

Ezra: A Priest for the People

Key Verse: “[Ezra] said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.”
—Ezra 9:6

Selected Scripture:
Ezra 9

THE BOOK OF EZRA IS THE

first of the post-captivity books, and it deals mostly with the remnant which alone had a heart for God. It records the return to Palestine under Zerubbabel, by decree of Cyrus, of a Jewish remnant who laid the Temple foundations. Ezra followed, and restored the law and ritual. (Ezra 1:1-11; 3:1-13) The mass of the nation, and most of the princes, remained by preference in Babylonia and Assyria, where they were prospering.—chap. 2:2

The material included in the Book of Ezra is historical, and it along with the Book of Nehemiah take up the history of Israel where it was written down by the scribes who also wrote the Book of Chronicles. Ezra, the writer of the book that bears his name, was a scribe, or educated man, whose genealogy can be traced back through the priesthood to Aaron. (chap. 7:1-5,11) It is thought that Ezra was not among those who went up first to Jerusalem under the proclamation of Cyrus; he was probably not born until much later after that important event. The record of the first

six chapters of Ezra covers a period of twenty years, and then an interval of about fifty years passed by before the events recorded in the seventh chapter transpired. The history of the return from captivity and the experiences of the people in connection with the rebuilding of the temple, he probably got from the records of the scribes at Jerusalem.

As we set the scene depicted in our lesson chapter, we see that the remnant has lost their separated position. In verse 2 of Ezra 9, we read, "The holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass." When Ezra heard these words he was very distraught, so much so that he rent his clothing, and even plucked the hair off of his head, and beard. It would lead him to speak the words found in our theme text. After falling to his knees and spreading out his hands to God, he would confess the innermost feelings of his heart. He would express his sorrow for their transgressions, render thanksgiving to God for his mercy, and ask him to intervene on behalf of the people. (Ezra 9:3-5,7-15) The people and their leaders would respond to Ezra's petition with a great outpouring of sorrow, and emotion.

Ezra magnified the Law, showing the people that their problems were the result of a failure to keep the Law, and the proper course was to go back to the Law and seek to keep it to the absolute best of their abilities. These were hard words to follow, for conformity to them would mean the breaking of family ties. It was a strong but just penalty for breaking the Law. As a result their separation as a people would be restored. This would prove to be very important to their existence, for this spirit has persisted among the Jews ever since, keeping the nation and people comparatively separate and distinct from all others. "Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD."—Ps. 144:15 ■