Anathoth brought upon themselves by persecuting Jeremiah, who was of their city. Jer. 11:21, 23, *There shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anathoth*. And see Isa. 10:30, *O poor Anathoth!* Nothing brings ruin on a people sooner than persecution.

Verses 36-63

Here is an account, I. Of the priests that returned, and they were a considerable number, about a tenth part of the whole company: for the whole were above 42,000 (v. 64), and four families of priests made up above 4200 (v. 36-39); thus was the tenth God's part—a blessed decimation. Three of the fathers of the priests here named were heads of courses, 1 Chr. 24:7, 8, 14. The fourth was Pashur, v. 38. If these were of the posterity of that Pashur that abused Jeremiah (Jer. 20:1), it is strange that so bad a man should have so good a seed, and so numerous.

II. Of the Levites. I cannot but wonder at the small number of them, for, taking in both the singers and the porters (v. 40-42), they did not make 350. Time was when the Levites were more forward to their duty than the priests (2 Chr. 29:34), but they were not so now. If one place, one family, has the reputation for pious zeal now, another may have it another time. *The wind blows where it listeth*, and shifts its points.

III. Of the Nethinim, who, it is supposed, were the Gibeonites, *given* (so their name signifies) by Joshua first (Jos. 9:27), and again by David (Ezra 8:20), when Saul had expelled them, to be employed by the Levites in the work of God's house as hewers of wood and drawers of water; and, with them, of the children of Solomon's servants, whom he gave for the like use (whether they were Jews or Gentiles does not appear) and who were here taken notice of among the retainers of the temple and numbered with the Nethinim, v. 55, 58. Note, It is an honour to belong to God's house, though in the meanest office there.

IV. Of some that were looked upon as Israelites by birth, and others as priests, and yet could not make out a clear title to the honour. 1. There were some that could not prove themselves Israelites (v. 59, 60), a considerable number, who presumed they were of the seed of Jacob, but could not produce their pedigrees, and yet would go up to Jerusalem, having an affection to the house and people of God. These shamed those who were true-born Israelites, and yet were not called Israelites indeed, *who came out of the waters of Judah* (Isa. 48:1), but had lost the relish of those waters. 2. There were others that could not prove themselves priests, and yet were supposed to be of the seed of Aaron. What is not preserved in black and white will, in all likelihood, be forgotten in a little time. Now we are here told, (1.) How they lost their evidence. One of their ancestors married a daughter of Barzillai, that great man whom we read of in David's time; he gloried in an alliance to that honourable family, and, preferring that before the dignity of his priesthood, would have his children called after Barzillai's family, and their pedigree preserved in the registers of that house, not of the house of Aaron, and so they lost it. In Babylon there was nothing to be got by the priesthood, and therefore they cared not for being akin to it. Those who think their ministry, or their relation to ministers, a diminution or disparagement to them, forget who it was that said, *I magnify my office*. (2.) What they lost with it. It could not be taken for granted that they were priests when they could not produce their proofs, but they were, *as polluted, put*

from the priesthood. Now that the priests had recovered their rights, and had the altar to live upon again, they would gladly be looked upon as priests. But they had sold their birthright for the honour of being gentlemen, and therefore were justly degraded, and forbidden to *eat of the most holy things*. Note, Christ will be ashamed of those that are ashamed of him and his service. It was the tirshatha, or governor, that put them under this sequestration, which some understand of Zerubbabel the present governor, others of Nehemiah (who is so called, Neh. 8:9, 10:1, and who gave this order when he came some years after); but the prohibition was not absolute, it was only a suspension, till there should be a high priest *with Urim and Thummim*, by whom they might know God's mind in this matter. This, it seems, was expected and desired, but it does not appear that ever they were blessed with it under the second temple. They had the canon of the Old Testament complete, which was better than Urim; and, by the want of that oracle, they were taught to expect the Messiah the great Oracle, which the Urim and Thummim was but a type of. Nor does it appear that the second temple had the ark in it, either the old one or a new one. Those shadows by degrees vanished, as the substance approached; and God, by the prophet, intimates to his people that they should sustain no damage by the want of the ark, Jer. 3:16, 17. *In those days, when they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord, neither shall it come to mind, for they shall do very well without it.*

Verses 64-70

Here is, I. The sum total of the company that returned out of Babylon. The particular sums before mentioned amount not quite to 30,000 (29, 818), so that there were above 12,000 that come out into any of those accounts, who, it is probable, were of the rest of the tribes of Israel, besides Judah and Benjamin, that could not tell of what particular family or city they were, but that they were Israelites, and of what tribe. Now, 1. This was more than double the number that were carried captive into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, so that, as in Egypt, the time of their affliction was the time of their increase. 2. These were but few to begin a nation with, and yet, by virtue of the old promise made to their fathers, they multiplied so as before their last destruction by the Romans, about 500 years after, to be a very numerous people. When God says, "Increase and multiply," *a little one shall become a thousand.*

II. Their retinue. They were themselves little better than servants, and therefore no wonder that their servants were comparatively but few (v. 65) and their beasts of burden about as many, v. 66, 67. It was not with them now as in days past. But notice is taken of 200 *singing-men and women* whom they had among them, who, we will suppose, were intended (as those 2 Chr. 35:25) to excite *their mourning*, for it was foretold that they should, upon this occasion, *go weeping* (Jer. 50:4), with ditties of lamentation.

III. Their oblations. It is said (v. 68, 69), 1. That they *came to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem*; and yet that house, that holy and beautiful house, was now in ruins, a heap of rubbish. But, like their father Abraham, when the altar was gone they came with devotion to *the place of the altar* (Gen. 13:4); and it is the character of the genuine sons of Zion that they favour even *the dust thereof*, Ps. 102:14. 2. That they offered freely towards the *setting of it up in its place*. That, it seems, was the first house they talked of setting up; and though they came off a journey, and were beginning the world (two chargeable things), yet they

offered, and offered freely, towards the building of the temple. Let none complain of the necessary expenses of their religion, but believe that when they come to balance the account they will find that it clears the cost. Their offering was nothing in comparison with the offerings of the princes in David's time; then they offered by talents (1 Chr. 29:7), now by drams, yet these drams, being after their ability, were as acceptable to God as those talents, like the widow's two mites. The 61,000 drams of gold amount, by Cumberland's calculation, to so many pounds of our money and so many groats. Every maneh, or pound of silver, he reckons to be sixty shekels (that is, thirty ounces), which we may reckon 7*l.* 10*s.* of our money, so that this 5000 pounds of silver will be above 37,000*l.* of our money. It seems, God had blessed them with an increase of their wealth, as well as of their numbers, in Babylon; and, as God had prospered them, they gave cheerfully to the service of his house. 3. That they *dwelt in their cities*, v. 70. Though their cities were out of repair, yet, because they were their cities, such as God had assigned them, they were content to dwell in them, and were thankful for liberty and property, though they had little of pomp, plenty, or power. Their poverty was a bad cause, but their unity and unanimity were a good effect of it. Here was room enough for them all and all their substance, so that there was no strife among them, but perfect harmony, a blessed presage of their settlement, as their discords in the latter times of that state were of their ruin.

Chapter 3

In the close of the foregoing chapter we left Israel in their cities, but we may well imagine what a bad posture their affairs were in, the ground untilled, the cities in ruins, all out of order; but here we have an account of the early care they took about the re-establishment of religion among them. Thus did they lay the foundation well, and begin their work at the right end. I. They set up an altar, and offered sacrifices upon it, kept the feasts, and contributed towards the rebuilding of the temple (v. 1-7). II. They laid the foundation of the temple with a mixture of joy and sorrow (v. 8-13). This was the day of small things, which was not to be despised, Zec. 4:10.

Verses 1-7

Here is, I. A general assembly of the returned Israelites at Jerusalem, in the *seventh month*, v. 1. We may suppose that they came from Babylon in the spring, and must allow at least four months for the journey, for so long Ezra and his company were in coming, ch. 7:9. The seventh month therefore soon came, in which many of the feasts of the Lord were to be solemnized; and then they gathered themselves together by agreement among themselves, rather than by the command of authority, to Jerusalem. Though they had newly come to their cities, and had their hands full of business there, to provide necessaries for themselves and their families, which might have excused them from attending on God's altar till the hurry was a little over, as many foolishly put off their coming to the communion till they are settled in the world, yet such was their zeal for religion, now that they had newly come from under correction for their irreligion, that they left all their business in the country, to attend God's altar; and (which is strange) in this pious zeal they were all of a mind, they came *as one man*. Let worldly business be postponed to the business of religion and it will prosper the better.

II. The care which their leading men took to have an altar ready for them to attend upon.

1. Joshua and his brethren the priests, Zerubbabel and his brethren the princes, built *the altar of the God of Israel* (v. 2), in the same place (it is likely) where it had stood, upon the same bases, v. 3. Bishop Patrick, observing that before the temple was built there seems to have been a tabernacle pitched for the divine service, as was in David's time, not on Mount Moriah, but Mount Sion (1 Chr. 9:23), supposes that this altar was erected there, to be sued while the temple was in building. Let us learn hence, (1.) To *begin with God*. The more difficult and necessitous our case is the more concerned we are to take him along with us in all our ways. If we expect to be directed by his oracles, let him be honoured by our offerings. (2.) To *do what we can* in the worship of God when *we cannot do what we would*. They could not immediately have a temple, but they would not be without an altar. Abraham, wherever he came, *built an altar*; and wherever we come, though we may perhaps want the benefit of the candlestick of preaching, and the showbread of the eucharist, yet, if we bring not the sacrifices of prayer and praise, we are wanting in our duty, for we have an altar that sanctifies the gift ever ready.

2. Observe the reason here given why they hastened to set up the altar: *Fear was upon them, because of the people of the land*. They were in the midst of enemies that bore ill will to them and their religion, for whom they were an unequal match. And, (1.) *Though* they were so, yet they built the altar (so some read it); they would not be frightened from their religion by the

opposition they were likely to meet with in it. Never let the fear of man bring us into this snare. (2.) *Because* they were so, therefore they set up the altar. Apprehension of danger should stir us up to our duty. Have we many enemies? Then it is good to have God our friend and to keep up our correspondence with him. This good use we should make of our fears, we should be driven by them to our knees. Even Saul would think himself undone if the enemy should come upon him before he had made his supplication to God, 1 Sa. 13:12.

III. The sacrifices they offered upon the altar. The altar was reared to be used, and they used it accordingly. Let not those that have an altar starve it.

1. They began *on the first day of the seventh month*, v. 6. It does not appear that they had any fire from heaven to begin with, as Moses and Solomon had, but common fire served them, as it did the patriarchs.

2. Having begun, they kept up the *continual burnt-offering* (v. 5), *morning and evening*, v. 3. They had known by sad experience what it was to want the comfort of the daily sacrifice to plead in their daily prayers, and now that it was revived they resolved not to let it fall again. The daily lamb typified the Lamb of God, whose righteousness must be our confidence in all our prayers.

3. They observed all the *set feasts of the Lord*, and offered the sacrifices appointed for each, and particularly *the feast of tabernacles*, v. 4, 5. Now that they had received such great mercy from God that joyful feast was in a special manner seasonable. And now that they were beginning to settle in their cities it might serve well to remind them of their fathers dwelling in tents in the wilderness. That feast also which had a peculiar reference to gospel times (as appears, Zec. 14:18) was brought, in a special manner, into reputation, now that those times drew on. Of the services of this feast, which continued seven days and had peculiar sacrifices appointed, it is said that they did *as the duty of every day required* (see Num. 29:13, 17, etc.), *Verbum die in die suo—the word, or matter, of the day in its day* (so it is in the original)—a phrase that has become proverbial with those that have used themselves to scripture-language. If the feast of tabernacles was a figure of a gospel conversation, in respect of continual weanedness from the world and joy in God, we may infer that it concerns us all to do the *work of the day in its day, according as the duty of the day requires*, that is, (1.) We must improve time, by finding some business to do every day that will turn to a good account. (2.) We must improve opportunity, by accommodating ourselves to that which is the proper business of the present day. Every thing is beautiful in its season. The tenth day of this month was the day of atonement, a solemn day, and very seasonable now: it is very probable that they observed it, yet it is not mentioned, nor indeed in all the Old Testament do I remember the least mention of the observance of that day; as if it were enough that we have the law of it in Lev. 16, and the gospel of it, which was the chief intention of it, in the New Testament.

4. They offered *every man's free-will offering*, v. 5. The law required much, but they brought more; for, though they had little wealth to support the expense of their sacrifices, they had much zeal, and, we may suppose, spared at their own tables that they might plentifully supply God's altar. Happy are those that bring with them out of the furnace of affliction such a holy heat as this.

IV. The preparation they made for the building of the temple, v. 7. This they applied themselves immediately to; for, while we

do what we can, we must still be aiming to do more and better. Tyre and Sidon must now, as of old, furnish them with workmen, and Lebanon with timber, orders for both which they had from Cyrus. What God calls us to we may depend upon his providence to furnish us for.

Verses 8-13

There was no dispute among the returned Jews whether they should build the temple or no; that was immediately resolved on, and that it should be done with all speed; what comfort could they take in their own land if they had not that token of God's presence with them and the record of his name among them? We have here therefore an account of the beginning of that good work. Observe,

I. When it was begun—in the second month of the second year, as soon as ever the season of the year would permit (v. 8), and when they had ended the solemnities of the passover. They took little more than half a year for making preparation of the ground and materials; so much were their hearts upon it. Note, When any good work is to be done it will be our wisdom to set about it quickly, and not to lose time, yea, though we foresee difficulty and opposition in it. Thus we engage ourselves to it, and engage God for us. Well begun (we say) is half ended.

II. Who began it—Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and their brethren. Then the work of God is likely to go on well when magistrates, ministers, and people, are hearty for it, and agree in their places to promote it. It was God that gave them one heart for this service, and it boded well.

III. Who were employed to further it. They appointed the *Levites to set forward the work* (v. 8), and they did it by *setting forward the workmen* (v. 9), and strengthening their hands with good and comfortable words. Note, Those that do not work themselves may yet do good service by quickening and encouraging those that do work.

IV. How God was praised at the laying of the foundation of the temple (v. 10, 11); the priests with the trumpets appointed by Moses, and the Levites with the cymbals appointed by David, made up a concert of music, not to please the ear, but to assist the singing of that everlasting hymn which will never be out of date, and to which our tongues should never be out of tune, *God is good, and his mercy endureth for ever*, the burden of Ps. 136. Let all the streams of mercy be traced up to the fountain. Whatever our condition is, how many soever our griefs and fears, let it be owned that God is good; and, whatever fails, that his mercy fails not. Let this be sung with application, as here; not only his mercy endures for ever, but it endures for ever towards Israel, Israel when captives in a strange land and strangers in their own land. However it be, yet *God is good to Israel* (Ps. 73:1), good to us. Let the reviving of the church's interests, when they seemed dead, be ascribed to the continuance of God's mercy for ever, for therefore the church continues.

V. How the people were affected. A remarkable mixture of various affections there was upon this occasion. Different sentiments there were among the people of God, and each expressed himself according to his sentiments, and yet there was no disagreement among them, their minds were not alienated from each other nor the common concern retarded by it. 1. Those that only knew the misery of having no temple at all praised the Lord with shouts of joy when they saw but the foundation of one laid, v. 11. To them even this foundation seemed great, and was as life from the dead; to their hungry souls even this was

sweet. They shouted, so that *the noise was heard afar off*. Note, We ought to be thankful for the beginnings of mercy, though we have not yet come to the perfection of it; and the foundations of a temple, after long desolations, cannot but be fountains of joy to every faithful Israelite. 2. Those that remembered the glory of the first temple which Solomon built, and considered how far this was likely to be inferior to that, perhaps in dimensions, certainly in magnificence and sumptuousness, *wept with a loud voice*, v. 12. If we date the captivity with the first, from the fourth of Jehoiakim, it was about fifty-two years since the temple was burnt; if from Jeconiah's captivity, it was but fifty-nine. So that many now alive might remember it standing; and a great mercy it was to the captives that they had the lives of so many of their priests and Levites lengthened out, who could tell them what they themselves remembered of the glory of Jerusalem, to quicken them in their return. These lamented the disproportion between this temple and the former. And, (1.) There was some reason for it; and if they turned their tears into the right channel, and bewailed the sin that was the cause of this melancholy change, they did well. Sin sullies the glory of any church or people, and, when they find themselves diminished and brought low, that must bear the blame. (2.) Yet it was their infirmity to mingle those tears with the common joys and so to cast a damp upon them. They *despised the day of small things*, and were unthankful for the good they enjoyed, because it was not so much as their ancestors had, though it was much more than they deserved. In the harmony of public joys, let not us be jarring strings. It was an aggravation of the discouragement they hereby gave to the people that they were priests and Levites, who should have known and taught others how to be duly affected under various providences, and not to let the remembrance of former afflictions drown the sense of present mercies. This mixture of sorrow and joy here is a representation of this world. Some are bathing in rivers of joy, while others are drowned in floods of tears. In heaven all are singing, and none sighing; in hell all are weeping and wailing, and none rejoicing; but here on earth we can scarcely *discern the shouts of joy from the noise of the weeping*. Let us learn to *rejoice with those that do rejoice* and *weep with those that weep*, and ourselves to rejoice as though we rejoiced not, and weep as though we wept not.

Chapter 4

The good work of rebuilding the temple was no sooner begun than it met with opposition from those that bore ill will to it; the Samaritans were enemies to the Jews and their religion, and they set themselves to obstruct it. I. They offered to be partners in the building of it, that they might have it in their power to retard it; but they were refused (v. 1-3). II. They discouraged them in it, and dissuaded them from it (v. 4, 5). III. They basely misrepresented the undertaking, and the undertakers, to the king of Persia, by a memorial they sent him (v. 6–16). IV. They obtained from him an order to stop the building (v. 17–22), which they immediately put in execution (v. 23, 24).

Verses 1-5

We have here an instance of the old enmity that was put between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God's temple cannot be built, but Satan will rage, and the *gates of hell* will *fight against it*. The gospel kingdom was, in like manner, to be set up with much struggling and contention. In this respect the glory of the latter house was greater than the glory of the former, and it was more a figure of the temple of Christ's church, in that Solomon built his temple when there was *no adversary nor evil occurrent*, (1 Ki. 5:4); but this second temple was built notwithstanding great opposition, in the removing and conquering of which, and the bringing of the work to perfection at last in spite of it, the wisdom, power, and goodness of God were much glorified, and the church was encouraged to trust in him.

I. The undertakers are here called the *children of the captivity* (v. 1), which makes them look very little. They had newly come out of captivity, were born in captivity, had still the marks of their captivity upon them; though they were not now captives, they were under the control of those whose captives they had lately been. Israel was God's son, his first-born; but by their iniquity the people sold and enslaved themselves, and so became children of the captivity. But, it should seem, the thought of their being so quickened them to this work, for it was by their neglect of the temple that they lost their freedom.

II. The opposers of the undertaking are here said to be *the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin*, not the Chaldeans or Persians (they gave them no disturbance—"let them build and welcome"), but the relics of the ten tribes, and the foreigners that had joined themselves to them, and patched up that mongrel religion we had an account of, 2 Ki. 17:33. *They feared the Lord, and served their own gods too*. They are called *the people of the land*, v. 4. The worst enemies Judah and Benjamin had were those that *said they were Jews and were not*, Rev. 3:9.

III. The opposition they gave had in it much of the subtlety of the old serpent. When they heard that the temple was in building they were immediately aware that it would be a fatal blow to their superstition, and set themselves to oppose it. They had not power to do it forcibly, but they tried all the ways they could to do it effectually.

1. They offered their service to build with the Israelites only that thereby they might get an opportunity to retard the work, while they pretended to further it. Now, (1.) Their offer was plausible enough, and looked kind: *"We will build with you, will help you to contrive, and will contribute towards the expense; for we seek your God as you do,"* v. 2. This was false, for, though they sought the same God, they did not seek him only, nor seek him in the way he appointed, and therefore did not seek

him as they did. Herein they designed, if it were possible, to hinder the building of it, at least to hinder their comfortable enjoyment of it; as good almost not have it as not have it to themselves, for the pure worship of the true God and him only. Thus are the *kisses of an enemy deceitful*; his words are smoother than butter when war is in his heart. But, (2.) The refusal of their proffered service was very just, v. 3. *The chief of the fathers of Israel* were soon aware that they meant them no kindness, whatever they pretended, but really designed to do them a mischief, and therefore (though they had need enough of help if it had been such as they could confide in) told them plainly, "*You have nothing to do with us, have no part nor lot in this matter, are not true-born Israelites nor faithful worshippers of God; you worship you know not what*, Jn. 4:22. You are none of those with whom we dare hold communion, and therefore we ourselves will build it." They plead not to them the law of their God, which forbade them to mingle with strangers (though that especially they had an eye to), but that which they would take more notice of, the king's commission, which was directed to them only: "The king of Persia has commanded us to build this house, and we shall distrust and affront him if we call in foreign aid." Note, In doing good there is need of the *wisdom of the serpent*, as well as the *innocency of the dove*, and we have need, as it follows there, to *beware of men*, Mt. 10:16, 17. We should carefully consider with whom we are associated and on whose hand we lean. While we trust God with a pious confidence we must trust men with a prudent jealousy and caution.

2. When this plot failed they did what they could to divert them from the work and discourage them in it. They weakened their hands by telling them it was in vain to attempt it, calling them *foolish builders*, who began what they were not able to finish, and by their insinuations troubled them, and made them drive heavily in the work. All were not alike zealous in it. Those that were cool and indifferent were by these artifices drawn off from the work, which wanted their help, v. 4. And because what they themselves said the Jews would suspect to be ill meant, and not be influenced by, they, underhand, *hired counsellors against them*, who, pretending to advise them for the best, should dissuade them from proceeding, and so *frustrate their purpose* (v. 5), or dissuade the men of Tyre and Sidon from furnishing them with the timber they had bargained for (ch. 3:7); or whatever business they had at the Persian court, to solicit for any particular grants or favours, pursuant to the general edict for their liberty, there were those that were hired and lay ready to appear of counsel against them. Wonder not at the restlessness of the church's enemies in their attempts against the building of God's temple. He whom they serve, and whose work they are doing, is *unwearied in walking to and fro through the earth* to do mischief. And let those who discourage a good work, and weaken the hands of those that are employed in it, see whose pattern they follow.

Verses 6-16

Cyrus stedfastly adhered to the Jews' interest, and supported his own grant. It was to no purpose to offer any thing to him in prejudice of it. What he did was from a good principle, and in the fear of God, and therefore he adhered to it. But, though his reign in all was thirty years, yet after the conquest of Babylon, and his decree for the release of the Jews, some think that he reigned but three years, others seven, and then either died or gave up that part of his government, in which his successor was Ahasuerus (v. 6), called also *Artaxerxes* (v. 7), supposed to be the same that in heathen authors is called *Cambyses*, who had never taken such cognizance of the despised Jews as to concern himself for them, nor had he that knowledge of the God of

Israel which his predecessor had. To him these Samaritans applied by letter for an order to stop the building of the temple; and they did it in the beginning of his reign, being resolved to lose no time when they thought they had a king for their purpose. See how watchful the church's enemies are to take the first opportunity of doing it a mischief; let not its friends be less careful to do it a kindness. Here is,

I. The general purport of the letter which they sent to the king, to inform him of this matter. It is called (v. 6) *an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem*. The devil is the *accuser of the brethren* (Rev. 12:10), and he carries on his malicious designs against them, not only by accusing them himself before God, as he did Job, but by acting as a lying spirit in the mouths of his instruments, whom he employs to accuse them before magistrates and kings and to make them odious to the many and obnoxious to the mighty. Marvel not if the same arts be still used to depreciate serious godliness.

II. The persons concerned in writing this letter. The contrivers are named (v. 7) that plotted the thing, the writers (v. 8) that put it into form, and the subscribers (v. 9) that concurred in it and joined with them in this representation, this misrepresentation I should call it. Now see here, 1. How the *rulers take counsel together against the Lord* and his temple, with their companions. The building of the temple would do them no harm, yet they appear against it with the utmost concern and virulence, perhaps because the prophets of the God of Israel had foretold the *famishing* and *perishing* of all the *gods of the heathen*, Zep. 2:11; Jer. 10:11. 2. How the people concurred with them in imagining this vain thing. They followed the cry, though ignorant of the merits of the cause. All the several colonies of that plantation (nine are here mentioned), who had their denomination from the cities or countries of Assyria, Chaldea, Persia, etc., whence they came, set their hands, by their representatives, to this letter. Perhaps they were incensed against these returned Jews because many of the ten tribes were among them, whose estates they had got into their possession, and of whom they were therefore jealous, lest they should attempt the recovery of them hereafter. III. A copy of the letter itself, which Ezra inserts here out of the records of the kingdom of Persia, into which it had been entered; and it is well we have it, that we may see whence the like methods, still taken to expose good people and baffle good designs, are copied.

1. They represent themselves as very loyal to the government, and greatly concerned for the honour and interest of it, and would have it thought that the king had no such loving faithful subjects in all his dominions as they were, none so sensible of their obligations to him, v. 14. *Because we are salted with the salt of the palace* (so it is in the *margin*), "we have our salary from the court, and could no more live without it than flesh could be preserved without salt;" or, as some think, their pay or pension was sent them in salt; or "Because we had our education in the palace, and were brought up at the king's table," as we find, Dan. 1:5. These were those whom he intended to prefer; they did *eat their portion of the king's meat*. "Now, in consideration of this, *it is not meet for us to see the king's dishonour*;" and therefore they urge him to stop the building of the temple, which would certainly be the king's dishonour more than any thing else. Note, A secret enmity to Christ and his gospel is often gilded over with a pretended affection to Caesar and his power. The Jews hated the Roman government, and yet, to serve a turn, could cry, *We have no king but Caesar*. But (to allude to this), if those that lived upon the crown thought themselves bound in gratitude thus to support the interest of it, much more reason have we thus to argue ourselves into a pious

concern for God's honour; *we have our maintenance from the God of heaven* and are *salted with his salt*, live upon his bounty and are the care of his providence; and therefore it is not *meet for us to see his dishonour* without resenting it and doing what we can to prevent it.

2. They represent the Jews as disloyal, and dangerous to the government, that Jerusalem was *the rebellious and bad city* (v. 12), *hurtful to kings and provinces*, v. 15. See how Jerusalem, *the joy of the whole earth* (Ps. 48:2), is here reproached as the scandal of the whole earth. The enemies of the church could not do the bad things they design against it if they did not first give it a bad name. Jerusalem had been a loyal city to its rightful princes, and its present inhabitants were as well affected to the king and his government as any of his provinces whatsoever. Daniel, who was a Jew, had lately approved himself so faithful to his prince that his worst enemies could find no fault in his management, Dan. 6:4. But thus was Elijah most unjustly charged with troubling Israel, the apostles with *turning the world upside down*, and Christ himself with *perverting the nation* and *forbidding to give tribute to Caesar*; and we must not think it strange if the same game be still played. Now here, (1.) Their history of what was past was invidious, that *within this city sedition had been moved of old time*, and, for *that cause, it was destroyed*, v. 15. It cannot be denied but that there was some colour given for this suggestion by the attempts of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah to shake off the yoke of the king of Babylon, which, if they had kept close to their religion and the temple they were now rebuilding, they would never have come under. But it must be considered, [1.] That they were themselves, and their ancestors, sovereign princes, and their efforts to recover their rights, if there had not been in them the violation of an oath, for aught I know, would have been justifiable, and successful too, had they taken the right method and made their peace with God first. [2.] Though these Jews, and their princes, had been guilty of rebellion, yet it was unjust therefore to fasten this as an indelible brand upon this city, as if that must for ever after go under the name of *the rebellious and bad city*. The Jews, in their captivity, had given such specimens of good behaviour as were sufficient, with any reasonable men, to roll away that one reproach; for they were instructed (and we have reason to hope that they observed their instructions) *to seek the peace of the city where they were captives* and *pray to the Lord for it*, Jer. 29:7. It was therefore very unfair, though not uncommon, thus to impute the iniquity of the fathers to the children.

(2.) Their information concerning what was now doing was grossly false in matter of fact. Very careful they were to inform the king that the Jews had *set up the walls of this city*, nay, had *finished* them (so it is in the *margin*) and *joined the foundations* (v. 12), when this was far from being the case. They had only begun to build the temple, which Cyrus commanded them to do, but, as for the walls, there was nothing done nor designed towards the repair of them, as appears by the condition they were in many years after (Neh. 1:3), all in ruins. *What shall be given, and what done, to these false tongues*, nay, which is worse, these false pens? *sharp arrows*, doubtless, *of the mighty*, and *coals of juniper*, Ps. 120:3, 4. If they had not been perfectly lost to all virtue and honour they would not, and if they had not been very secure of the king's countenance they durst not, have written that to the king which all their neighbours knew to be a notorious lie. See Prov. 29:12.

(3.) Their prognostics of the consequences were altogether groundless and absurd. They were very confident, and would have the king believe it upon their word, that if this city should be built, not only the Jews would *pay no toll, tribute, or custom* (v.

13), but (since a great lie is as soon spoken as a little one) that the king would have no portion at all on this side the river (v. 16), that all the countries on this side Euphrates would instantly revolt, drawn in to do so by their example; and, if the prince in possession should connive at this, he would wrong, not only himself, but his successors: *Thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings*. See how every line in this letter breathes both the subtlety and malice of the old serpent.

Verses 17-24

Here we have,

I. The orders which the king of Persia gave, in answer to the information sent him by the Samaritans against the Jews. He suffered himself to be imposed upon by their fraud and falsehood, took no care to examine the allegations of their petition concerning that which the Jews were now doing, but took it for granted that the charge was true, and was very willing to gratify them with an order of council to stay proceedings. 1. He consulted the records concerning Jerusalem, and found that it had indeed rebelled against the king of Babylon, and therefore that it was, as they called it, a *bad city* (v. 19), and withal that in times past kings had reigned there, to whom all the countries on that side the river had been tributaries (v. 20), and that therefore there was danger that if ever they were able (which they were never likely to be) they would claim them again. Thus he says as they said, and pretends to give a reason for so doing. See the hard fate of princes, who must see and hear with other men's eyes and ears, and give judgment upon things as they are represented to them, though often represented falsely. God's judgment is always just because he sees things as they are, and it is according to truth. 2. He appointed these Samaritans to stop the building of the city immediately, till further orders should be given about it, v. 21, 22. Neither they, in their letter, nor he, in his order, make any mention of the temple, and the building of that, because both they and he knew that they had not only a permission, but a command, from Cyrus to rebuild that, which even these Samaritans had not the confidence to move for the repeal of. They spoke only of the *city*: "Let not *that* be built," that is, as a city with walls and gates; "whatever you do, prevent *that*, lest damage grow to the hurt of the kings:" he would not that the crown should lose by his wearing it.

II. The use which the enemies of the Jews made of these orders, so fraudulently obtained; upon the receipt of them they went up *in haste to Jerusalem*, v. 23. *Their feet ran to evil*, Prov. 1:16. They were impatient till the builders were served with this prohibition, which they produced as their warrant to *make them cease by force and power*. As they abused the king in obtaining this order by their mis-informations, so they abused him in the execution of it; for the order was only to prevent the walling of the *city*, but, having force and power on their side, they construed it as relating to the *temple*, for it was that to which they had an ill will, and which they only wanted some colour to hinder the building of. There was indeed a general clause in the order, to *cause these men to cease*, which had reference to their complaint about building the walls; but they applied it to the building of the temple. See what need we have to pray, not only for kings, but for all in authority under them, and *the governors sent by them*, because the *quietness* and *peaceableness* of our lives, *in all godliness and honesty*, depend very much upon the integrity and wisdom of inferior magistrates, as well as the supreme. The consequence was that *the work of the house of God ceased* for a time, through the power and insolence of its enemies; and so, through the coldness and indifference of its friends, it stood still till the second year of Darius Hystaspes, for to me it seems clear by the thread of this sacred history that it

was that Darius, v. 24. Though now a stop was put to it by the violence of the Samaritans, yet that they might soon after have gone on by connivance, if they had had a due affection to the work, appears by this, that before they had that express warrant from the king for doing it (ch. 6) they were reprov'd by the prophets for not doing it, ch. 5:1, compared with Hag. 1:1, etc. If they had taken due care to inform Cambyses of the truth of this case, perhaps he would have recalled his order; but, for aught I know, some of the builders were almost as willing it should cease as the adversaries themselves were. At some periods the church has suffered more by the coldness of its friends than by the heat of its enemies; but both together commonly make church-work slow work.

Chapter 5

We left the temple-work at a full stop; but, being God's work, it shall be revived, and here we have an account of the reviving of it. It was hindered by might and power, but it was set a-going again "by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts." Now here we are told how that blessed Spirit, I. Warmed its cool-hearted friends and excited them to build (v. 1, 2). II. Cooled its hot-headed enemies, and brought them to better tempers; for, though they secretly disliked the work as much as those in the foregoing chapter, yet, 1. They were more mild towards the builders (v. 3-5). 2. They were more fair in their representation of the matter to the king, of which we have here an account (v. 6-17).

Verses 1-2

Some reckon that the building of the temple was suspended for only nine years; I am willing to believe that fifteen years were the utmost. During this time they had an altar and a tabernacle, which no doubt they made use of. When we cannot do what we would we must do what we can in the service of God, and be sorry we can do no better. But the counsellors that were hired to hinder the work (ch. 4:5) told them, and perhaps with a pretence to inspiration, that the time had not come for the building of the temple (Hag. 1:2), urging that it was long ere the time came for the building of Solomon's temple; and thus the people were made easy in their own *ceiled houses*, while *God's house lay waste*. Now here we are told how life was put into that good cause which seemed to lie dead.

I. They had two good ministers, who, in God's name, earnestly persuaded them to put the wheel of business in motion again. Observe,

1. Who these ministers were, namely, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who both began to prophesy in the second year of Darius, as appears, Hag. 1:1; Zec. 1:1. Note, (1.) The temple of God among men is to be built by prophecy, not by secular force (that often hinders it, but seldom furthers it), but by *the word of God*. As the *weapons of our warfare*, so the instruments of our building, *are not carnal*, but *spiritual*, and they are the ministers of the gospel that are the master-builders. (2.) It is the business of God's prophets to stir up God's people to that which is good, and to help them in it, to strengthen their hands, and, by suitable considerations fetched from the word of God, to quicken them to their duty and encourage them in it. (3.) It is a sign that God has mercy in store for a people when he raises up prophets among them to be their helpers in the way and work of God, their guides, overseers, and rulers.

2. To whom they were sent. They prophesied unto the *Jews* (for, as to them pertained the giving of the law, so also the gift of prophecy, and therefore they are called *the children of the prophets*, Acts 3:25, because they were educated under their tuition and instruction), *even unto them, upon them, even upon them* (so it is in the original), as Ezekiel prophesied *upon the dry bones*, that they might live, Eze. 37:4. They prophesied *against* them (so bishop Patrick), for they reproved them because they did not build the temple. The word of God, if it be not received now as a testimony to us, will be received now as a testimony to us, will be received another day as a testimony against us, and will judge us.

3. Who sent them. They prophesied in the name, or (as some read it) *in the cause*, or for the sake, *of the God of Israel*; they

spoke by commission from him, and argued from his authority over them, his interest in them, and the concern of his glory among them.

II. They had two good magistrates, who were forward and active in this work. Zerubbabel their chief prince, and Jeshua their chief priest, v. 2. Those that are in places of dignity and power ought with their dignity to put honour upon and with their power to put life into every good work: thus it becomes those that preceded, and those that preside, with an exemplary care and zeal to *fulfil all righteousness* and to *go before in a good work*. These great men thought it no disparagement to them, but a happiness, to be taught and prescribed to by the prophets of the Lord, and were glad of their help in reviving this good work. Read the first chapter of the prophecy of Haggai here (for that is the best comment on these two verses) and see what great things God does by his word, which he magnifies above all his name, and by his Spirit working with it.

Verses 3-17

We have here, I. The cognizance which their neighbours soon took of the reviving of this good work. A jealous eye, it seems, they had upon them, and no sooner did the Spirit of God stir up the friends of the temple to appear for it than the evil spirit stirred up its enemies to appear against it. While the people built and ceiled their own houses their enemies gave them no molestation (Hag. 1:4), though the king's order was to put a stop to the building of the city (ch. 4:21); but when they fell to work again at the temple then the alarm was taken, and all heads were at work to hinder them, v. 3, 4. The adversaries are here named: *Tatnai* and *Shethar-boznai*. The governors we read of (ch. 4) were, it is probable, displaced at the beginning of this reign, as is usual. It is the policy of princes often to change their deputies, proconsuls, and rulers of provinces. These, though real enemies to the building of the temple, were men of better temper than the other, and made some conscience of telling truth. If *all men have not faith* (2 Th. 3:2), it is well some have, and a sense of honour. The church's enemies are not all equally wicked and unreasonable. The historian begins to relate what passed between the builders and those inquisitors (v. 3, 4), but breaks off his account, and refers to the ensuing copy of the letter they sent to the king, where the same appears more fully and at large, which he began to abridge (v. 4), or make an extract out of, though, upon second thoughts, he inserted the whole.

II. The care which the divine Providence took of this good work (v. 5): *The eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews*, who were active in the work, so that their enemies could not cause them to cease, as they would have done, till the matter came to Darius. They desired they would only cease till they had instructions from the king about it. But they would not so much as yield them that, for *the eye of God was upon them*, even their God. And, 1. That baffled their enemies, infatuated and enfeebled them, and protected the builders from their malicious designs. While we are employed in God's work we are taken under his special protection; his eye is upon us for good, seven eyes upon one stone in his temple; see Zec. 3:9; 4:10. 2. That quickened them. The elders of the Jews saw *the eye of God upon them*, to observe what they did and own them in what they did well, and then they had courage enough to face their enemies and to go on vigorously with their work, notwithstanding all the opposition they met with. our eye upon God, observing his eye upon us, will keep us to our duty and encourage us in it when the difficulties are ever so discouraging.

III. The account they sent to the king of this matter, in which we may observe,

1. How fully the elders of the Jews gave the Samaritans an account of their proceedings. They, finding them both busy and prosperous, that all hands were at work to run up this building and that it went on rapidly, put these questions to them:—"By what authority do you do these things, and who gave you that authority? Who set you to work? Have you that which will bear you out?" To this they answered that they had sufficient warrant to do what they did; for, (1.) "*We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth.* The God we worship is not a local deity, and therefore we cannot be charged with making a faction, or setting up a sect, in building this temple to his honour: but we pay our homage to a God on whom the whole creation depends, and therefore ought to be protected and assisted by all and hindered by none." It is the wisdom as well as duty of kings to countenance the servants of the *God of heaven*. (2.) "We have a prescription to this house; it was built for the honour of our God by Solomon many ages ago. It is no novel invention of our own; we are but *raising the foundations of many generations*," Isa. 58:12. (3.) "It was to punish us for our sins that we were, for a time, put out of the possession of this house; not because the gods of the nations had prevailed against our God, but because we had provoked him (v. 12), for which he delivered us and our temple into the hands of the king of Babylon, but never intended thereby to put a final period to our religion. We were only suspended for a time, not deprived for ever." (4.) "We have the royal decree of Cyrus to justify us and bear us out in what we do. He not only permitted and allowed us, but charged and commanded us to build this house (v. 13), and to build it in its place (v. 15), the same place where it had stood before." He ordered this, not only in compassion to the Jews, but in veneration of their God, saying, *He is the God*. He also delivered the vessels of the temple to one whom he entrusted to see them restored to their ancient place and use, v. 14. And they had these to show in confirmation of what they alleged. (5.) "The building was begun according to this order as soon as ever we had returned, so that we have not forfeited the benefit of the order for want of pursuing it in time; still it has been in building, but, because we have met with opposition, it is not finished." But, observe, they mention not the falsehood and malice of the former governors, nor make any complaint of them, though they had cause enough, to teach us not to render bitterness for bitterness, nor the most just reproach for that which is most unjust, but to think it enough if we can obtain fair treatment for the future, without an invidious reference to former injuries, v. 16. This is the account they give of their proceedings, not asking what authority they had to examine them, nor upbraiding them with their idolatry, and superstitions, and medley religion. Let us learn hence with meekness and fear to *give a reason of the hope that is in us* (1 Pt. 3:15), rightly to understand, and then readily to declare, what we do in God's service and why we do it.

2. How fairly the Samaritans represented this to the king. (1.) They called the temple at Jerusalem the *house of the great God* (v. 8); for though the Samaritans, as it should seem, had yet gods many and lords many, they owned the God of Israel to be the *great God*, who is above all gods. "It is the house of the *great God*, and therefore we dare not oppose the building of it without orders from thee." (2.) They told him truly what was done, not stating, as their predecessors did, that they were fortifying the city as if they intended war, but only that they were rearing the temple as those that intended worship, v. 8. (3.) They fully represented their plea, told him what they had to say for themselves, and were willing that the cause should be set in a true light. (4.) They left it to the king to consult the records whether Cyrus had indeed made such a decree, and then to give directions as he should think fit, v. 17. We have reason to think that if Artaxerxes, in the foregoing chapter, had had the Jews'

cause as fairly represented to him as it was here to Darius, he would not have ordered the work to be hindered. God's people could not be persecuted if they were not belied, could not be baited if they were not dressed up in bears' skins. Let but the cause of God and truth be fairly stated, and fairly heard, and it will keep its ground.

Chapter 6

How solemnly the foundation of the temple was laid we read in ch. 3. How slowly the building went on, and with how much difficulty, we found in ch. 4 and 5. But how gloriously the topstone was at length brought forth with shoutings we find in this chapter; and even we, at this distance of time, when we read of it, may cry, "Grace, grace to it." As for God, his work is perfect; it may be slow work, but it will be sure work. We have here, I. A recital of the decree of Cyrus for the building of the temple (v. 1-5). II. The enforcing of that decree by a new order from Darius for the perfecting of that work (v. 6-12). III. The finishing of it thereupon (v. 13-15). IV. The solemn dedication of it when it was built (v. 16-18), and the handselling of it (as I may say) with the celebration of the passover (v. 19-22). And now we may say that in Judah and Jerusalem things went well, very well.

Verses 1-12

We have here, I. The decree of Cyrus for the building of the temple repeated. To this the Samaritans referred because the Jews pleaded it, and perhaps hoped it would not be found, and then their plea would be over-ruled and a stop put to their work. Search was ordered to be made for it among the records; for, it seems, the tribes had not taken care to provide themselves with an authentic copy of it, which might have stood them in good stead, but they must appeal to the original. It was looked for in Babylon (v. 1), where Cyrus was when he signed it. But, when it was not found there, Darius did not make that a pretence to conclude that therefore there was no such decree, and thereupon to give judgment against the Jews; but it is probable, having himself heard that such a decree was certainly made, he ordered the rolls in other places to be searched, and at length it was found at Achmetha, in the province of the Medes, v. 2. Perhaps some that durst not destroy it, yet hid it there, out of ill will to the Jews, that they might lose the benefit of it. But Providence so ordered that it came to light; and it is here inserted, v. 3-5. 1. Here is a warrant for the building of the temple: *Let the house of God at Jerusalem, yea, let that house be built* (so it may be read), within such and such dimensions, and with such and such materials. 2. A warrant for the taking of the expenses of the building out of the king's revenue, v. 4. We do not find that they had received what was here ordered them, the face of things at court being soon changed. 3. A warrant for the restoring of the vessels and utensils of the temple, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away (v. 5), with an order that the priests, the Lord's ministers, should return them all to their places in the house of God. II. The confirmation of it by a decree of Darius, grounded upon it and in pursuance of it.

1. The decree of Darius is very explicit and satisfactory.

(1.) He forbids his officers to do any thing in opposition to the building of the temple. The manner of expression intimates that he knew they had a mind to hinder it: *Be you far hence* (v. 6); *let the work of this house of God alone*, v. 7. Thus was the wrath of the enemy *made to praise God* and the remainder thereof did he restrain.

(2.) He orders them out of his own revenue to assist the builders with money, [1.] For carrying on the building, v. 8. Herein he pursues the example of Cyrus, v. 4. [2.] For maintaining the sacrifices there when it was built, v. 9. He ordered that they should be supplied with every thing they wanted both for burnt-offerings and meat-offerings. He was content it should be a rent-

charge upon his revenue, and ordered it to be paid every day, and this without fail, that they might offer sacrifices and prayers with them (for the patriarchs, when they offered sacrifice, *called on the name of the Lord*, so did Samuel, Elijah, and others) for the life (that is, the happiness and prosperity) of the king and his sons, v. 10. See here how he gives honour, *First*, To Israel's God, whom he calls once and again the *God of heaven*. *Secondly*, To his ministers, in ordering his commissioners to give out supplies for the temple service at the appointment of the priests. Those that thought to control them must now be, in this matter, at their command. It was a new thing for God's priests to have such an interest in the public money. *Thirdly*, To prayer: *That they may pray for the life of the king*. He knew they were a praying people, and had heard that God was nigh to them in all that which they called upon him for. He was sensible he needed their prayers and might receive benefit by them, and was kind to them in order that he might have an interest in their prayers. It is the duty of God's people to pray for those that are in authority over them, not only for the good and gentle, but also for the forward; but they are particularly bound in gratitude to pray for their protectors and benefactors; and it is the wisdom of princes to desire their prayers, and to engage them. Let not the greatest princes despise the prayers of the meanest saints; it is desirable to have them for us, and dreadful to have them against us.

(3.) He enforces his decree with a penalty (v. 11): "Let none either oppose the work and service of the temple or withhold the supports granted to it by the crown upon pain of death. If any alter this decree, let him be (*hanged before his own door* as we say), hanged upon a beam of his own house, and, as an execrable man, *let his house be made a dunghill*."

(4.) He entails a divine curse upon all those kings and people that should ever have any hand in the destruction of this house, v. 12. What he would not do himself for the protection of the temple he desired that God, *to whom vengeance belongs*, would do. This bespeaks him zealous in the cause; and though this temple was, at length, most justly destroyed by the righteous hand of God, yet perhaps the Romans, who were the instruments of that destruction, felt the effects of this curse, for that empire sensibly declined ever after.

2. From all this we learn, (1.) That the heart of kings is in the hand of God, and he turns it which way soever he pleases; what they are he makes them to be, for he is *King of kings*. (2.) That when God's time has come for the accomplishing of his gracious purposes concerning his church he will raise up instruments to promote them from whom such good service was not expected. *The earth sometimes helps the woman* (Rev. 12:16), and those are made use of for the defence of religion who have little religion themselves. (3.) That what is intended for the prejudice of the church has often, by the overruling providence of God, been made serviceable to it, Phil. 1:12. The enemies of the Jews, in appealing to Darius, hoped to get an order to suppress them, but, instead of that, they got an order to supply them. Thus *out of the eater comes forth meat*. The apocryphal Esdras (or Ezra), Book 1 ch. 3 and 4, gives another account of this decree in favour of the Jews, that Darius had vowed that if ever he came to the kingdom he would build the temple at Jerusalem, and that Zerubbabel, who was one of his attendants (whereas it is plain here that he was now at Jerusalem), for making an ingenious discourse before him on that subject (*Great is the truth and will prevail*), was told to ask what recompence he would, and asked only for this order, in pursuance of the king's vow.

Verses 13-22

Here we have, I. The Jews' enemies made their friends. When they received this order from the king they came with as much haste to encourage and assist the work as their predecessors had done to put a stop to it, ch. 4:23. What the king ordered they did, and, because they would not be thought to do it with reluctance, they *did it speedily*, v. 13. The king's moderation made them, contrary to their own inclination, moderate too.

II. The building of the temple carried on, and finished in a little time, v. 14, 15. Now the *elders of the Jews built* with cheerfulness. For aught I know, the elders themselves laboured at it *with their own hands*; and, if they did, it was no disparagement to their eldership, but an encouragement to the other workmen. 1. They found themselves bound to it *by the commandment of the God of Israel*, who had given them power that they might use it in his service. 2. They found themselves shamed into it by the commandment of the heathen kings, Cyrus formerly, Darius now, and Artaxerxes some time after. Can the elders of the Jews be remiss in this good work when these foreign princes appear so warm in it? Shall native Israelites grudge their pains and care about this building when strangers grudge not to be at the expense of it? 3. They found themselves encouraged in it by the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, who, it is likely, represented to them (as bishop Patrick suggests) the wonderful goodness of God in inclining the heart of the king of Persia to favour them thus. And now the work went on so prosperously that, in four hours' time, it was brought to perfection. *As for God, his work is perfect*. The gospel church, that spiritual temple, is long in the building, but it will be finished at last, when the mystical body is completed. Every believer is a *living temple, building up himself in his most holy faith*. Much opposition is given to this work by Satan and our own corruptions. We trifle, and proceed in it with many stops and pauses; but he that has *begun the good work* will see it performed, and will *bring forth judgment unto victory*. *Spirits of just men will be made perfect*.

III. The dedication of the temple. When it was built, being designed only for sacred uses, *they showed by an example how it should be used*, which (says bishop Patrick) is the proper sense of the word *dedicate*. They entered upon it with solemnity and probably with a public declaration of the separating of it from common uses and the surrender of it to the honour of God, to be employed in his worship. 1. The persons employed in this service were not only *the priests and Levites* who officiated, but *the children of Israel*, some of each of the *twelve tribes*, though Judah and Benjamin were the chief, and *the rest of the children of the captivity or transportation*, which intimates that there were many besides the children of Israel, of other nations, who transported themselves with them, and became proselytes to their religion, unless we read it, *even the remnant of the children of the captivity*, and then, we may suppose, notice is hereby taken of their mean and afflicted condition, because the consideration of that helped to make them devout and serious in this and other religious exercises. A sad change! The *children of Israel* have become *children of the captivity*, and there appears but a remnant of *them*, according to that prediction (Isa. 7:3), *Shear-jashub—The remnant shall return*. 2. The sacrifices that were offered upon this occasion were *bullocks, rams, and lambs* (v. 17), for burnt-offerings and peace-offerings; not to be compared, in number, with what had been offered at the dedication of Solomon's temple, but, being according to their present ability, they were accepted, for, *after a great trial of affliction, the abundance of their joy, and their deep poverty, abounded to the riches of their liberality*, 2 Co. 8:2. These hundreds were more to them than Solomon's thousands were to him. But, besides these, they offered twelve he-goats for sin-

offerings, one for every tribe, to make atonement for their sins, which they looked upon as necessary in order to the acceptance of their services. Thus, by getting iniquity taken away, they would free themselves from that which had been the sting of their late troubles, and which, if not removed, would be a worm at the root of their present comforts. 3. This service was performed with joy. They were all glad to see the temple built and the concerns of it in so good a posture. Let us learn to welcome holy ordinances with joy and attend on them with pleasure. Let us serve the Lord with gladness. Whatever we dedicate to God, let it be done with joy that he will please to accept of it. 4. When they dedicated the house they settled the household. Small comfort could they have in the temple without the temple service, and therefore they *set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses*, v. 18. Having set up the worship of God in this dedication, they took care to keep it up, and made *the book of Moses* their rule, to which they had an eye in this establishment. Though the temple service could not now be performed with so much pomp and plenty as formerly, because of their poverty, yet perhaps it was performed with as much purity and close adherence to the divine institution as ever, which was the true glory of it. No beauty like the beauty of holiness.

IV. The celebration of the passover in the newly-erected temple. Now that they were newly delivered out of their bondage in Babylon it was seasonable to commemorate their deliverance out of their bondage in Egypt. Fresh mercies should put us in mind of former mercies. We may suppose that they had kept the passover, after a sort, every year since their return, for they had an altar and a tabernacle. But they were liable to frequent disturbances from their enemies, were straitened for room, and had not conveniences about them, so that they could not do it with due solemnity till the temple was built; and now they made a joyful festival of it, it falling out in the next month after the temple was finished and dedicated, v. 19. Notice is here taken, 1. Of the purity of the priests and Levites that *killed the passover*, v. 20. In Hezekiah's time the priests were many of them under blame for not purifying themselves. But now it is observed, to their praise, that *they were purified together, as one man* (so the word is); they were unanimous both in their resolutions and in their endeavours to make and keep themselves ceremonially clean for this solemnity; they joined together in their preparations, that they might help one another, so that all of them were pure, to a man. The purity of ministers adds much to the beauty of their ministrations; so does their unity. 2. Of the proselytes that communicated with them in this ordinance: *All such as had separated themselves unto them*, had left their country and the superstitions of it and cast in their lot with the Israel of God, and had *turned from the filthiness of the heathen of the land*, both their idolatries and immoralities, *to seek the Lord God of Israel* as their God, did eat the passover. See how the proselytes, the converts, are described. They separated themselves from the filthiness of sin and fellowship with sinners, joined themselves with the Israel of God in conformity and communion, and set themselves to seek the God of Israel; and those that do so in sincerity, though strangers and foreigners, are welcome to eat of the gospel feast, as *fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God*. 3. Of the great pleasure and satisfaction wherewith they *kept the feast of unleavened bread*, v. 22. *The Lord had made them joyful*, had given them both cause to rejoice and hearts to rejoice. It was now about twenty years since the foundation of this temple was laid, and we may suppose the old men that then wept at the remembrance of the first temple were most of them dead by this time, so that now there were no tears mingled with their joys. Those that are, upon good grounds, joyful, have therefore reason to be thankful, because it is God that *makes them to rejoice*. He is the fountain whence

all the streams of our joy flow. God has promised to all those who take hold of his covenant that *he will make them joyful in his house of prayer*. The particular occasion they had for joy at this time was that God had *turned the heart* of the emperor to them, to *strengthen their hands*. If those that have been, or who we feared would have been, against us, prove to be for us, we may rejoice in it as a token for good, that *our ways please the Lord* (Prov. 16:7), and he must have the glory of it.

Chapter 7

Ezra's precious name saluted us, at first, in the title of the book, but in the history we have not met with it till this chapter introduces him into public action in another reign, that of Artaxerxes. Zerubbabel and Jeshua we will suppose, by this time, to have grown old, if not gone off; nor do we hear any more of Haggai and Zechariah; they have finished their testimony. What shall become of the cause of God and Israel when these useful instruments are laid aside? Trust God, who has the residue of the Spirit, to raise up others in their room. Ezra here, and Nehemiah in the next book, are as serviceable in their days as those were in theirs. Here is, I. An account, in general, of Ezra himself, and of his expedition to Jerusalem for the public good (v. 1–10). II. A copy of the commission which Artaxerxes gave him (v. 11–26). III. His thankfulness to God for it (v. 27, 28). The next chapter will give us a more particular narrative of his associates, his journey, and his arrival at Jerusalem.

Verses 1-10

Here is, I. Ezra's pedigree. He was one of the sons of Aaron, a priest. Him God chose to be an instrument of good to Israel, that he might put honour upon the priesthood, the glory of which had been much eclipsed by the captivity. He is said to be *the son of Seraiah*, that Seraiah, as is supposed, whom the king of Babylon put to death when he sacked Jerusalem, 2 Ki. 25:18, 21. If we take the shortest computation, it was seventy-five years since Seraiah died; many reckon it much longer, and, because they suppose Ezra called out in the prime of his time to public service, do therefore think that Seraiah was not his immediate parent, but his grandfather or great-grandfather, but that he was the first eminent person that occurred in his genealogy upwards, which is carried up here as high as Aaron, yet leaving out many for brevity-sake, which may be supplied from 1 Chr. 6:4, etc. He was a younger brother, or his father was Jozadak, the father of Jeshua, so that he was not high priest, but nearly allied to the high priest.

II. His character. Though of the younger house, his personal qualifications made him very eminent. 1. He was a man of great learning, a scribe, a *ready scribe, in the law of Moses*, v. 6. He was very much conversant with the scriptures, especially the writings of Moses, had the words ready and was well acquainted with the sense and meaning of them. It is to be feared that learning ran low among the Jews in Babylon; but Ezra was instrumental to revive it. The Jews say that he collected and collated all the copies of the law he could find out, and published an accurate edition of it, with all the prophetic books, historical and poetical, that were given by divine inspiration, and so made up the canon of the Old Testament, with the addition of the prophecies and histories of his own time. If he was raised up of God, and qualified and inclined to do this, all generations have reason to call him blessed, and to bless God for him. God sent to the Jews *prophets and scribes*, Mt. 23:34. Ezra went under the latter denomination. Now that prophecy was about to cease it was time to promote scripture-knowledge, pursuant to the counsel of God by the last of the prophets, Mal. 4:4. *Remember the law of Moses*. Gospel ministers are called *scribes instructed to the kingdom of heaven* (Mt. 13:52), New-Testament scribes. It was a pity that such a worthy name as this should be worn, as it was in the degenerate ages of the Jewish church, by men who were professed enemies to Christ and his gospel (*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees*), who were learned in the letter of the law, but strangers to the spirit of it. 2. He

was a man of great piety and holy zeal (v. 10): *He had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord*, etc. (1.) That which he chose for his study was *the law of the Lord*. The Chaldeans, among whom he was born and bred, were famed for literature, especially the study of the stars, to which, being a studious man, we may suppose that Ezra was tempted to apply himself. But he got over the temptation; the law of his God was more to him than all the writings of their magicians and astrologers, which he knew enough of with good reason to despise them. (2.) He *sought the law of the Lord*, that is, he made it his business to enquire into it, searched the scriptures, and sought the knowledge of God, of his mind and will, in the scriptures, which is to be found there, but not without seeking. (3.) He made conscience of doing according to it; he set it before him as his rule, formed his sentiments and temper by it, and managed himself in his whole conversation according to it. This use we must make of our knowledge of the scriptures; for happy are we if we do what we know of the will of God. (4.) He set himself *to teach Israel the statutes and judgments* of that law. What he knew he was willing to communicate for the good of others; for *the ministration of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal*. But observe the method: he first learned and then taught, sought the law of the Lord and so laid up a good treasure, and then instructed others and laid out what he had laid up. He also first did and then taught, practised the commandments himself and then directed others in the practice of them; thus his example confirmed his doctrine. (5.) He *prepared his heart* to do all this, or he fixed his heart. He took pains in his studies, and thoroughly furnished himself for what he designed, and then put on resolution to proceed and persevere in them, and thus he became a ready scribe. Moses in Egypt, Ezra in Babylon, and both in captivity, were wonderfully fitted for eminent services to the church.

III. His expedition to Jerusalem for the good of his country: *He went up from Babylon* (v. 6), and, in four months' time, came to Jerusalem, v. 8. It was strange that such a man as he staid so long in Babylon after his brethren had gone up; but God sent him not thither till he had work for him to do there; and none went but those *whose spirits God raised* to go up. Some think that this Artaxerxes was the same with that Darius whose decree we had (ch. 6), and that Ezra came the very year after the temple was finished: that was the sixth year, this the seventh (v. 8), so Dr. Lightfoot. My worthy and learned friend, lately deceased, Mr. Talents, in his chronological tables, places it about fifty-seven years after the finishing of the temple; others further on. I have only to observe, 1. How kind the king was to him. He *granted him all his request*, whatever he desired to put him into a capacity to serve his country. 2. How kind his people were to him. When he went many more went with him, because they desired not to stay in Babylon when he had gone thence, and because they would venture to dwell in Jerusalem when he had gone thither. 3. How kind his God was to him. He obtained this favour from his king and country by *the good hand of the Lord that was upon him*, v. 6, 9. Note, Every creature is that to us which God makes it to be, and from him our judgment proceeds. As we must see the events that *shall* occur in the hand of God, so we must see the hand of God in the events that *do* occur, and acknowledge him with thankfulness when we have reason to call it his *good hand*.

Verses 11-26

We have here the commission which the Persian emperor granted to Ezra, giving him authority to act for the good of the Jews; and it is very ample and full, and beyond what could have been expected. The commission runs, we suppose, in the usual form: *Artaxerxes, King of kings*. This however is too high a title for any mortal man to assume; he was indeed king of some kings,

but to speak as if he were king of all kings was to usurp *his* prerogative who hath *all power both in heaven and in earth*. He sends greeting to his trusty and well-beloved Ezra, whom he calls a *scribe of the law of the God of heaven* (v. 12), a title which (it seems by this) Ezra valued himself by, and desired no other, no, not when he was advanced to the proconsular dignity. He reckoned it more his honour to be a *scribe of God's law* than to be a peer or prince of the empire. Let us observe the articles of this commission.

I. He gives Ezra leave to go up to Jerusalem, and as many of his countrymen as pleased to go up with him, v. 13. He and they were captives, and therefore they would not quit his dominions without his royal license.

II. He gives him authority to enquire into the affairs of Judah and Jerusalem, v. 14. The rule of his enquiry was to be *the law of his God, which was in his hand*. He must enquire whether the Jews, in their religion, had and did according to that law—whether the temple was built, the priesthood was settled, and the sacrifices were offered conformably to the divine appointment. If, upon enquiry, he found any thing amiss, he must see to get it amended, and, like Titus in Crete, must *set in order the things that were wanting*, Tit. 1:5. Thus is God's law magnified and made honourable, and thus are the Jews restored to their ancient privilege of governing themselves by that law, and are no longer under *the statutes that were not good*, the statutes of their oppressors, Eze. 20:25.

III. He entrusts him with the money that was freely given by the king himself and his counsellors, and collected among his subjects, for the service of the house of God, v. 15, 16.

1. Let this be taken notice of, (1.) To the honour of God, as the one only living and true God; for even those that worshipped other gods were so convinced of the sovereignty of the God of Israel that they were willing to incur expenses in order to recommend themselves to his favour. See Ps. 45:12; 68:26. (2.) To the praise of this heathen king, that he honoured the God of Israel though his worshippers were a despicable handful of poor men, who were not able to bear the charges of their own religion and were now his vassals, and that, though he was not wrought upon to quit his own superstitions, yet he protected and encouraged the Jews in their religion, and did not only say, *Be you warmed, and be you filled*, but gave them such things as they needed. (3.) To the reproach of the memory of the wicked kings of Judah. Those that had been trained up in the knowledge and worship of the *God of Israel*, and had his law and his prophets, often plundered and impoverished the temple; but here a heathen prince enriched it. Thus afterwards the gospel was rejected by the Jews, but welcomed by the Gentiles. See Rom. 11:11, *Through their fall salvation has come to the Gentiles*. Acts 13:46.

2. We are here told that Ezra was entrusted, (1.) To receive this money and to carry it to Jerusalem; for he was a man of known integrity, whom they could confide in, that he would not convert to his own use the least part of that which was given to the public. We find Paul going to Jerusalem upon such an errand, *to bring alms to his nation and offerings*, Acts 24:17. (2.) To lay out this money in the best manner, in sacrifices to be offered upon the altar of God (v. 17), and in whatever else he or his brethren thought fit (v. 18), with this limitation only that it should be *after the will of their God*, which they were better acquainted with than the king was. Let the *will of our God* be always our rule in our expenses, and particularly in what we lay out for his service. God's work must always be done according to his will. Besides money, he had vessels also given him for

the service of the temple, v. 19. Cyrus restored what of right belonged to the temple, but these were given over and above: thus it *receiveth its own with usury*. These he must *deliver before the God of Jerusalem*, as intended for his honour, there where he had *put his name*.

IV. He draws him a bill, or warrant rather, upon the *treasurers on that side the river*, requiring them to furnish him with what he had occasion for out of the king's revenues, and to place it to the king's account, v. 20, 22. This was considerately done; for Ezra, having yet to enquire into the state of things, knew not what he should have occasion for and was modest in his demand. It was also kindly done, and evinced a great affection to the temple and a great confidence in Ezra. It is the interest of princes and great men to use their wealth and power for the support and encouragement of religion. What else are great revenues good for but that they enable men to do much good of this kind if they have but hearts to do it?

V. He charges him to let nothing be wanting that was requisite to be done in or about the temple for the honour of the God of Israel. Observe, in this charge (v. 23), 1. How honourably he speaks of God. He had called him before *the God of Jerusalem*; but here, lest it should be thought that he looked upon him as a local deity, he calls him twice, with great veneration, the *God of heaven*. 2. How strictly he eyes the word and law of God, which, it is likely, he had read and admired: "Whatsoever is *commanded by your God*" (whose institutions, though he wrote himself *King of kings*, he would not presume in the least iota or tittle to alter or add to) "let it be done, let it be diligently done, with care and speed." And, 3. How solicitously he deprecates the wrath of God: *Why should there be wrath against the realm?* The neglect and contempt of religion bring the judgments of God upon kings and kingdoms; and the likeliest expedient to turn away his wrath, when it is ready to break out against a people, is to support and encourage religion. Would we secure our peace and prosperity? Let us take care that the cause of God be not starved.

VI. He exempts all the ministers of the temple from paying taxes to the government. From the greatest of the priests to the least of the Nethinim, *it shall not be lawful* for the king's officers *to impose that toll, tribute, or custom upon them*, which the rest of the king's subjects paid, v. 24. This put a great honour upon them as free denizens of the empire, and would gain them respect as favourites of the crown; and it gave them liberty to attend their ministry with more cheerfulness and freedom. We suppose it was only what they needed for themselves and their families, and the maintenance of their ministry, that was hereby allowed to come to them custom-free. If any of them should take occasion from this privilege to meddle in trade and merchandise, they justly lost the benefit of it.

VII. He empowers Ezra to nominate and appoint judges and magistrates for all the Jews on that side the river, v. 25, 26. It was a great favour to the Jews to have such nobles of themselves, and especially to have them of Ezra's nomination. 1. All that *knew the laws of Ezra's God* (that is, all that professed the Jewish religion) were to be under the jurisdiction of these judges, which intimates that they were exempted from the jurisdiction of the heathen magistrates. 2. These judges were allowed and encouraged to make proselytes: Let them *teach the laws of God to those that do not know them*. Though he would not turn Jew himself, he cared not how many of his subjects did. 3. They were authorized to enforce the judgments they gave, and the orders they made, conformable to *the law of God* (which was hereby made *the law of the king*), with severe penalties—imprisonment,

banishment, fine, or death, according as their law directed. They were not allowed to make new laws, but must see the laws of God duly executed; and they were entrusted with the sword in order that they might be *a terror to evil doers*. What could Jehoshaphat, or Hezekiah, or David himself, as king, have done more for the honour of God and the furtherance of religion?

Verses 27-28

Ezra cannot proceed in his story without inserting his thankful acknowledgement of the goodness of God to him and his people in this matter. As soon as he has concluded the king's commission, instead of subjoining, *God save the king* (though that would have been proper enough), he adds, *Blessed be the Lord*; for we must *in every thing give thanks*, and, whatever occurrences please us, we must own God's hand in them, and praise his name. Two things Ezra blessed God for:-1. For his commission. We suppose he kissed the king's hand for it, but that was not all: *Blessed be God* (says he) *that put such a thing as this into the king's heart*. God can put things into men's hearts which would not arise there of themselves, and into their heads too, both by his providence and by his grace, in things *pertaining both to life and godliness*. If any good appear to be in our own hearts, or in the hearts of others, we must own it was God that put it there, and bless him for it; for it is he that *worketh in us both to will and to do* that which is good. When princes and magistrates act for the suppression of vice, and the encouragement of religion, we must thank God that *put it into their hearts* to do so, as much as if they had granted us some particular favour. When God's house was built Ezra rejoiced in what was done to beautify it. We read not of any orders given to paint or gild it, or to garnish it with precious stones, but to be sure that the ordinances of God were administered there constantly, and carefully, and exactly according to the institution; and that was indeed the beautifying of the temple. 2. For the encouragement he had to act in pursuance of his commission (v. 28): *He has extended mercy to me*. The king, in the honour he did him, we may suppose, had an eye to his merit, and preferred him because he looked upon him to be a very sensible ingenious man; but he himself ascribes his preferment purely to God's mercy. It was this that recommended him to the favour of his prince. Ezra himself was a man of courage, yet he attributed his encouragement not to his own heart, but to God's hand: "I was strengthened to undertake the services, *as the hand of the Lord my God was upon me* to direct and support me." If God gives us his hand, we are bold and cheerful; if he withdraws it, we are weak as water. Whatever service we are enabled to do for God and our generation, God must have all the glory of it. Strength for it is derived from him, and therefore the praise of it must be given to him.

Chapter 8

This chapter gives us a more particular narrative of Ezra's journey to Jerusalem, of which we had a general account in the foregoing chapter I. The company that went up with him (v. 1–20). II. The solemn fast which he kept with his company, to implore God's presence with them in this journey (v. 21–23). III. The care he took of the treasure he had with him, and the charge he gave concerning it to the priests, to whose custody he committed it (v. 24–30). IV. The care God took of him and his company in the way (v. 31). V. Their safe arrival at Jerusalem, where they delivered their treasure to the priests (v. 32–34), their commissions to the king's lieutenants (v. 36), offered sacrifices to God (v. 35), and then applied to their business.

Verses 1-20

Ezra, having received his commission from the king, beats up for volunteers, as it were, sets up an ensign to assemble the outcasts of Israel and the dispersed of Judah, Isa. 11:12. "Whoever of the sons of Sion, that *swell with the daughters of Babylon*, is disposed to go to Jerusalem, now that the temple there is finished and the temple-service set a-going, now is their time." Now one would think that under such a leader, with such encouragements, all the Jews should at length have *shaken themselves from their dust*, and *loosed the bands of their neck*, according to that call, Isa. 52:1, 2, etc. I wonder how any of them could read that chapter and yet stay behind. But multitudes did. They loved their ease better than their religion, thought themselves well off where they were, and either believed not that Jerusalem would better their condition or durst not go thither through any difficulties. But here we are told,

I. That some offered themselves willingly to go with Ezra. The heads of the several families are here named, for their honour, and the numbers of the males that each brought in, amounting in all to 1496. Two priests are named (v. 2) and one of the sons of David; but, it should seem, they came without their families, probably intending to see how they liked Jerusalem and then either to send for their families or return to them as they saw cause. Several of their families, or clans, here named, we had before, ch. 2. Some went up from them at that time, more went up now, as God inclined their hearts; some were called into the vineyard at the third hour, others not till the eleventh, yet even those were not rejected. But here we read of *the last sons of Adonikam* (v. 13), which some understand to their dispraise, that they were the last that enlisted themselves under Ezra; I rather understand it to their honour, that now all the sons of that family returned and none staid behind.

II. That the Levites who went in this company were in a manner pressed into the service. Ezra appointed a general rendezvous of all his company at a certain place upon new-year's day, the first day of the first month. ch. 7:9. Then and there he took a view of them, and mustered them, and (which was strange) *found there none of the sons of Levi*, v. 15. Some priests there were, but no others that were Levites. Where was the spirit of that sacred tribe? Ezra, a priest, like Moses proclaims, *Who is on the Lord's side?* They, unlike to Levi, shrink, and desire to *abide among the sheep-folds to hear the bleatings of the flock*. Synagogues we suppose they had in Babylon, in which they prayed, and preached, and kept sabbaths (and, when they could not have better, they had reason to be thankful for them); but now that the temple at Jerusalem was opened, to the service of which they were ordained, they ought to have preferred the gates of Zion before all those synagogues. It is upon record here, to

their reproach; but *tell it not in Gath*. Ezra, when he observed that he had no Levites in his retinue, was much at a loss. He had money enough for the service of the temple, but wanted men. The king and princes had more than done their part, but the sons of Levi had not half done theirs. Eleven men, chief men, and men of understanding, he chooses out of his company, to be employed for the filling up of this lamentable vacancy; and here we are informed, 1. Of their being sent. Ezra sent them to a proper place, where there as a college of Levites, *the place Casiphia*, probably a street or square in Babylon allowed for that purpose—*Silver Street* one may call it, for *ceseph* signifies *silver*. He sent them to a proper person, to Iddo, the chief president of the college, not to urge him to come himself (we will suppose him to be old and unfit for such a remove), but to send some of the juniors, *ministers for the house of our God*, v. 17. The furnishing of God's house with good ministers is a good work, which will redound to the comfort and credit of all that have a hand in it. 2. Of their success. They did not return without their errand, but, though the warning was short, they brought about forty Levites to attend Ezra, Sherebiah, noted as a very intelligent man, and eighteen with him (v. 18). Hashabiah, and Jeshaiiah, and twenty with them, v. 19. By this it appears that they were not averse to go, but were slothful and inattentive, and only wanted to be called upon and excited to go. What a pity it is that good men should omit a good work, merely for want of being spoken to! What a pity that they should need it, but, if they do, what a pity that they should be left without it! Of the Nethinim, the servitors of the sacred college, the *species infima*—*the lowest order* of the temple ministers, more appeared forward to go than of the Levites themselves. Of them 220, upon this hasty summons, enlisted themselves, and had the honour to be expressed by name in Ezra's muster-roll, v. 20. "Thus," says Ezra, "were we furnished with Levites, *by the good hand of our God upon us*." If, where ministers have been wanting, the vacancies are well supplied, let God have the glory, and his good hand be acknowledged as qualifying them for the service, inclining them to it, and then opening a door of opportunity for them.

Verses 21-23

Ezra has procured Levites to go along with him; but what will that avail, unless he have God with him? That is therefore his chief care. In all our ways we must acknowledge God, and in those particularly wherein we are endeavouring to serve the interest of his kingdom among men. Ezra does so here. Observe,

I. The stedfast confidence he had in God and in his gracious protection. He told the king (v. 22) what principles he went upon, that those who seek God are safe under the shadow of his wings, even in their great dangers, but that those who forsake him are continually exposed, even when they are most secure. God's servants have his power engaged for them; his enemies have it engaged against them. This Ezra believed with his heart, and with his mouth made confession of it before the king; and therefore he was ashamed to ask of the king a convoy, lest thereby he should give occasion to the king, and those about him, to suspect either God's power to help his people or Ezra's confidence in that power. Those that trust in God, and triumph in him, will be ashamed of seeking to the creature for protection, especially of using any sorry shifts for their own safety, because thereby they contradict themselves and their own confidence. Not but that those who depend upon God must use proper means for their preservation, and they need not be ashamed to do so; but, when the honour of God is concerned, one would rather expose one's-self than do any thing to the prejudice of that, which ought to be dearer to us than our lives.

II. The solemn application he made to God in that confidence: He *proclaimed a fast*, v. 21. No doubt he had himself begged of God direction in this affair from the first time he had it in his thoughts; but for public mercies public prayers must be made, that all who are to share in the comfort of them may join in the request for them. Their fasting was, 1. To express their humiliation. This he declares to be the intent and meaning of it. "*that we might afflict ourselves before our God* for our sins, and so be qualified for the pardon of them." When we are entering upon any new condition of life our care should be to bring none of the guilt of the sins of our former condition into it. When we are in any imminent peril let us be sure to make our peace with God, and then we are safe: nothing can do us any real hurt. 2. To excite their supplications. Prayer was always joined with religious fasting. Their errand to the throne of grace was *to seek of God the right way*, that is, to commit themselves to the guidance of the divine Providence, to put themselves under the divine protection, and to beg of God to guide and keep them in their journey and bring them safely to their journey's end. They were strangers in the road, were to march through their enemies' countries, and had not a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them, as their fathers had; but they believed that the power and favour of God, and the ministration of his angels, would be to them instead of that, and hoped by prayer to obtain divine assistance. Note, All our concerns about ourselves, our families, and our estates, it is our wisdom and duty by prayer to commit to God, and leave the care of with him, Phil. 4:6.

III. The good success of their doing so (v. 23): *We besought our God* by joint-prayer, *and he was entreated of us*. They had some comfortable assurance in their own minds that their prayers were answered, and the event declared it; for never any that sought God in earnest sought him in vain.

Verses 24-30

We have here an account of the particular care which Ezra took of the treasure he had with him, that belonged to God's sanctuary, Observe, 1. Having committed the keeping of it to God, he committed the keeping of it to proper men, whose business it was to watch it, though without God they would have waked in vain. Note, Our prayers must always be seconded with our endeavours; the care of Christ's gospel, his church, and ordinances, must not be so left with him but that it must also be *committed to faithful men*, 2 Tim. 2:2. 2. Having prayed to God to preserve all the substance they had with them, he shows himself especially solicitous for that part of it which belonged to the house of God and was an offering to him. Do we expect that God should, by his providence, keep that which belongs to us? Let us, by his grace, keep that which belongs to him. Let God's honour and interest be our care; and then we may expect that our lives and comforts will be his. Observe, (1.) The persons to whom he delivered the offerings of the house of God. Twelve chief priests, and as many Levites, he appointed to this trust (v. 24, 30), who were bound by their office to take care of the things of God, and were in a particular manner to have the benefit of these sacred treasures. Ezra tells them why he put those things into their hands (v. 28): *You are holy unto the Lord, the vessels are holy also*; and who so fit to take care of holy things as holy persons? Those that have the dignity and honour of the priesthood must take along with them the trust and duty of it. The prophet is foretelling the return of God's people and ministers out of Babylon, when he gives the solemn charge (Isa. 52:11), *Be you clean that bear the vessels of the Lord*. (2.) The great exactness with which he lodged this trust in their hands: He *weighed to them the silver, the gold, and the*

vessels (v. 25), because he expected to have it from them again by weight. In all trust, but especially sacred ones, we ought to be punctual, and preserve a right understanding on both sides. In Zerubbabel's time the vessels were delivered by number, here by weight, that all might be forth-coming and it might easily appear if any were missing, to intimate that such as are entrusted with holy things (as all the stewards of the mysteries of God are) are concerned to remember, both in receiving their trust and in discharging it, that they must shortly give a very particular account of it, that they may be faithful to it and so give up their account with joy. (3.) The charge he gave them with these treasures (v. 29): "*Watch you, and keep them*, that they be not lost, nor embezzled, nor mingled with the other articles. Keep them together; keep them by themselves; keep them safely, till you weigh them in the temple, before the great men there," hereby intimating how much it was their concern to be careful and faithful and how much it would be their honour to be found so. Thus when Paul charges Timothy with the gospel treasure he bids him keep it *until the appearing of Jesus Christ*, and his appearing before him to give account of his trust, when his fidelity would be his crown.

Verses 31-36

We are now to attend Ezra to Jerusalem, a journey of about four months in all; but his multitude made his marches slow and his stages short. Now here we are told,

I. That his God was good, and he acknowledged his goodness: *The hand of our God was upon us*, to animate us for our undertaking. To him they owed it, 1. That they were preserved in their journey, and not all cut off; for there were enemies that *laid wait for them by the way* to do them a mischief, or at least, like Amalek, to *smite the hindmost of them*, but God protected them, v. 31. Even the common perils of journeys are such as oblige us to sanctify our going out with prayer and our returns in peace with praise and thanksgiving; much more ought God to be thus eyed in such a dangerous expedition as this was. 2. That they were brought in safety to their journey's end, v. 32. Let those that have stedfastly set their faces towards the new Jerusalem proceed and persevere to the end *till they appear before God in Zion*, and they shall find that he *who has begun the good work will perform it*.

II. That his treasurers were faithful. When they had come to Jerusalem they were impatient to be discharged of their trust, and therefore applied to the great men of the temple, who received it from them and gave them an acquittance in full, v. 33, 34. It is a great ease to one's mind to be discharged from a trust, and a great honour to one's name to be able to make it appear that it has been faithfully discharged.

III. That his companions were devout. As soon as they came to be near the altar they thought themselves obliged to offer sacrifice, whatever they had done in Babylon, v. 35. That will be dispensed with when we want opportunity which when the door is opened again will be expected from us. It is observable, 1. That among their sacrifices they had a sin-offering; for it is the atonement that sweetens and secures every mercy to us, which will not be truly comfortable unless *iniquity be taken away* and our peace made with God. 2. That the number of their offerings related to the number of the tribes, twelve bullocks, twelve he-goats, and ninety-six rams (that is, eight times twelve), intimating the union of the two kingdoms, according to what was foretold, Eze. 37:22. They did not any longer go two tribes one way and ten another, but all the twelve met by their

representatives at the same altar.

IV. That even the enemies of the Jews became their friends, bowed to Ezra's commission, and, instead of hindering the people of God, furthered them (v. 36), purely in complaisance to the king: when he appeared moderate they all coveted to appear so too. *Then had the churches rest.*

Chapter 9

The affairs of the church were in a very good posture, we may well suppose, now that Ezra presided in them. Look without; the government was kind to them. We hear no complaints of persecution and oppression; their enemies had either their hearts turned or at least their hands tied; their neighbours were civil, and we hear of no wars nor rumours of wars; there were none to make them afraid; all was as well as could be, considering that they were few, and poor, and subjects to a foreign prince. Look at home; we hear nothing of Baal, or Ashtaroath, nor Moloch, no images, nor groves, nor golden calves, no, nor so much as high places (not only no idolatrous altars, but no separate ones), but the temple was duly respected and the temple service carefully kept up. Yet all was not well either. The purest ages of the church have had some corruptions, and it will never be presented "without spot or wrinkle" till it is "a glorious church," a church "triumphant," Eph. 5:27. We have here, I. A complaint brought to Ezra of the many marriages that had been made with strange wives (v. 1, 2). II. The great trouble which he, and others influenced by his example, were in upon this information (v. 3, 4). III. The solemn confession which he made of this sin to God, with godly sorrow, and shame (v. 5–15).

Verses 1-4

Ezra, like Barnabas when he came to Jerusalem and *saw the grace of God* to his brethren there, no doubt *was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave to the Lord*, Acts 11:23. He saw nothing amiss (many corruptions lurk out of the view of the most vigilant rulers); but here is a damp upon his joys: information is brought him that many of the people, yea, and some of the rulers, had married wives out of heathen families, and joined themselves in affinity with strangers. Observe,

I. What the sin was that they were guilty of: it was *mingling with the people of those lands* (v. 2), associating with them both in trade and in conversation, making themselves familiar with them, and, to complete the affinity, taking *their daughters in marriages* to their sons. We are willing to hope that they did not worship their gods, but that their captivity had cured them of their idolatry: it is said indeed that they *did according to their abominations*; but that (says bishop Patrick) signifies here only the imitation of the heathen in promiscuous marriages with any nation whatsoever, which by degrees would lead them to idolatry. Herein, 1. They disobeyed the express command of God, which forbade all intimacy with the heathen, and particularly in matrimonial contracts, Deu. 7:3. 2. They profaned the crown of their peculiarity, and set themselves upon a level with those above whom God had by singular marks of his favour, of late as well as formerly, dignified them. 3. They distrusted the power of God to protect and advance them, and were led by carnal policy, hoping to strengthen themselves and make an interest among their neighbours by these alliances. A practical disbelief of God's all-sufficiency is at the bottom of all the sorry shifts we make to help ourselves. 4. They exposed themselves, and much more their children, to the peril of idolatry, the very sin, and introduced by this very way, that had cone been the ruin of their church and nation.

II. Who were the persons that were guilty of this sin, not only some of the unthinking people of Israel, that knew no better, but *many of the priests and Levites*, whose office it was to teach the law, and this law among the rest, and in whom, by reason of

their elevation above common Israelites, it was a greater crime. It was a diminution to the sons of that tribe to match into any other tribe, and they seldom did except into the royal tribe; but for them to match with heathen, with Canaanites, and Hittites, and I know not whom, was such a disparagement as, if they had had any sense, though not of duty, yet of honour, one would think, they would never have been guilty of. Yet this was not the worst: *The hand of the princes and rulers*, who by their power should have prevented or reformed this high misdemeanour, *was chief in this trespass*. If princes be in a trespass, they will be charged as chief in it, because of the influence their examples will have upon others. *Many will follow their pernicious ways*. But miserable is the case of that people whose leaders debauch them and cause them to err.

III. The information that was given of this to Ezra. It was given by the persons that were most proper to complain, the princes, those of them that had kept their integrity and with it their dignity; they could not have accused others if they themselves had not been free from blame. It was given to the person who had power to mend the matter, who, as a *ready scribe in the law of God*, could argue with them, and, as king's commissioner, could awe them. It is probable that these princes had often endeavoured to redress this grievance and could not; but now they applied to Ezra, hoping that his wisdom, authority, and interest, would prevail to do it. Those that cannot of themselves reform public abuses may yet do good service by giving information to those that can.

IV. The impression this made upon Ezra (v. 3): *He rent his clothes, plucked off his hair, and sat down astonished*. Thus he expressed the deep sense he had, 1. Of the dishonour hereby done to God. It grieved him to the heart to think that a people called by his name should so grossly violate his law, should be so little benefited by his correction, and make such bad returns for his favours. 2. Of the mischief the people had hereby done to themselves and the danger they were in of the wrath of God breaking out against them. Note, (1.) The sins of others should be our sorrow, and the injury done by them to God's honour and the souls of men is what we should lay to heart. (2.) Sorrow for sin must be great sorrow; such Ezra's was, *as for an only son or a first-born*. (3.) The scandalous sins of professors are what we have reason to be astonished at. We may stand amazed to see men contradict, disparage, prejudice, ruin, themselves. Strange that men should act so inconsiderately and so inconsistently with themselves! Upright men are astonished at it.

V. The influence which Ezra's grief for this had upon others. We may suppose that he *went up to the house of the Lord*, there to humble himself, because he had an eye to God in his grief and that was the proper place for deprecating his displeasure. Public notice was soon taken of it, and all the devout serious people that were at hand assembled themselves to him, it should seem of their own accord, for nothing is said of their being sent, to, v. 4. Note, 1. It is the character of good people that they *tremble at God's word*; they stand in awe of the authority of its precepts and the severity and justice of its threatenings, and to those that do so *will God look*, Isa. 66:2. 2. Those that tremble *at the word of God* cannot but tremble *at the sins of men*, by which the law of God is broken and his wrath and curse are incurred. 3. The pious zeal of one against sin may perhaps provoke very many to the like, as the apostle speaks in another case, 2 Co. 9:2. Many will follow who have not consideration, talent, and courage, enough to lead in a good work. 4. All good people ought to own those that appear and act in the cause of God against vice and profaneness, to stand by them, and do what they can to strengthen their hands.

Verses 5-15

What the meditations of Ezra's heart were, while for some hours he sat down astonished, we may guess by the words of his mouth when at length he *spoke with his tongue*; and a most pathetic address he here makes to Heaven upon this occasion.

Observe,

I. The time when he made this address—*at the evening sacrifice*, v. 5. Then (it is likely) devout people used to come into the courts of the temple, to grace the solemnity of the sacrifice and to offer up their own prayers to God in concurrence with it. In their hearing Ezra chose to make this confession, that they might be made duly sensible of the sins of their people, which hitherto they had either not taken notice of or had made light of. Prayer may preach. The sacrifice, and especially the evening sacrifice, was a type of the great propitiation, that *blessed Lamb of God* which in the evening of the world was to *take away sin by the sacrifice of himself*, to which we may suppose Ezra had an eye of faith in this penitential address to God; he makes confession with his hand, as it were, upon the head of that great sacrifice, through which *we receive the atonement*. Certainly Ezra was no stranger to the message which the angel Gabriel had some years ago delivered to Daniel, at the time of the evening sacrifice, and as it were in explication of it, concerning Messiah the Prince (Dan. 9:21, 24); and perhaps he had regard to that in choosing this time.

II. His preparation for this address. 1. He *rose up from his heaviness*, and so far shook off the burden of his grief as was necessary to the lifting up of his heart to God. He recovered from his astonishment, got the tumult of his troubled spirits somewhat stilled and his spirit composed for communion with God. 2. He *fell upon his knees*, put himself into the posture of a penitent humbling himself and a petitioner suing for mercy, in both representing the people for whom he was now an intercessor. 3. He *spread out his hands*, as one affected with what he was going to say, offering it up unto God, waiting, and reaching out, as it were, with an earnest expectation, to receive a gracious answer. In this he had an eye to God as the Lord, and as his God, a God of power, but a God of grace.

III. The address itself. It is not properly to be called a prayer, for there is not a word of petition in it; but, if we give prayer its full latitude, it is the offering up of pious and devout affections to God, and very devout, very pious, are the affections which Ezra here expresses. His address is a penitent confession of sin, not his own (from a conscience burdened with its own guilt and apprehensive of his own danger), but the sin of his people, from a gracious concern for the honour of God and the welfare of Israel. Here is a lively picture of ingenuous repentance. Observe in this address,

1. The confession he makes of the sin and the aggravations of it, which he insists upon, to affect his own heart and theirs that joined with him with holy sorrow and shame and fear, in the consideration of it, that they might be deeply humbled for it. And it is observable that, though he himself was wholly clear from this guilt, yet he puts himself into the number of the sinners, because he was a member of the same community—*our sins and our trespass*. Perhaps he now remembered it against himself, as his fault, that he had staid so long after his brethren in Babylon, and had not separated himself so soon as he might have done from the people of those lands. When we are lamenting the wickedness of the wicked, it may be, if we duly reflect upon ourselves and give our own hearts leave to deal faithfully with us, we may find something of the same nature, though in a

lower degree, that we also have been guilty of. However, he speaks that which was, or should have been, the general complaint.

(1.) He owns their sins to have been very great: "*Our iniquities are increased over our heads* (v. 6); we are ready to perish in them as in keep waters;" so general was the prevalency of them, so violent the power of them, and so threatening were they of the most pernicious consequences. "Iniquity has grown up to such a height among us that it reaches to the heavens, so very impudent that it dares heaven, so very provoking that, like the sin of Sodom, it cries to heaven for vengeance." But let this be the comfort of true penitents that though their sins reach to the heavens God's mercy is *in the heavens*, Ps. 36:5. *Where sin abounds grace will much more abound.*

(2.) Their sin had been long persisted in (v. 7): *Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass.* The example of those that had gone before them he thought so far from excusing their fault that it aggravated it. "We should have taken warning not to stumble at the same stone. The corruption is so much the worse that it has taken deep root and begins to plead prescription, but by this means we have reason to fear that the measure of the iniquity is nearly full."

(3.) The great and sore judgments which God had brought upon them for their sins did very much aggravate them: "*For our iniquities we have been delivered to the sword and to captivity* (v. 7), and yet not reformed, yet not reclaimed—brayed in the mortar, and yet the *folly not gone* (Prov. 27:22)—corrected, but not reclaimed."

(4.) The late mercies God had bestowed upon them did likewise very much aggravate their sins. This he insists largely upon, v. 8, 9. Observe, [1.] The time of mercy: *Now for a little space*, that is, "It is but a little while since we had our liberty, and it is not likely to continue long." This greatly aggravated their sin, that they were so lately in the furnace and that they knew not how soon they might return to it again; and could they yet be secure? [2.] The fountain of mercy: *Grace has been shown us from the Lord.* The kings of Persia were the instruments of their enlargement; but he ascribes it to God and to his grace, his free grace, without any merit of theirs. [3.] The streams of mercy,—that they were *not forsaken in their bondage*, but even in Babylon had the tokens of God's presence,—that they were a remnant of Israelites left, a few out of many, and those narrowly escaped out of the hands of their enemies, by the favour of the kings of Persia,—and especially that they had *a nail in his holy place*, that is (as it is explained, v. 9), that they had set up the *house of God*. They had their religion settled and the service of the temple in a constant method. We are to reckon it a great comfort and advantage to have stated opportunities of worshipping God. *Blessed are those that dwell in God's house*, like Anna that departed not from the temple. *This is my rest for ever*, says the gracious soul. [4.] The effects of all this. It enlightened their eyes, and it revived their hearts; that is, it was very comfortable to them, and the more sensibly so because it was in their bondage: it was life from the dead to them. Though but *a little reviving*, it was a great favour, considering that they deserved none and the day of small things was an earnest of greater. "Now," says Ezra, "how ungrateful are we to offend a God that has been so kind to us! how disingenuous to mingle in sin with those nations from whom we have been, in wonderful mercy, delivered! how unwise to expose ourselves to God's displeasure when we are tried with the returns of his favour and are upon our good behaviour for the continuance of it!"

(5.) It was a great aggravation of the sin that it was against an express command: *We have forsaken thy commandments*, v. 10.

It seems to have been an ancient law of the house of Jacob not to match with the families of the uncircumcised, Gen. 34:14. But, besides that, God had strictly forbidden it. He recites the command, v. 11, 12. For sin appears sin, appears exceedingly sinful, when we compare it with the law which is broken by it. Nothing could be more express: *Give not your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters to your sons*. The reason given is because, if they mingled with those nations, they would pollute themselves. It was an unclean land, and they were a holy people; but if they kept themselves distinct from them it would be their honour and safety, and the perpetuating of their prosperity. Now to violate a command so express, backed with such reasons, and a fundamental law of their constitution, was very provoking to the God of heaven.

(6.) That in the judgments by which they had already smarted for their sins God had *punished them less than their iniquities deserved*, so that he looked upon them to be still in debt upon the old account. "What! and yet shall we run up a new score? Has God dealt so gently with us in correcting us, and shall we thus abuse his favour and turn his grace into wantonness?" God, in his grace and mercy, had said concerning Sion's captivity, *She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins* (Isa. 40:2); but Ezra, in a penitential sense of the great malignity that was in their sin, acknowledged that, though the punishment was very great, it was less than they deserved.

2. The devout affections that were working in him, in making this confession. Speaking of sin,

(1.) He speaks as one much ashamed. With this he begins (v. 6), *O my God! I am ashamed and blush, O my God!* (so the words are placed) *to lift up my face unto thee*. Note, [1.] Sin is a shameful thing; as soon as ever our first parents had eaten forbidden fruit they were ashamed of themselves. [2.] Holy shame is as necessary an ingredient in true and ingenuous repentance as holy sorrow. [3.] The sins of others should be our shame, and we should blush for those who do not blush for themselves. We may well be ashamed that we are any thing akin to those who are so ungrateful to God and unwise for themselves. This is *clearing ourselves*, 2 Co. 7:11. [4.] Penitent sinners never see so much reason to blush and be ashamed as when they come to *lift up their faces before God*. A natural sense of our own honour which we have injured will make us ashamed, when we have done a wrong thing, to look men in the face; but a gracious concern for God's honour will make us much more ashamed to look him in the face. The publican, when he went to the temple to pray, hung down his head more than ever, as one ashamed, Lu. 18:13. [5.] An eye to God as our God will be of great use to us in the exercise of repentance. Ezra begins, *O my God!* and again in the same breath, *My God*. The consideration of our covenant-relation to God as ours will help to humble us, and break our hearts for sin, that we should violate both his precepts to us and our promises to him; it will also encourage us to hope for pardon upon repentance. "He is my God, notwithstanding this;" and every transgression in the covenant does not throw us out of covenant.

(2.) He speaks as one much amazed (v. 10) *"What shall we say after this? For my part I know not what to say: if God do not help us, we are undone."* The discoveries of guilt excite amazement: the more we think of sin the worse it looks. The difficulty of the case excites amazement. How shall we recover ourselves? Which way shall we make our peace with God? [1.] True penitents are at a loss what to say. Shall we say, *We have not sinned*, or, *God will not require it?* If we do, *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. Shall we say, *Have patience with us and we will pay thee all, with thousands of rams, or*

our first-born for our transgression? God will not thus be mocked: he knows we are insolvent. Shall we say, *There is no hope, and let come on us what will?* That is but to make bad worse. [2.] True penitents will consider what to say, and should, as Ezra, beg of God to teach them. What shall we say? Say, "I have sinned; I have done foolishly; God be merciful to me a sinner;" and the like. See Hos. 14:2.

(3.) He speaks as one much afraid, v. 13, 14. "After all the judgments that have come upon us to reclaim us from sin, and all the deliverances that have been wrought for us to engage us to God and duty, *if we should again break God's commandments, by joining in affinity with the children of disobedience* and learning their ways, what else could we expect but that God should be *angry with us till he had consumed us*, and there should not be so much as a remnant left, nor any to escape the destruction?" There is not a surer nor sadder presage of ruin to any people than revolting to sin, to the same sins again, after great judgments and great deliverances. Those that will be wrought upon neither by the one nor by the other are fit to be rejected, as reprobate silver, for the *founder melteth in vain*.

(4.) He speaks as one much assured of the righteousness of God, and resolved to acquiesce in that and to leave the matter with him whose judgment is *according to truth* (v. 15): "*Thou art righteous, wise, just, and good; thou wilt neither do us wrong nor be hard upon us; and therefore behold we are before thee, we lie at thy feet, waiting our doom; we cannot stand before thee, insisting upon any righteousness of our own, having no plea to support us or bring us off, and therefore we fall down before thee, in our trespass, and cast ourselves on thy mercy. Do unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee*, Jdg. 10:15. We have nothing to say, nothing to do, but to *make supplication to our Judge*," Job 9:15. Thus does this good man lay his grief before God and then leave it with him.

Chapter 10

In this chapter we have that grievance redressed which was complained of and lamented in the foregoing chapter. Observe, I. How the people's hearts were prepared for the redress of it by their deep humiliation for the sin (v. 1). II. How it was proposed to Ezra by Shechaniah (v. 2-4). III. How the proposal was put in execution. 1. The great men were sworn to stand to it (v. 5). 2. Ezra appeared first in it (v. 6). 3. A general assembly was called (v. 7-9). 4. They all, in compliance with Ezra's exhortation, agreed to the reformation (v. 10-14). 5. Commissioners were appointed to sit "de die in diem"—day after day, to enquire who had married strange wives and to oblige them to put them away, which was done accordingly (v. 15-17). and a list of the names of those that were found guilty given in (v. 18-44).

Verses 1-5

We are here told,

I. What good impressions were made upon the people by Ezra's humiliation and confession of sin. No sooner was it noised in the city that their new governor, in whom they rejoiced, was himself in grief, and to so great a degree, for them and their sin, than presently there *assembled to him a very great congregation*, to see what the matter was and to mingle their tears with his, v. 1. Our weeping for other people's sins may perhaps set those a weeping for them themselves who otherwise would continue senseless and remorseless. See what a happy influence the good examples of great ones may have upon their inferiors. When Ezra, a scribe, a scholar, a man in authority under the king, so deeply lamented the public corruptions, they concluded that they were indeed very grievous, else he would not thus have grieved for them; and this drew tears from every eye: *men, women, and children, wept very sore*, when he wept thus.

II. What a good motion Shechaniah made upon this occasion. The place was *Bochim*—a place of *weepers*; but, for aught that appears, there was a profound silence among them, as among Job's friends, who *spoke not a word to him, because they saw that his grief was very great*, till Shechaniah (one of Ezra's companions from Babylon, ch. 8:3, 5) stood up, and made a speech addressed to Ezra, in which,

1. He owns the national guilt, sums up all Ezra's confession in one word, and sets to his seal that it is true: "*We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives*, v. 2. The matter is too plain to be denied and too bad to be excused." It does not appear that Shechaniah was himself culpable in this matter (if he had had the beam in his own eye, he could not have seen so clearly to pluck it out of his brother's eye), but his father was guilty, and several of his father's house (as appears v. 26), and therefore he reckons himself among the trespassers; nor does he seek to excuse or palliate the sin, though some of his own relations were guilty of it, but, in the cause of God, *says to his father, I have not known him*, as Levi, Deu. 33:9. Perhaps the strange wife that his father had married had been an unjust unkind step-mother to him, and had made mischief in the family, and he supposed that others had done the like, which made him the more forward to appear against this corruption; if so, this was not the only time that private resentments have been over ruled by the providence of God to serve the public good.

2. He encourages himself and others to hope that though the matter was bad it might be amended: *Yet now there is hope in*

Israel (where else should there be hope but in Israel? those that are strangers to that commonwealth are said to have *no hope*, Eph. 2:12) even *concerning this thing*. The case is sad, but it is not desperate; the disease is threatening, but not incurable. There is hope that the people may be reformed, the guilty reclaimed, a stop put to the spreading of the contagion; and so the judgments which the sin deserves may be prevented and all will be well. *Now there is hope*; now that the disease is discovered it is half-cured. Now that the alarm is taken the people begin to be sensible of the mischief, and to lament it, a spirit of repentance seems to be poured out upon them, and they are all thus humbling themselves before God for it, *now there is hope* that God will forgive, and have mercy. The *valley of Achor* (that is, of *trouble*) is the *door of hope* (Hos. 2:15); for the sin that truly troubles us shall not ruin us. There is hope now that Israel has such a prudent, pious, zealous governor as Ezra to manage this affair. Note, (1.) In melancholy times we must see and observe what makes for us, as well as what makes against us. (2.) There may be good hopes through grace, even when there is the sense of great guilt before God. (3.) Where sin is seen and lamented, and good steps are taken towards a reformation, even sinners ought to be encouraged. (4.) Even great saints must thankfully receive seasonable counsel and comfort from those that are much their inferiors, as Ezra from Shechaniah.

3. He advises that a speedy and effectual course should be taken for the divorcing of the strange wives. The case is plain; what has been done amiss must be undone again as far as possible; nothing less than this is true repentance. *Let us put away all the wives, and such as are born of them*, v. 3. Ezra, though he knew this was the only way of redressing the grievance, yet perhaps did not think it feasible, and despaired of ever bringing the people to it, which put him into that confusion in which we left him in the foregoing chapter; but Shechaniah, who conversed more with the people than he did, assured him the thing was practicable if they went wisely to work. As to us now, it is certain that sin must be put away, a bill of divorce must be given it, with a resolution never to have any thing more to do with it, though it be dear as the wife of thy bosom, nay, as a right eye or a right hand, otherwise there is no pardon, no peace. What has been unjustly got cannot be justly kept, but must be restored; but, as to the case of being *unequally yoked with unbelievers*, Shechaniah's counsel, which he was then so clear in, will not hold now; such marriages, it is certain, are sinful, and ought not to be made, but they are not null. *Quod fieri non debuit, factum valet*—*That which ought not to have been done must, when done, abide*. Our rule, under the gospel, is, *If a brother has a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away*, 1 Co. 7:12, 13.

4. He puts them in a good method for the effecting of this reformation, and shows them not only that it must be done, but how. (1.) "Let Ezra, and all those that are present in this assembly, agree in a resolution that this must be done (pass a vote immediately to this effect: it will now pass *nemine contradicente—unanimously*), that it may be said to be done *according to the counsel of my lord*, the president of the assembly, with the unanimous concurrence of those that *tremble at the commandment of our God*, which is the description of those that were gathered to him, ch. 9:4. Declare it to be the sense of all the sober serious people among us, which cannot but have a great sway among Israelites." (2.) "Let the command of God in this matter, which Ezra recited in his prayer, be laid before the people, and let them see that it is *done according to the law*; we have that to warrant us, nay, that binds us to what we do; it is not an addition of our own to the divine law, but the necessary execution of it." (3.) "While we are in a good mind, let us bind ourselves by a solemn vow and covenant that we will do it, lest,

when the present impressions are worn off, the thing be left undone. Let us covenant, not only that, if we have strange wives ourselves, we will put them away, but that, if we have not, we will do what we can in our places to oblige others to put away theirs." (4.) "Let Ezra himself preside in this matter, who is authorized by the king's commission to enquire whether the law of God be duly observed in Judah and Jerusalem (ch. 7:14), and let us all resolve to stand by him in it (v. 4): *Arise, be of good courage*. Weeping, in this case, is good, but reforming is better." See what God said to Joshua in a like case, Jos. 7:10, 11. III. What a good resolution they came to upon this good motion, v. 5. They not only agreed that it should be done, but bound themselves with an oath that they would do according to this word. Fast bind, fast find.

Verses 6-14

We have here an account of the proceedings upon the resolutions lately taken up concerning the strange wives; no time was lost; they struck when the iron was hot, and soon set the wheels of reformation a-going. 1. Ezra went to the council-chamber where, it is probable, the priests used to meet upon public business; *and till he came thither* (so bishop Patrick thinks it should be read), till he saw something done, and more likely to be done, for the redress of this grievance, *he did neither eat nor drink*, but continued mourning. Sorrow for sin should be abiding sorrow; be sure to let it continue till the sin be put away. 2. He sent orders to all the children of the captivity to attend him at Jerusalem *within three days* (v. 7, 8); and, being authorized by the king to enforce his orders with penalties annexed (ch. 7:26), he threatened that whosoever refused to obey the summons should forfeit his estate and be outlawed. The doom of him that would not attend on this religious occasion should be that his substance should, in his stead, be for ever after appropriated to the service of their religion, and he himself, for his contempt, should for ever after be excluded from the honours and privileges of their religion; he should be excommunicated. 3. Within the time limited the generality of the people met at Jerusalem and made their appearance *in the street of the house of God*, v. 9. Those that had no zeal for the work they were called to, nay, perhaps had a dislike to it, being themselves delinquents, yet paid such a deference to Ezra's authority, and were so awed by the penalty, that they durst not stay away. 4. God gave them a token of his displeasure in the great rain that happened at that time (v. 9 and again v. 13), which perhaps kept some away, and was very grievous to those that met in the open street. When they wept the heavens wept too, signifying that, though God was angry with them for their sin, yet he was well pleased with their repentance, and (as it is said, Jdg. 10:16) *his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel*; it was also an indication of the good fruits of their repentance, for the rain makes the earth fruitful. 5. Ezra gave the charge at this great assize. He told them upon what account he called them together now, that it was because he found that since their return out of captivity they had *increased the trespass of Israel by marrying strange wives*, had added to their former sins this new transgression, which would certainly be a means of again introducing idolatry, the very sin they had smarted for and which he hoped they had been cured of in their captivity; and he called them together that they might *confess their sin to God*, and, having done that, might declare themselves ready and willing to do his pleasure, as it should be made known to them (which all those will do that truly repent of what they have done to incur his displeasure), and particularly that they might separate themselves from all idolaters, especially idolatrous wives, v. 10, 11. On these heads, we may suppose, he enlarged, and probably made such another confession of the sin now as he made ch. 9, to which he required them to say *Amen*.

6. The people submitted not only to Ezra's jurisdiction in general, but to his inquisition and determination in this matter: "*As thou hast said, so must we do*, v. 12. We have sinned in mingling with the heathen, and have thereby been in danger, not only of being corrupted by them, for we are frail, but of being lost among them, for we are few; we are therefore convinced that there is an absolute necessity of our separating from them again." There is hope concerning people when they are convinced, not only that it is good to part with their sins, but that it is indispensably necessary: we must do it, or we are undone. 7. It was agreed that this affair should be carried on, not in a popular assembly, nor that they should think to go through with it all on a sudden, but that a court of delegates should be appointed to receive complaints and to hear and determine upon them. It could not be done at this time, for it was not put into a method, nor could the people stand out because of the rain. The delinquents were many, and it would require time to discover and examine them. Nice cases would arise, which could not be adjudged without debate and deliberation, v. 13. "And therefore let the crowd be dismissed, and the rulers stand to receive informations; let them proceed city by city, and let the offenders be convicted before them in the presence of the judges and elders of their own city; and let them be entrusted to see the orders executed. Thus *take time and we shall have done the sooner*; whereas, if we do it in a hurry, we shall do it by halves, v. 14. If, in this method, a thorough reformation be made, the *fierce wrath of God* will be *turned from us*, which, we are sensible, is ready to break forth against us for this transgression." Ezra was willing that his zeal should be guided by the people's prudence, and put the matter into this method; he was not ashamed to own that the advice came from them, any more than he was to comply with it.

Verses 15-44

The method of proceeding in this matter being concluded on, and the congregation dismissed, that each in his respective place might gain and give intelligence to facilitate the matter, we are here told, 1. Who were the persons that undertook to manage the matter and bring the causes regularly before the commissioners—*Jonathan* and *Jahaziah*, two active men, whether of the priests or of the people does not appear; probably they were the men that made that proposal (v. 13, 14) and were therefore the fittest to see it pursued; two honest Levites were joined with them, and *helped them*, v. 15. Dr. Lightfoot gives a contrary sense of this: *only* (or *nevertheless*) *Jonathan and Jahaziah stood against this matter* (which reading the original will very well bear), and these two *Levites helped them* in opposing it, either the thing itself or this method of proceeding. It was strange if a work of this kind was carried on and met with no opposition. 2. Who were the commissioners that sat upon this matter. Ezra was president, and with him *certain chief men of the fathers* who were qualified with wisdom and zeal above others for this service, v. 16. It was happy for them that they had such a man as Ezra to head them; they could not have done it well without his direction, yet he would not do it without their concurrence. 3. How long they were about it. They began *the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter* (v. 16), which was but ten days after this method was proposed (v. 9), and they finished in three months, v. 17. They sat closely and minded their business, otherwise they could not have despatched so many causes as they had before them in so little time; for we may suppose that all who were impeached were fairly asked what cause they could show why they should not be parted, and, if we may judge by other cases, provided the wife were proselyted to the Jewish religion she was not to be put away, the trial of which would require great care. 4. Who the persons were that were

found guilty of this crime. Their names are here recorded to their perpetual reproach; many of the priests, nay, of the family of Jeshua, the high priest, were found guilty (v. 18), though the law had particularly provided, for the preserving of their honour in their marriages, that being holy themselves they should not marry such as were profane, Lev. 21:7. Those that should have taught others the law broke it themselves and by their example emboldened others to do likewise. But, having lost their innocency in this matter, they did well to recant and give an example of repentance; for they promised *under their hand* to put away their strange wives (some think that they made oath to do so with their *hands lifted up*), and they took the appointed way of obtaining pardon, bringing the ram which was appointed by the law *for a trespass offering* (Lev. 6:6), so owning their guilt and the desert of it, and humbly suing for forgiveness. About 113 in all are here named who had married strange wives, and some of them, it is said (v. 44), had children by them, which implies that not many of them had, God not crowning those marriages with the blessing of increase. Whether the children were turned off with the mothers, as Shechaniah proposed, does not appear; it should seem not: however it is probable that the wives which were put away were well provided for, according to their rank. One would think this grievance was now thoroughly redressed, yet we meet with it again (Neh. 13:23 and Mal. 2:11), for such corruptions are easily and insensibly brought in, but not without great difficulty purged out again. The best reformers can but do their endeavour, but, when the Redeemer himself shall *come to Sion*, he shall effectually *turn away ungodliness from Jacob*.