1:1 God 'stirred up' the spirit of Cyrus and also of the Jews who returned (:1,5). Isaiah uses the same Hebrew term to describe how Israel's saviour would be "raised up" [s.w.]- Is. 41:2,25; 45:13. And yet Isaiah pleads with Zion, i.e. the faithful, to indeed be stirred up- Is. 51:17; 52:1 appeals to Zion to "Awake!"- the same word translated "stirred up". But Isaiah tragically concluded that there were so few who would 'stir up themselves' (Is. 64:7). God had given them the potential to be 'stirred up' in their hearts and minds to leave Babylon and return- but they wouldn't respond. And today, the same happens. God is willing to change hearts, to stir up materialistic and complacent spirits- but because we're not robots, we have to respond. And yet, God's grace still shines through. 1 Kings 8:47-50 had predicted that God would give the exiles compassion before their captors if they repented. They didn't repent, as passages like Ez. 18 make clear (they blamed everything on their fathers and protested their personal innocence)- and yet still God gave them compassion in the eyes of their captors, through the amazing decrees of Cyrus enabling them to return to their land and rebuild the temple at his expense.

2:1 The majority of Jews preferred to stay in Babylon. “*The* province” (singular) suggest that only a few Jews who lived in the province of Babylon returned (one out of 127 provinces; see 7:16 too), even though there were significant numbers of Jews in all the provinces, as the book of Esther makes clear (as also does Neh. 1:8, which says that the Babylonian captivity fulfilled God’s prophecy to scatter Israel amongst all nations). Those who did return were very significant to God, and He has therefore recorded their names and numbers to the individual, even how many donkeys went with them- each one who returned was so special to Him, just as we will be if we respond to the call of the restored Kingdom and come out from ‘Babylon’.

2:52 Comparing the list of names in the list of returnees in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, we find that a number of names recur in both lists, e.g. Bazluth (Ezra 2:52; Neh. 7:54). It could be that some went from Babylon to Judah with Ezra, then returned to Babylon, and returned with Nehemiah. This hardly sounds like the glorious, positive, confident return of the captives to Zion prophesied in the restoration prophecies. Many respond to the call to leave the good life in Babylon but then falter; the vision of the restored Kingdom on earth and our working with God’s blessing to bring it about just doesn’t motivate us as it should.

2:64 Haggai's criticism of the returnees is more understandable if we understand that most of them were the poor, who hadn't 'made it' in Babylon and who went to Judah hoping to get nice houses, great harvests and material blessings- rather than to rebuild *God’s* house. It would be fair to infer that only the poor Jews returned from Babylon. The record here in :64-70 speaks of 42,360 people returning, along with 7,337 servants and 200 singers, making a total of 49,837. And yet only 8,100 animals went with them to transport them. This means that many would have walked. They carried 5,400 vessels for use in the temple- so the picture could be that their more wealthy brethren laded them with goods, but only the poor returned. Further, the list of towns of origin in Ezra 2 suggests it was mainly those who had originally lived in peripheral villages who returned, rather than the inhabitants of Jerusalem and larger cities. It's stressed twice that only "some" of the returned exiles supported the work of the temple (:68-70)- which was supposed to be the main reason for their return. We too can leave ‘Babylon’ by responding to the call of the Kingdom when actually our motivation is simply a disillusion with our present life, with life in ‘Babylon’, rather than a serious desire to work for the establishment of *God’s* Kingdom.

3:1 *As one man*- Unity amongst God’s people comes from all being committed to a sacrificial life before God and a genuine desire to hear God’s word and obey it (:2-4).

3:3 *Their fear*- The promises of the restoration from Babylon had repeatedly emphasized that they were not to fear nor be dismayed because God would be behind their return- if they were returning to rebuild God’s house and Kingdom rather than seek their own houses and kingdom (Jer. 30:10; Is. 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8; 51:7; 54:4). This is such strong emphasis that we have to conclude that their fear was because they didn’t allow God’s prophetic word to influence them as they should have done.

3:7 *According to the grant that they had from Cyrus King of Persia*- Hag. 1:8, a prophecy given 18 years after the decree of Cyrus, orders the people to go up into the hills of Judah and get wood with which to build the temple. And yet we read here that the decree of Cyrus 18 years earlier had resulted in cedar wood being brought from Tyre and Sidon, enough for the temple to be built. Where did that wood go? Is the implication not that the leadership had used it for their own wood ceilinged houses (Hag. 1:4)? It all seems so petty minded. But this is what we are tempted to do, time and again- build up our own house and leave God's house desolate and in a very poor second place.

3:12 The young and old didn’t rejoice together as required by the restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:12-13. Instead the old men wept, perhaps at how small the temple was compared even with Solomon’s, at how Ezekiel’s temple wasn’t being rebuilt; whilst the younger ones rejoiced.

4:2 *We seek your God, as you do*- They didn’t actually seek the God of Israel. The fact people have some belief in a ‘god’ and perform religious worship doesn’t mean that the people of the true God have anything in common with them. The mantra of ‘unity’ has often been used in attempts to undermine the work of the true God. We live in a world of reductionism whereby the lowest common denominator is often used as a tool for manipulation. Yet the true God stands revealed in His word as He is and the core of the Gospel is in that sense non-negotiable.

4:24 This means that the work of rebuilding the temple was suspended for 21 years. This corresponds to the 21 days (a day representing a year) during which the Angel Gabriel worked on the prince of Persia to make him genuinely support the work of rebuilding, even though during that period the prince of Persia resisted him (Dan. 10:13). This was in response to Daniel’s 21 days of prayer (Dan. 10:1,12). So although it may seem that God is distant and everything is in the hands of human rulers, in fact the Angels are actively at work, not forcing people to do what they don’t want, but seeking to arrange circumstances so that they make the choices which favour God’s work going forward. But because of this desire not to ‘force’ men, there are such delays. This is one way to explain the apparent silence of God at times in our lives, and the way that humanly, things can appear to ‘go wrong’.

5:1 Ezra 4 says that the reason the temple was not further rebuilt was because of the decree of Artaxerxes suspending the building programme; then Haggai came and told Israel that the temple wasn’t built because they had preferred to build their own ceiled houses (Hag. 1:4). So God had confirmed the people in the way they chose. They preferred to build their houses rather than His, so He stopped them from building His house altogether until they wholeheartedly recommitted themselves to Him. God arranges circumstances in our lives to try to bring us toward total commitment rather than a surface level devotion which is made out of social necessity.

5:2 *With them were the prophets of God, helping them*- The prophets didn’t merely speak God’s word and think they had done their job by relaying it; they proactively worked to as it were bring about the fulfilment of the things they predicted. We should have the same spirit, living according to the good news of the Kingdom which we preach.

5:3,4 This is a situation very similar to that in Acts 4:18-21, where the early Christians were ordered not to preach about Christ and likewise threatened, but they felt they must do God’s will above the will of man. And true believers often have this choice; we are to seek to live obediently in the societies within which we live, but we cannot obey any command (especially relating to military service) which causes us to disobey God’s principles. God’s word must come before the word of men.

6:3 *Sixty cubits*- The temple which Cyrus commanded the Jews to build in Jerusalem was of different (smaller) dimensions to that of Ezekiel. Two possibilities arise here. Either Israel chose to listen to the words of man rather than those of God through Ezekiel; or perhaps God reduced the dimensions, knowing that this was within the capability of Israel to achieve. In any case, Israel were encouraged by Divine prophesy in the work of building according to the pattern which Cyrus had given (:14). God is so eager to work with men that He will work with us on our lower level, even if it is a level lower than what we are capable of. And so we should treat our weaker brethren.

6:10 Paul exhorts us to pray for kings and governors, in the very language of the LXX here about the returnees praying in the new temple for the kings of Babylon (1 Tim. 2:1,2).

6:21 The account of Judah’s separation from the surrounding peoples reads similarly to that of the purges from idolatory during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land; by 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by 10:11 likewise; then they separate (10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Neh. 9:2; 13:3. Our natures gravitate downwards, and any personal spiritual reformation we achieve has to be consciously maintained.

6:22 *Yahweh had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria*- Constantly we see evidence of God’s ability to give people attitudes of mind, e.g. joy, and to affect how even unbelieving kings think about His people (Prov. 21:1). As believers in Christ, our greatest need is for spiritual mindedness, to think spiritually rather about worldly and fleshly things; and we can ask God to help us in this. For He surely has the power to change our hearts.

7:2 *Son of Zadok*- It could have been possible for the Messianic Kingdom to have been established at the time of the restoration, and Ezekiel’s temple prophecies would then have been fulfilled. Ezekiel emphasised that the sons of Zadok were to organize priestly work in the temple (Ez. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11); Ezra, the leader of the initial restoration, was one of the sons of Zadok. He was in a position to fulfil those prophecies, although the bulk of his brethren seem to have precluded this. Ezra was enabled to ‘beautify’ the temple (:27), the very same word used in Is. 60:7,9,13 about how God would “glorify” [s.w.] His temple with merchandise from throughout the Babylonian empire- all of which was willingly offered by Cyrus and Darius. Ez. 40-48 stress the “gates” dozens of times; and Nehemiah’s account likewise stresses many times the attention he paid to setting up the “gates” [s.w.], as if he saw his work as fulfilling Ezekiel’s words. Ez. 40:42 speaks of the vessels to be used in the temple [AV “instruments”] with the same word used for the temple vessels which were brought up out of Babylon back to Judah, in fulfilment of several of Isaiah’s ‘Kingdom’ passages (Ezra 1:6-11; 8:25-33 cp. Is. 52:11; 66:20). God’s relationship with Israel has in a sense been one long story of Him working out amazingly detailed and extensive potentials, which human inattention and lack of faith and vision meant didn’t come true. But still He endures, trying to work with us, and is so thrilled at our attempts to respond. What relief and rejoicing and fulfilment God will have when His Son finally fulfils all these potential scenarios in their essence at His return.

7:10 *For Ezra had set his heart*- Ezra went up to Jerusalem with his heart set on fulfilling God’s word there; and this was exactly the attitude of Jesus. It was evident from His body language that His heart was set upon going to Jerusalem to die there (Lk. 9:51,53). Ezra’s single-minded focus upon his objective should be our pattern too; not gaining worldly wealth or honour, but rather the building up of God’s house and people, and the things of His Kingdom.

8:21 *A straight way for us*- God’s people had been prophesied as returning, walking “by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble” (Jer. 31:9). Ezra fasted for them to be given a “straight way”, as Jeremiah had foretold they could have. He saw the need for them to make the effort to fulfil the prophecy Ezekiel’s vision of the cherubim featured “straight” progress; the wheels on earth surely connect with how Israel should have been, moving in a straight way back to the land, in harmony with the Angel-cherubim above them likewise moving in a straight way. But they failed to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). They were to walk “each one straight before him” (Is. 57:2 Heb.), as each of the cherubim went straight ahead (Ez. 1:12). We too are not alone in this world, we are being guided by the Angels above, and are to walk in step with them.

8:22 The returning exiles had been comforted by the prophetic word: “Fear not... I will help you” (Is. 41:10). Ezra was ashamed to ask for help against Judah’s enemies, the implication being that he wanted that human help but was ashamed to ask for it from the King. He had initially believed those words of Isaiah, but found it hard to maintain that level of faith. We find ourselves so often in this situation as we struggle to believe God’s promises in the midst of our secular lives.

9:1 The Levites in the restored Kingdom were not to marry divorcees or Gentiles (Ez. 44:22); but they did just this (see too Mal. 2:11-16). Time and again, they didn’t have the Kingdom experience because they didn’t want it. All who truly love the Kingdom and want it to ultimately be real for them will have it (2 Tim. 4:8).

9:2 *For they have taken of their daughters*- This was why they were following the idols of the Gentiles (:1). Marriage out of the faith is strongly associated with adopting the religion of the unbelieving partner. Whatever exceptions there are to this rule, that is the general pattern- be it the worship of Baal in those times, or agnosticism today. This is the spiritual danger of marriage to unbelievers.

9:3 *Plucked off the hair of my head*- The very punishment for marriage out of the faith at this time(Neh. 13:25). Ezra so identified with his weak brethren that he felt as if he himself had committed the sin; he even blushed before God because of the failure of His people with whom He was so closely identified (:6). This should be our response when we encounter weakness in our brethren, rather than self-righteousness and mental or physical separation from them as persons. The Lord Jesus supremely identified with us as sinners in His time of dying; our similar identity with our sinful brethren is therefore one way of living out the spirit of the cross.

9:4 The sins of those who returned are called "the transgression of those that had been carried away". Yet those who returned to the land weren't mainly the generation who had been carried away. The intended confusion is surely to suggest that those who returned committed the same sins as had led Judah into captivity a generation earlier. Ezra comments on this fact in his subsequent prayer (:7). One sad thing about spiritual history is that so few learn the lessons from others’ failures; the entire Bible is in one sense a history of spiritual failure, written for our learning (Rom. 15:4).

9:9 Ezra referred to the Jews in Babylon as those "bondservants… in bondage"- when historical records, as well as the book of Esther and the fact Nehemiah the Jew was the king's cupbearer, show that the Jews were very far from being servants in Babylonian society. Yet Ezra perceived the spiritual poverty and servanthood of remaining in that affluent society, compared to the freedom of giving it all up and going to rebuild the ruins of Zion.

9:13 Ezra said that God had punished them less than their iniquities deserved; yet he appears to have in mind Is. 40:2, where God said that at the time of Zion’s restoration, He would admit to having punished her “double for all her sins”. Yahweh in His love and pity felt that He had punished them twice as much as they deserved; but Ezra realized that it was less than what they deserved. His love is so abounding that He almost rushes to take guilt for having justly punished sin. Another example is 9:8: “And now for a little moment grace has been shown from Yahweh”. This uses the same relatively rare Hebrew construction as in Is. 54:6-8, which likens Judah to a young wife who had been “refused” during the 70 years captivity: “For a little moment have I forsaken you... in a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment”. Here is Yahweh, likening Himself to a faithful husband feeling more guilty than He was, taking upon Himself the fault for it all, saying that for the “small moment” of the captivity, He had forsaken His people. But Ezra saw that “little moment” as a time when they received grace; what may appear to some as forsaking is in fact God’s grace to us, when spiritually discerned- whether it be deep within our own lives, or in the state of affairs upon this planet.

9:14 The covenant was not to be broken in the restored Kingdom; the temple had been destroyed before because of breaking covenant with Yahweh (Ez. 44:7). But now, Judah broke covenant [s.w.] with Yahweh at the time of the restoration by marrying Gentiles and worshipping their gods.

9:15 *We cannot remain before You*- Ezra is recognizing that the prophecies of the restored Kingdom which speak of God’s returned people standing or remaining [same Hebrew words] before Him for ever were not going to come true (Is. 66:20-22; Ez. 44:15).

10:3 The suggestion to divorce their Gentile wives and send them away to their Gentile families, even with the children they had had by them (:44), was on their initiative. When there was a similar repentance about marriage out of the faith in Nehemiah’s time, this wasn’t done. There are degrees to which we can repent; the word ‘repent’ literally means a change of mind. Repentance is a matter of the heart, hence we can’t judge others’ repentance. But it will be articulated to different levels by different people. The fact there are different levels on which we can respond to God shouldn’t encourage a spirit of minimalism within us, but rather a desire to serve Him on as high a level as we can.

10:9 In the context of the restoration, Is. 66:1,2 had stated that having a humble spirit which trembled at God’s word was more important than building a physical house for Him. The Jews did tremble at the word at the beginning of the rebuilding. But it was a momentary thing; they came to see the building of the walls as more important than keeping a trembling spirit. Works eclipsed spirituality. Yet Isaiah had taught that the trembling at the word was more essentially important than building temples. But Judah paid no attention in the long term.

10:13 *We are not able to stand outside*- Literally, ‘we are not strong enough to be outside’. The returned exiles were prophesied as having increased strength and energy for their task of rebuilding the temple and God’s Kingdom; their strength would not fail (Is. 40:29-41:1), in contrast to how for the idolater, “his strength fails” (Is. 44:12). But the same word is used here about how the strength of the redeemed exiles did become weak; and again in Neh. 4:10 about how the Jewish builders didn’t have strength to remove all the rubble to rebuild the walls. God will strengthen us in all our weakness- if we are truly committed to His work, His people, His house and His Kingdom. Resources will be provided and our personal weaknesses overcome- if these things are the true yearning of our hearts.