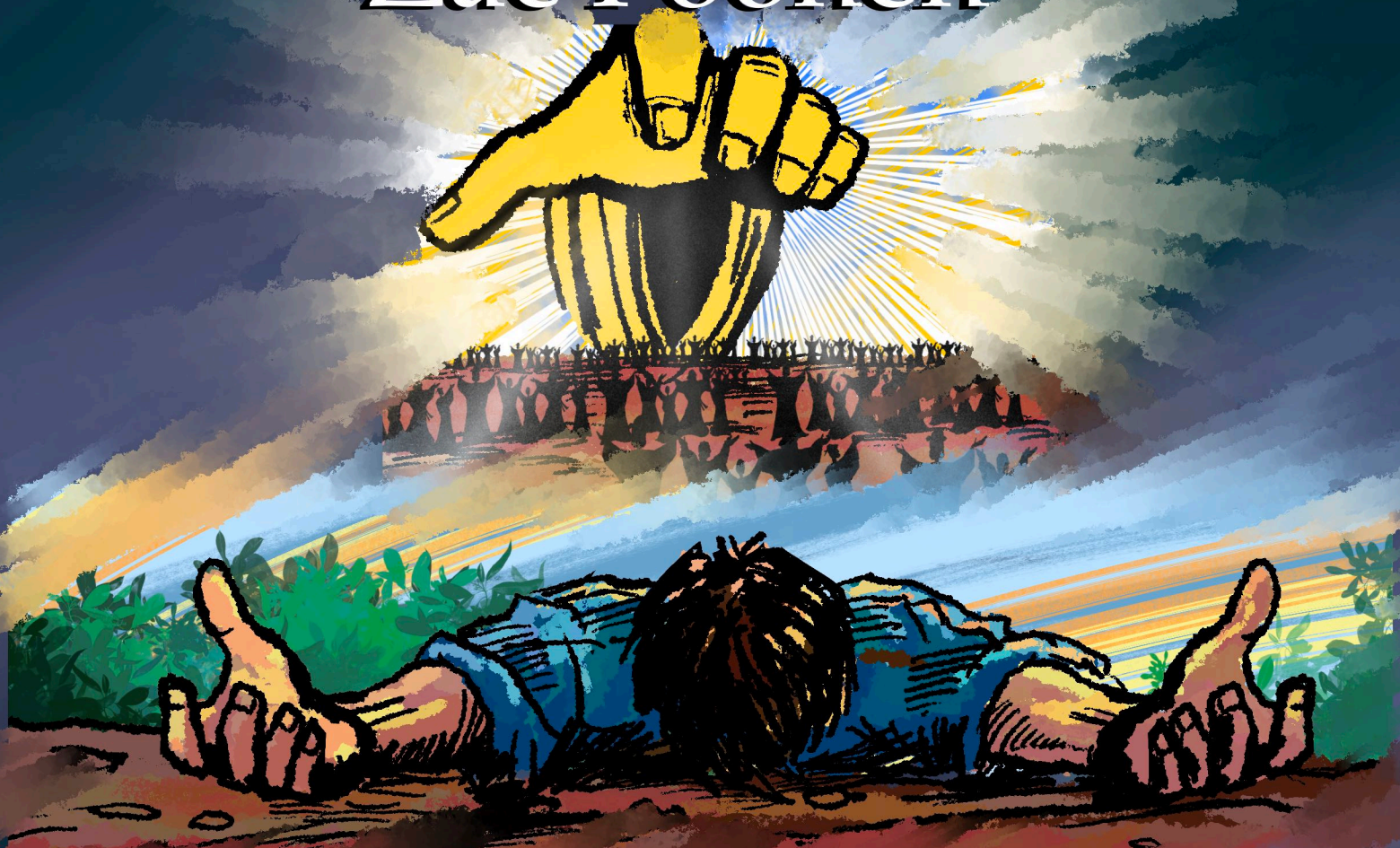


Through the Bible

EZRA

Zac Poonen



Illustrations by Vinay Kuruville

COPYRIGHT : ZAC POONEN AND VINAY KURUVILLA

CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

**69 PARADISE ENCLAVE, BELAHALLI
KANNUR POST, BANGALORE - 562 149
INDIA**

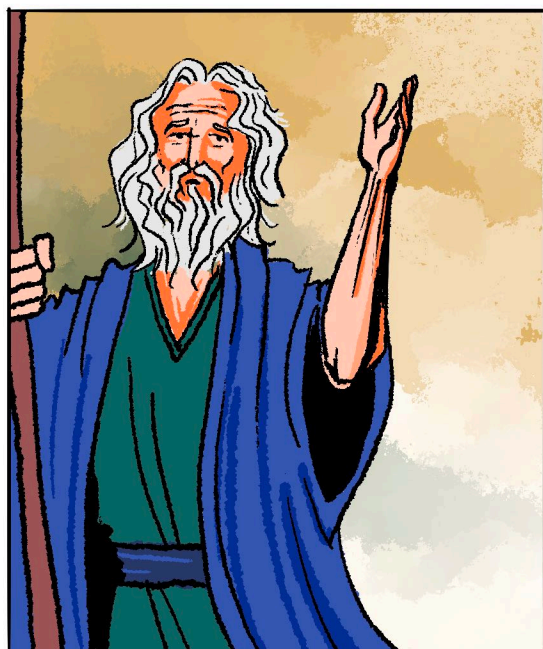
EZRA



EZRA LIVED AT THE TIME WHEN THE ISRAELITES CAME BACK FROM THEIR **SEVENTY** YEARS OF CAPTIVITY. **TWO** JOURNEYS OF ISRAEL ARE RECORDED . THE **FIRST** JOURNEY WAS FROM **EGYPT** TO **CANAAN**, AND THIS SYMBOLISES **SALVATION** FOR THE **INDIVIDUAL** CHRISTIAN -- REDEEMED BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST , BAPTISED IN WATER , BAPTISED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND CONQUERING THE LUSTS. THE **SECOND** JOURNEY WAS THEIR MOVE FROM **BABYLON** TO **JERUSALEM** AFTER THE CAPTIVITY. THAT SPEAKS ABOUT BUILDING THE **CHURCH** SYMBOLISING OUR COMING OUT OF **DEAD** RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS (BABYLON), AND BUILDING THE **BODY OF CHRIST** (JERUSALEM).



WE READ FIRST OF ALL, THAT GOD MOVED KING **CYRUS** TO ORDER THE BUILDING OF THE TEMPLE. SEE THE **SOVEREIGNTY** OF GOD THAT MOVED A **HEATHEN** KING TO ORDER THE BUILDING OF **GOD'S** TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM . **CYRUS** WENT ON TO SAY, "WHOEVER IS AMONG YOU LET HIM GO UP TO JERUSALEM AND REBUILD THE HOUSE OF GOD." (EZRA 1:3). HE **DID NOT COMPEL** ANY ISRAELITE TO GO. THEY WERE FREE TO **CHOOSE**. EVEN SO TODAY -- WE ARE **FREE** TO STAY IN **DEAD** RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS OR TO **MOVE** AWAY FROM THEM TO JERUSALEM.



NEARLY **200** YEARS **BEFORE** **CYRUS** WAS BORN, THE PROPHET **ISAIAH** PROPHESED ABOUT HIM **BY NAME**: "THUS SAYS THE LORD, 'WHEN I SAY OF **CYRUS**, "HE IS MY SHEPHERD," HE WILL CERTAINLY DO AS I SAY. HE WILL COMMAND THAT JERUSALEM BE **REBUILT** AND THAT THE TEMPLE BE **RESTORED**.--- '" (ISAIAH 44:28--45:6). **DANIEL**, WHO WAS STILL **ALIVE** AT THAT TIME, MUST HAVE SHOWN THIS SCRIPTURE TO **CYRUS** -- AND **CYRUS** MUST HAVE BEEN **OVERWHELMED** TO KNOW THAT ALMIGHTY GOD HAD **PROPHESED** ABOUT HIM BY NAME, **TWO CENTURIES EARLIER**. THIS WOULD HAVE **HUMBLED** HIM; AND HE DID WHAT **ISAIAH** **PROPHESED** THAT HE WOULD DO -- **COMMAND** THE JEWISH PEOPLE TO GO BACK TO **JERUSALEM** AND **REBUILD** THE **TEMPLE!!** GOD'S WAYS ARE **TRULY** AMAZING.



GOD MAKES A NOTE OF THOSE LEFT **COMFORTABLE** BABYLON. IT WAS DIFFICULT, DANGEROUS AND EXPENSIVE TO GO TO **JERUSALEM** THOSE DAYS. MANY ISRAELITES WOULD HAVE SAID TO THEMSELVES, "WHY SHOULD WE MOVE? WE ARE QUITE COMFORTABLE." MANY BELIEVERS WHO ARE IN UNGODLY SYSTEMS TODAY SAY THE SAME THING. THEY CAN GET "MARRIED" AND "BURIED" WITH GREATER **HONOUR** IN BABYLON. BUT THE **WHOLEHEARTED** WANT TO BE WHERE GOD IS **MOVING** IN THEIR DAY AND WANT TO BE WHERE THE **ANOINTING** OF GOD IS. THEY DO **NOT SEEK** THEIR OWN **COMFORT** OR **HONOUR**. THUS A **SIFTING** TAKES PLACE AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE **EVEN TODAY**.



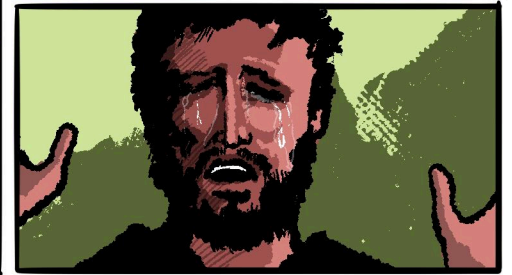
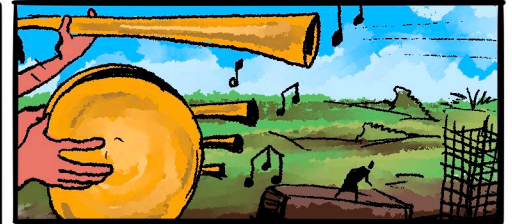
IN CHAPTER 2:40, WE READ THAT **ONLY 74** LEVITES LEFT FOR **JERUSALEM**. WHY WAS THE NUMBER SO **SMALL**? THE LEVITES HAD BEEN COMMANDED BY GOD NOT TO **OWN** ANY PROPERTY. THEY WERE TO BE SUPPORTED BY THE **TITHES** OF GOD'S PEOPLE. THEY SAW HERE THAT THE PEOPLE GOING **BACK** TO **JERUSALEM** WERE VERY **POOR** AND FELT THAT THOSE POOR PEOPLE WOULD BE UNABLE TO PAY ANY TITHES AT ALL, AND EVEN IF THEY DID, IT WOULDN'T AMOUNT TO MUCH! THEREFORE MOST OF THE LEVITES DECIDED TO **STAY BACK** IN **BABYLON**. IT WAS MORE SECURE FOR THEM THERE. **ONLY 74** COULD **TRUST GOD** TO TAKE CARE OF THEM IN **JERUSALEM**! IT IS THE **SAME STORY** TODAY. **PREACHERS** STILL GO WHERE THERE ARE **RICH** PEOPLE WHO CAN GIVE THEM **HANDSOME GIFTS**!



IN CHAPTER 2:59--63, WE READ OF CERTAIN PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT GIVE EVIDENCE BUT CLAIMED TO BE FROM THE **PRIESTLY** TRIBE .SO THEY WERE **EXCLUDED** FROM ALL **PRIESTLY** FUNCTIONS. WE SEE THERE THAT THE LEADERS WERE VERY **STRICT** ABOUT THE **ANCESTRY** OF THOSE WHO WANTED TO **BUILD JERUSALEM**. WE TOO MUST BE **ESPECIALLY CAREFUL** TO DEMAND **HIGH STANDARDS** OF **PURITY** FROM THOSE WHO ARE TO BE **LEADERS** IN THE **CHURCH**. WE MUST BE **CERTAIN** OF THE **SALVATION** EXPERIENCE OF THOSE WHO WANT TO BE A PART OF OUR CHURCH. WE LIVE IN A DAY WHEN **STANDARDS** ARE BEING LOWERED FOR **BAPTISM**. **JOHN THE BAPTIST** DID **NOT** BAPTISE THE **PHARISEES** BECAUSE THEY WERE **UNREPENTANT**. THAT IS A GOOD EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW.



WE READ ABOUT THE BEGINNING OF THE **CONSTRUCTION** OF THE TEMPLE IN CHAPTER 3. THERE WAS A GREAT **SPIRIT OF UNITY** AMONG THE PEOPLE. "THE SONS OF ISRAEL WERE IN THE CITIES. THE PEOPLE GATHERED TOGETHER AS **ONE MAN** IN JERUSALEM" (3:1). THAT WAS LIKE THE 120 WHO WAITED AS ONE MAN IN THE UPPER ROOM FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT. "JESHUA AND HIS BROTHERS THE PRIESTS, AND ZERUBBABEL AND HIS BROTHERS AROSE AND BUILT" (3:2). IT WAS A **BODY-MINISTRY** AND NOT A **ONE MAN SHOW**.



THEY FIRST BUILT THE **ALTAR** AND **OFFERED** BURNT OFFERINGS (3:2). THIS SPEAKS OF THE PRE-EMINENT PLACE BEING GIVEN TO THE MESSAGE OF THE **CROSS**, TO BUILD THE BODY OF CHRIST. AND THEN THEY CELEBRATED THE 'FEAST OF **BOOTHS**' ACCORDING TO THE ORDINANCE. THEY HONOURED GOD'S WORD. THEN THERE WAS A TIME OF **PRAISE** (3:10) WHEN THE BUILDERS LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE. THE PRIESTS STOOD AND WITH TRUMPETS AND CYMBALS BEGAN TO PRAISE THE LORD. THAT'S ANOTHER THING THAT MUST BE FOUND IN JERUSALEM (THE TRUE CHURCH) -- A SPIRIT OF **PRAISE** AND **WORSHIP**. THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY A TIME OF "**WEEPING WITH A LOUD VOICE**" (3:12). **MOURNING** FOR OUR **SINS** IS ALSO A **NECESSARY** PART OF BUILDING THE **CHURCH**.



CHAPTER 4:1: THE NEXT THING THAT HAPPENED WAS **OPPOSITION**. NO GENUINE WORK OF GOD WILL BE WITHOUT ENEMIES. THESE ENEMIES **PRETENDED** THAT THEY TOO WANTED TO HELP IN BUILDING THE TEMPLE. BUT ZERUBBABEL SAID, "YOU HAVE **NOTHING** IN COMMON WITH US IN BUILDING A HOUSE TO OUR **GOD**" (4:3). WE DO **NOT COOPERATE** WITH **UNBELIEVERS** EVEN IF THEY ARE **NOMINAL** CHRISTIANS. THEN THESE PEOPLE GOT UP, JOINED UP WITH THE PEOPLE OF THE LAND, AND (4:4) TRIED TO **FRIGHTEN** THEM. THERE WAS **RELIGIOUS** OPPOSITION, **FEAR** AND **HARASSMENT**. THEY HIRED COUNSELLORS (4:5) TO FRUSTRATE THEIR COUNSEL -- ALL THIS OPPOSITION TO THESE **SIMPLE** PEOPLE WHO JUST WANTED TO **BUILD THE TEMPLE!** WHEN YOU TRY TO BUILD THE HOUSE OF GOD AS THE **BODY OF CHRIST** YOU WILL FACE A LOT OF **OPPOSITION**. BUT YOUR LIFE WILL BE **EXCITING**, BECAUSE **GOD IS SOVEREIGN**. **GOD PERMITS** THIS **OPPOSITION**, AND HE **OVERCOMES** BOTH **KINGS** AND THEIR **DECREES**. THE ENEMIES SENT A **REQUEST** TO THE KING, AND A **DECREE** CAME FROM THE KING DUE TO **FALSE REPORTS**...



IN 4:24, WE SEE THAT EVEN 16 YEARS AFTER RETURNING TO JERUSALEM, THE JEWS HADN'T GOT PAST LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE. THIS WAS BECAUSE THE JEWS HAD A **CASUAL** ATTITUDE TOWARDS BUILDING THE TEMPLE AND WERE ALL **BUSY** BUILDING THEIR **OWN HOMES** (SEE HAGGAI 1:1--4). THE PROPHETS **HAGGAI** AND **ZECHARIAH** THEN **CHALLENGED** THE PEOPLE TO PUT **GOD** FIRST AND TO BUILD HIS TEMPLE (5:1, 2). BUT ONCE AGAIN THE ENEMIES WERE STIRRED UP AND SAID, "WHO TOLD YOU TO BUILD THIS TEMPLE?" AND THEN WE READ THIS WONDERFUL VERSE, "THE **EYE** OF **GOD** WAS UPON THEM, AND THEY COULD **NOT STOP THEM**"



THE NEW KING, **DARIUS** ISSUED ANOTHER DECREE, BECAUSE HE FOUND THE DECREE THAT **CYRUS** HAD MADE. NOTICE THE **SOVEREIGNTY** OF **GOD** IN OPERATION HERE. DARIUS WROTE, "LEAVE THIS WORK ON THE HOUSE OF GOD ALONE. I ISSUE A DECREE THAT YOU MUST DO WHATEVER YOU CAN TO **HELP** BUILD THIS HOUSE. THE **FULL COST** IS TO BE PAID OUT OF THE ROYAL **TREASURY**. WHATEVER IS NEEDED THEY **MUST BE GIVEN**" (6:7, 8). WHO WAS DARIUS' ADVISOR? **DANIEL**. GOD HAS HIS PEOPLE EVERYWHERE TO HELP HIS SERVANTS. SO WE SEE THAT THE OPPOSITION ONLY WORKED FOR **GOOD** HERE, BECAUSE **ULTIMATELY** GOD'S PEOPLE GOT **MORE** THAN WHAT THEY HAD EARLIER.



THE TEMPLE WAS FINALLY COMPLETED THROUGH A **BODY-MINISTRY** -- WITH ALL WORKING TOGETHER. IT HAD STARTED IN A VERY **SMALL** WAY, AS WITH ALL OF GOD'S WORKS. BUT FINALLY THEY COMPLETED A BUILDING THAT GOD WAS **HAPPY** WITH. THIS IS HOW IT IS IN THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH TOO. THEN THEY **CELEBRATED THE PASSOVER** AND **REJOICED** -- "BECAUSE THE LORD HAD CAUSED THEM TO REJOICE, AND HAD TURNED THE HEART OF THE KING TO **ENCOURAGE** THEM IN THE WORK OF THE HOUSE OF GOD" (EZRA 6:22). AFTER THIS, WE HAVE A 60-YEAR GAP BEFORE CHAPTER 7. IT IS DURING THIS PERIOD THAT WE HAVE THE STORY OF **ESTHER**. FROM CHAPTER 7 ONWARDS, WE READ OF THE RETURN OF THE EXILES AND THE REFORMATION UNDER **EZRA**. THE FIRST GROUP OF EXILES HAD **HAGGAI**, **ZECHARIAH**, **ZERUBBABEL** AND **JESHUA** AS THEIR LEADERS. **EZRA** CAME WITH THE **SECOND** GROUP. WHEN ONE SERVANT OF GOD **PASSES ON**, **GOD** RAISES UP **ANOTHER**.



EZRA WAS A **TEACHER** -- A **SCRIBE** WHO WAS **SKILLED** IN THE **LAW OF MOSES**, A MAN WHO HAD **STUDIED** THE **WORD OF GOD** IN DEPTH -- 7:6). WE READ THAT HE HAD SET HIS **HEART** TO **STUDY** GOD'S WORD, TO **PRACTICE** IT AND THEN TO **TEACH** IT (7:10). WHAT AN **EXAMPLE** FOR US TO **FOLLOW**. GOD NEEDS MEN TODAY WHO WILL **STUDY, PRACTISE** AND **TEACH** HIS WORD -- **IN THAT ORDER!** REMEMBER THAT IF YOU WANT GOD TO USE YOU.

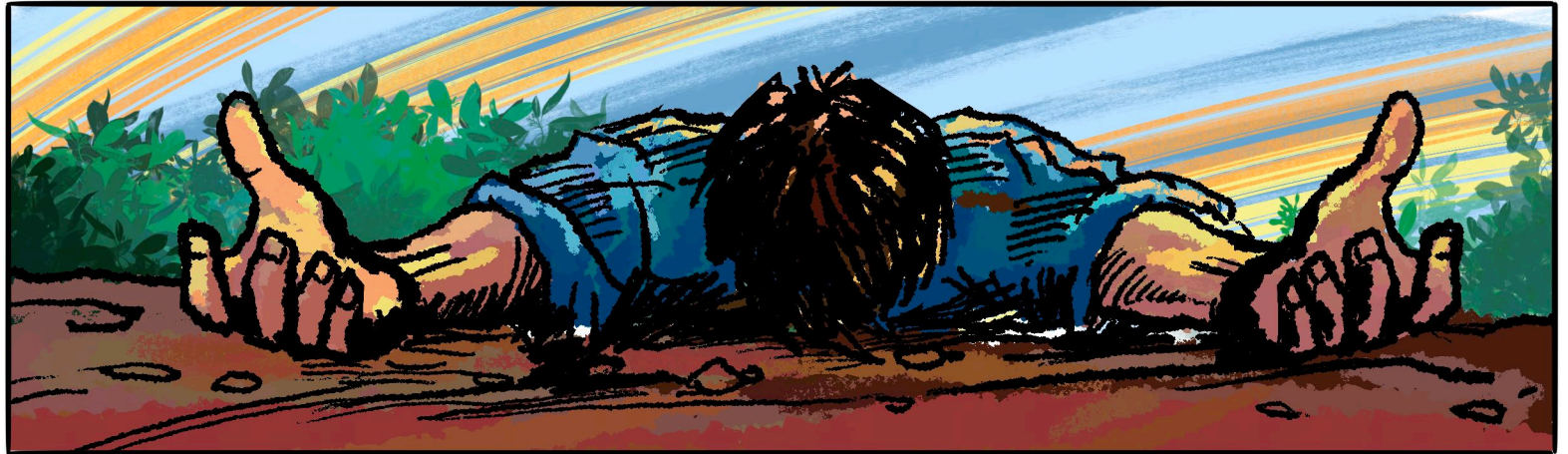
CHAPTER 7:18 INDICATES THE TREMENDOUS **CONFIDENCE** THAT THE KING HAD IN EZRA AS A MAN OF **INTEGRITY** THAT HE COULD TELL HIM: "WHATEVER SEEMS **GOOD** TO YOU AND TO YOUR BROTHERS TO DO WITH THE REST OF THE **SILVER** AND **GOLD**, YOU MAY DO ACCORDING TO THE **WILL** OF YOUR **GOD**". EVERY SERVANT OF GOD SHOULD BE A MAN OF SUCH **FINANCIAL INTEGRITY** THAT **EVEN** THE **HEATHEN** HAVE **CONFIDENCE** IN HIM. BUT ALAS, HOW RARE IT IS TO FIND PEOPLE LIKE THAT TODAY.



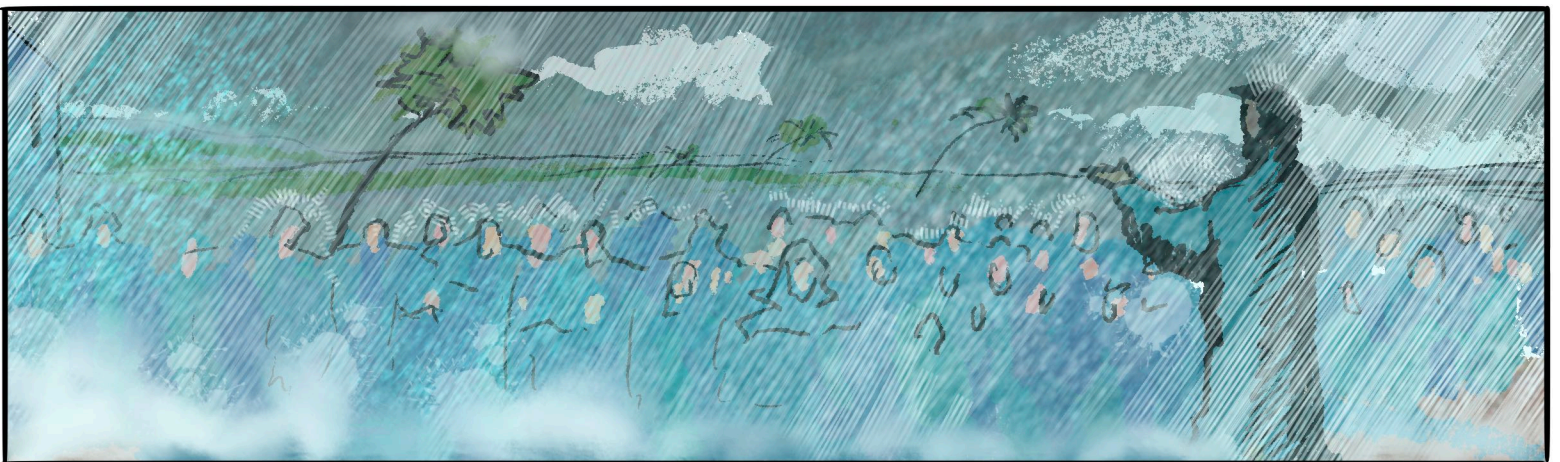
IN CHAPTER 8:1, WE READ OF ANOTHER LIST OF PEOPLE WHO WENT OUT OF BABYLON. THIS TIME WE NOTICE THAT THE NUMBER OF LEVITES HAS **DECREASED** TO JUST 38 (7:18, 19). THE NUMBER OF THOSE WHO CAN **TRUST** GOD AND **LIVE** BY **FAITH** IN HIM KEEPS **DECREASING!** IF EZRA HAD STAYED IN BABYLON, WE WOULD NEVER HAVE HEARD OF HIM. **HEAVEN** RECOGNISES THOSE WHO **LEAVE** BABYLON AND MOVE TO **JERUSALEM**. **SIX** TIMES IN THIS BOOK, WE READ THAT EZRA "WENT UP" FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM. MOVING FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM IS ALWAYS A **STEP UP** AND IS THE RESULT OF "THE **GOOD HAND** OF GOD BEING UPON A MAN" (7:9). THOSE WHO LEFT BABYLON AND WENT TO JERUSALEM BECAME THE **ANCESTORS** OF THE **TWELVE APOSTLES** OF JESUS. OUR CHILDREN AND OUR DESCENDANTS ARE ALL AFFECTED BY THE **DECISIONS** THAT WE TAKE **TODAY**. THE KING OF PERSIA, AT THAT TIME, WAS A **DESCENDANT** OF **ESTHER**. THIS MADE IT **EASIER** FOR THE JEWS. IN CHAPTER 7:12, WE READ AN **INTERESTING** CONTRAST OF TITLES: **ARTAXERXES** KING OF KINGS, AND **EZRA** SCRIBE OF THE **LAW OF GOD** OF **HEAVEN!!** WE ALL KNOW WHICH TITLE IS **GREATER**.



IN CHAPTER 8:21, WE READ THAT EZRA PROCLAIMED A **FAST**. THIS WAS A WAY OF EXPRESSING THEIR **HUMBLE DEPENDENCE** ON GOD FOR A SAFE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM. EZRA WAS ASHAMED TO ASK THE KING FOR SOLDIERS TO PROTECT THEM, AFTER HAVING MADE SUCH A BOLD CONFESSION BEFORE THE KING OF THEIR FAITH IN AN ALMIGHTY GOD: "THE **HAND OF OUR GOD** IS FAVORABLY DISPOSED TO ALL THOSE WHO **SEEK** HIM, BUT HIS **POWER** AND HIS ANGER ARE AGAINST ALL THOSE WHO FORSAKE HIM" (8:22). WE FIND THE PHRASE "THE **GOOD HAND OF OUR GOD** UPON US" APPEARING A **NUMBER** OF TIMES IN EZRA, INDICATING HOW **DEPENDENT** THEY WERE, AS **WEAK** AND **HELPLESS** EXILES ON GOD'S HELP FOR EVERYTHING. THIS IS HOW GOD'S WORK IS DONE TODAY AS WELL. THERE WAS **NO PILLAR OF CLOUD** OR **FIRE** TO LEAD EZRA AND HIS BAND OF EXILES BACK TO JERUSALEM -- ONLY THE **INVISIBLE PRESENCE OF GOD**.



IN CHAPTERS 9 AND 10, WE READ OF EZRA HAVING TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM OF **MIXED MARRIAGES** IN ISRAEL. THE FIRST THING EZRA DID WHEN HE HEARD ABOUT IT WAS TO **MOURN** FOR THE FAILURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE HIMSELF (9:3). HE THEN **GATHERED** SOME OTHERS LIKE HIM WHO **TREMbled** AT GOD'S WORD AND HAD A **PRAYER-MEETING** ALONG WITH THEM, WHERE THEY **CONFESSED** THEIR OWN SINS INSTEAD OF **BLAMING** AND **JUDGING** THE OTHERS (9:5--15). EZRA PRAYED, CONFESSED HIS SINS, **WEPT**, AND **PROSTRATED** HIMSELF (10:1). "HE DID **NOT EAT** BREAD NOR DRINK WATER, FOR HE WAS **MOURNING** OVER THE **UNFAITHFULNESS** OF THE EXILES" (10:6). HE WAS AN **UPRIGHT** MAN AND A SCHOLAR IN GOD'S WORD. YET HE WEPT AND PRAYED BECAUSE HIS FELLOW-JEWS HAD SINNED. THIS IS THE **BEST** WAY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS IN THE **CHURCH** EVEN TODAY. WE MUST HAVE **BOTH** IN THE CHURCH -- **PRAISE** AND **WEEPING** FOR OUR SINS.



EZRA AND HIS FELLOW-JEWS HAD GATHERED TOGETHER BEFORE **GOD** WITH A **SINCERE** CONCERN FOR GOD'S **NAME**. YOU MAY WONDER THEN **WHY** GOD DID NOT **STOP** THE RAIN FOR THEM, FOR IT SAYS THAT IT **RAINED** HEAVILY **ALL** THE TIME THAT THE **PEOPLE** WERE **SITTING** THERE IN THE **OPEN SQUARE** BEFORE THE TEMPLE (10:9). **PERHAPS** IT WAS SO THAT **GOD** COULD **TEST** WHO WERE **WHOLEHEARTED** AND WHO WERE **NOT**! EZRA TAUGHT THE PEOPLE TO MAKE **RESTITUTION**, TO SET THINGS **RIGHT**, AND TO **CONFESS** THEIR **SINS** (10:11). A FEW PEOPLE OPPOSED HIM, BUT THE MAJORITY SUPPORTED HIM. ONCE AGAIN THERE IS A LIST OF THE **COMPROMISERS** (10:18--44). **GOD** KEEPS A **LIST** OF THE **COMPROMISERS** EVEN **TODAY** ...AND THAT'S HOW THE BOOK OF EZRA ENDS.