

DAYS OF OPPORTUNITY

There is something very special about the little word *tj a* with which Ezra begins his account of the times and of God's providence toward his people. This little word is not just a temporal adverb or particle. The Hebrew word *tj a* is directly related to the word "one" *dj a* and tends to mean "one only" hence "a unique occasion" or "opportunity".

Let us take stock of these **eight unique times** to which Ezra gives testimony in his account. These events together form the sheen or fabric of God's rich tapestry of providence and sovereign purpose which Ezra weaves into his account for the interest of the spiritual reader.

- (1) **Now** in the first year of Cyrus (1.1) that the word of God might be completed by the mouth of Jeremiah the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus and he proclaimed "The LORD God of heaven has given me all kingdoms of the earth and charged me with building a house at Jerusalem" This unique event in 539B.C. was the first of a series of wonderful occurrences coupled with the later 457B.C. return of Ezra. Eighty years later its ramifications were still working out under God. God gave **deliverance**-salvation-redemption!
- (2) "**Now** for a little space grace has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a little reviving in our bondage" (9.8) (A.V.) This absolutely unique opportunity linked with the prophecy of Jeremiah and affording a time of refreshing from God was well understood by Ezra-who used it to formulate a new style of spiritual leadership in the Sanhedrin and to establish a school of scribes and to develop the concept of consecutive proclamation of God's word. God would give "a nail"-a Messiah -a lamb- and **revelation** so that truth became clear to all.
- (3) "Now what shall we say after this for we have forsaken Your commandments?" (9.10) The LORD never forsook His people even amid the gross sin that had raged for a year or more. The land which was "from mouth to mouth" unclean. The intimate relationships were impure and unnatural. How possibly could the nation harvest its opportunity-grasp with both hands its chance to get back on track? At this critical juncture Ezra finds a word-it is the word God wants to hear-We have "forsaken Your commandments". The scene around Ezra showed that the entire Decalogue was being cast to the ground. Sin was rampant. God has kept covenant-we have broken covenant. This needed to be said as the light shone through. The national compact with God was at an end on the part of at least a third of the families who had returned. Were the others going to follow? At this moment Ezra saw the problem in all its lurid seriousness. It was the problem of "**sin**". He shared it with God. He must share it with the people.
- (4) "**Now** therefore give not your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons nor seek their peace or prosperity as long as you live or as long as Israel stands-that you may be strong-eat the good of the land and leave it to your posterity always" (9.12) (A.V.) The tragic few years of disguised involvement with foreign women and their idolatrous practice was on the point of putting Israel beyond redemption- there was just a narrow window of opportunity to reverse it all. Ezra gave public notice that the situation was one

of gross disobedience. Shecaniah the fourth chief among the leaders strengthened his resolve to act to forestall national collapse into dissipation. This pre-emptive strike for righteousness was deeply blessed of God and within 3 months the nation was all found in worship at Passover. This was a truly opportune time when Ezra was owned of God to turn the spiritual tide of his people. Peace there must be but it had to be **“peace with God”**

- (5) “You our God have withheld beneath our iniquities and you have given us such a deliverance” (9.13) Ezra goes on to recognize that to pursue this path of evil living and abomination it would mean that there would be no turning back-the nation would be consumed without remnant. Ezra sees the people “before God” in guilt but “before God” with their capacity to minister at an end. It needs grace. The only hope is divine mercy. Ezra pleads the “righteousness of God” and in the same case the sinner must look to the righteousness of Christ for inner clothing in the nakedness of a broken soul spoiled and guilty through sinning. There is a moment in the sinner’s pathway home where nothing will suffice but the **“Righteousness of Christ”**. As the hymn writer said, “Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me!”
- (6) “Yet **now** in Israel there is hope concerning this thing.” (10.2) A further moment of **bright hope** followed when it seemed a rainbow burst over Israel. Hope “lives on above this” said Shecaniah. What motivated this leader? What did he say that got Ezra to his feet? He said “we have been **faithless**” “covert”. This man saw that the true greatness of Israel was that he wrestled with God. He saw Ezra in that poise and position. He captured the vital element of faith and openness and spoke of Israel’s sin of secret flight from God. It was from the roots of faith that new hope could grow. He had the analysis that mattered. Ezra had an ally of the first calibre. He no longer stood alone. This was another unique opportunity that fell in the lap of the scribe from God.
- (7) “**Now** therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the (strange) wives and such as are born of them according to the counsel of my lord” (10.3). It was proposed that a covenant be sworn by the nation to bind the righteous together. This Ezra recognised as a “one-off” and wonderful moment of deadly seriousness when on one mighty pivot the entire wheel of future. Israel was a **covenant** people. It was ever so simple-why had he not thought of it himself? Well done-Shecaniah! Thank you LORD!
- (8) “**Now** make confession and thanksgiving to the LORD God of our fathers and do His will and **separate** yourselves” (holiness) (10.11) the psychological moment had come. It was the hour of challenge. Would the people respond? Would they revolt? Reverberating back came the answer “We must do it-there is no alternative-we have sinned”. What a response. Genuine heart searching-even as the great crowd stood in the pouring rain. They pleaded for time-this was an involved matter and it was more than a week’s work. There were raw emotions and little children-fair judgment and proper arrangements must be made to avoid the Hagar model being played out in Jerusalem under Ezra. The scribe was well pleased. Men were at hand to steer the matter to a proper conclusion. The heart of the people was penitent and their head was wise. This also was a rare opportunity to set right once for all the creeping infidelity to God that was in danger of neutralising Israel as a power for God on the earth. Holiness would put them back where they belonged-a people from whom we received the word of God and the “Nail in a sure place”-our glorious Christ. We are looking at a beautiful series of “opportune moments” the gist of which

is that Israel could be turned round much in the same way as any wayward soul. We are looking at the very kernel of the message of Ezra and at principles that are timeless and sure when applied to spiritual need even today. The LORD is the giver of opportunity for repentance and renewal-and as He refreshed Israel he can refresh your life and mine today.