

CHAPTER 20: Ezra and Nehemiah

The book of Ezra opens with King Cyrus of Persia issuing a decree allowing the Israelite exiles to return home. **In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the Lord's message spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord stirred the mind of King Cyrus of Persia. He disseminated a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, announcing in a written edict the following: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: 'The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has instructed me to build a temple for Him in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone from His people among you (may his God be with him!) may go up to Jerusalem...'"** (Ezra 1:1-3)

This is great news! It was predicted by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 44 and 45). It was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25). It is mentioned at the end of 2 Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36). In fact this edict is quoted there. God moves King Cyrus to allow God's covenant people to finally return home. The long period of exile is over!

You would think that the Israelite people would be thrilled about being released from their captivity and going back home. For years they have been hearing from their prophets all those wonderful promises – the coming of a messianic king; rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem; enjoying God's presence in that sacred place; and God's glorious kingdom. Now all of these amazing promises can be fulfilled! But, sadly, this is not the case. The vast majority of the nearly one million exiles currently living in the country now known as the Persian Empire have NO desire to leave. It's a long, hard and perilous journey back to Jerusalem. For those born during the 70 years of captivity – which is most of them – Persia IS home. They have become "at home" in exile. So the majority of Israelites opt to remain in familiar surroundings.

For those wanting to return, preparations get underway. It takes a year plus to organize the trip. The first group of returning exiles is about 50,000 people total. This is 5% of the Israelite population in exile. They are led by two men, Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar. These two guys are Israelites who were born in captivity and have become the exile's primary leaders. The journey back to the Promised Land is between 800 and 900 miles. It will take them about 4 months to reach Jerusalem. Just a side note here: it will be another 78 years before the second major group of exiles returns under Ezra. Thirteen years after that is when Nehemiah arrives. We'll talk more about them later.

The trip is funded by the Persian government. The primary purpose stated by the king will be to rebuild the temple of the Lord God of Israel in Jerusalem. Prior to leaving they collect large donations to help fund the rebuilding project – silver utensils, gold, equipment, animals and expensive gifts. King Cyrus contributes by bringing out all the vessels of the temple that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken. All of this gets transported with the exiles back to Jerusalem.

We now follow the story of these 50,000 exiles as they return to the Promised Land. **These are the people of the province who were going up, from the captives of the exile whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had forced into exile in Babylon. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own city.** (Ezra 2:1). There is a detailed list given of all the returning exiles and their families. Upon their return they settle down in their home towns. Included with this particular group are the priests and Levites.

A few months later those who have returned assemble together as one group in Jerusalem. The temple rebuilding project gets underway. You can just imagine the condition of the old temple as they begin their work. They rebuild the altar of sacrifice and offer burnt offerings on it to God as the law requires. **From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. However, the Lord's temple was not at that time established.** (Ezra 3:6) There is still so much work yet to be done.

With grants received from Cyrus to fund the temple project they mobilize carpenters, masons and materials to the site. They even ship in cedar trees from Lebanon. The Levites supervise the actual construction. Two years into the temple project the foundation and framework are laid. With the temple beginning to take shape there is cause for great celebration. The people shout and sing praises to God.

But something is just not right... **Many of the priests, the Levites, and the leaders – older people who had seen with their own eyes the former temple while it was still established – were weeping loudly, and many others raised their voices in a joyous shout.** (Ezra 3:12)

The older men know that this new temple will not come anywhere close to matching the glory of Solomon's temple (the one that had been destroyed by the Babylonians). They remember the way it looked, how beautiful and magnificent it was. Not only that but the Ark of the Covenant is gone and God's presence no longer resides in the temple. Recall Ezekiel's vision where he saw the glory of God departing the temple. The nation is now small and weak and is under the control of the Persian government. THIS temple is smaller than and not nearly as beautiful as Solomon's

temple. And so, as they reflect back to the good old days, they are sad. They can't help but weep.

At first the local non-Israelite population is supportive of the temple building project. However, when they offer to help, the Israelite leaders reject it. They tell the locals: **“You have no right to help us build the temple of our God. We will build it ourselves for the Lord God of Israel, just as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, has commanded us.”** (Ezra 4:3) Basically they say, “Go away, we don't want or need your help!”

Their rather harsh response is troubling. It reflects an old mindset. It completely disregards what the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel had prophesied – that the tribes of Israel would all come together with the nations and join together in the worship of the God of Israel when the kingdom comes (Isaiah 44 and 66, Ezekiel 37 and 38). Given the optimism of God's people about this new temple project and the words from their prophets, these leaders did not give an appropriate response. In fact all their words create an atmosphere of hostility. And the outcome is not good.

The shunned non-Israelite locals undertake a propaganda campaign to try and discourage the work on the temple. When this fails they write a letter to their new king, King Artaxerxes. They falsely accuse the Israelites to the king. Here's what they tell him in the letter: **“The Jews who came up to us from you gave gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and odious city. They are completing its walls and repairing its foundations.”** Ezra 4:12. Of course this is completely untrue. The Israelites have only been working on the temple.

In his reply back, the king orders the Israelites to stop the work in Jerusalem. So the project grinds to a halt and the temple remains unfinished.

Fifteen years pass. Enter the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They encourage the Israelites to resume work to complete the temple project.

When work starts back up, the Persian governor of a neighboring province asks the builders, **“Who gave you authority to rebuild this temple and to complete this structure?” But God was watching over the elders of Judah, and they were not stopped until a report could be dispatched to [King] Darius and a letter could be sent back concerning this.** (Ezra 5:3, 5)

In response the Israelite leaders cite the original decree by King Cyrus ordering the rebuilding of the temple. The governor writes to King Darius who is the new king of Persia requesting that King Darius check this out. Sure enough, the decree by Cyrus is confirmed. King Darius orders that all expenses relating to the temple project be paid from the royal treasury.

Four years later the work on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem is finally complete. Twenty years after work began, the temple is dedicated. There is great joy and the Passover is celebrated.

[The Passover] was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6:21) Did you catch that? Non-Israelite followers of God from the local population join together with their Israelite neighbors to celebrate the Passover! This is truly remarkable.

Between Ezra Chapter 6 and 7 we fast forward 58 years. Several generations have come and gone. The enthusiasm that followed the new temple's completion has faded into a distant memory. The spiritual condition of the people has slowly deteriorated. The teachings of God's law are largely ignored. Temple worship has become routine. At this point Ezra, an Israelite priest, "**a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses,**" (Ezra 7:6) arrives on the scene. Accompanying him is a second group of returning exiles, around 7,000 people. These include some of Israel's leading men and priests, Levites, and temple servants. Ezra has been sent on official business by the Persian government. He brings with him a large contribution of gold and silver vessels for the temple. His orders from the king are to appoint judges and to establish law and order. Frankly, Ezra comes with a bit of a heavy hand. He is there to make sure that the Israelite people are following not only the Persian law but also the Law of God.

Ezra leads the nation in much-needed spiritual reform. This includes dealing with the sins of the people. He is made aware that many of the returning exiles, including the priests and Levites, have intermarried with non-Israelites. This is a violation of God's law (Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7). Ezra tears his clothes as a public display of guilt and shame. He falls to his knees and prays on behalf of God's people. He confesses their sin and pleads to God for mercy. **While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself to the ground before the temple of God, a very large crowd – men, women, and children alike – gathered around him. The people wept loudly.** (Ezra 10:1)

Ezra calls for national assembly of the people in Jerusalem. The people gather together trembling in the pouring rain. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, **"You have behaved in an unfaithful manner by taking foreign wives! This has contributed to the guilt of Israel. Now give praise to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will. Separate yourselves from the local residents and from these foreign wives."** (Ezra 10:10-11)

Bible scholars debate whether Ezra's actions here are justified. Although Ezra is a godly man, there is no indication that God ever told Ezra to call for mass divorce. In fact, his decree appears to have come from a suggestion by the leaders. His assumption seems to be that all the non-Israelite wives of the returning exiles are pagan unbelievers. They are never given an opportunity to turn and follow God and, thus, save their marriages. And there is no regard for the welfare of the children produced from these marriages. As it turns out only a portion of the exiles actually comply with Ezra's decree.

The return of God's people back home from exile was supposed to be a happier and more joyful time. So far it appears to be anything but that. The return to the land to this point has been filled with heartache and disappointment. The religious reforms under Ezra, however well-meaning, have become a heavy burden on the people.

This brings us to the book of Nehemiah which takes place about 10 years after the book of Ezra. This man Nehemiah is an Israelite official serving in the Persian government. He serves as the cupbearer for the king. Nehemiah lives in the city of Susa which is where the royal palace is located. Nehemiah is distraught as he gets news about the ruined condition of Jerusalem's walls. He pours out his heart fervently to the Lord about the situation.

King Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah is depressed. When he talks to Nehemiah and discovers the reason for this, the king grants him permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. The king gives Nehemiah letters from him to present to the officials in Jerusalem. This will inform them of Nehemiah's mission. The king also provides Nehemiah with an armed escort for his journey.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem he surveys the city at night. This is done so as not to draw any attention. After he completes his survey he reveals his royal commission to rebuild the city's walls. The response he receives is not at all surprising. The Israelites are very enthusiastic as you might expect them to be. However, the pagan officials led by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are NOT. They ridicule the idea of rebuilding the walls and do everything they can to discourage Nehemiah. They make the ridiculous claim that rebuilding Jerusalem's walls is catamount to rebellion against Persia. We know this is not true.

Nehemiah responds to them. He says, **"The God of heaven will prosper us. We His servants will start the rebuilding. But you have no just or ancient right in Jerusalem."** (Nehemiah 2:20) He pretty much tells it like it is. Of course his response provokes the officials.

Undeterred by the opposition that he is receiving, Nehemiah carries out his vision for the city with integrity and courage. He organizes the work. He assigns the various sections of the wall to certain families and teaches the different groups how to work together. Chapter 3 gives a detailed list of all the builders. As you can see it is a massive team effort with everyone pitching in.

As progress continues to be made on the walls Sanballat becomes angry. He and Tobiah step up a rumor and ridicule campaign. When their strategy fails, they plot an armed attack. Nehemiah hears about this and he organizes a defense strategy. Half the workers will be placed on guard duty while the other half will continue working on the wall. The Israelites proceed with only minor interruptions.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem continue their efforts to derail the rebuilding project. They try to get Nehemiah sidetracked. They falsely accuse and slander Nehemiah. They try all kinds of treachery. Of course, none of it works. **So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul in just fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard and all the nations who were around us saw this, they were greatly disheartened. They knew that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.** (Nehemiah 6:15-16)

With the walls rebuilt the final step is to install doors at the city's gates. This is done and Nehemiah's mission is accomplished!

While many people know the story of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls, the last part of the book is not nearly as familiar. So here is what happens. Less than a month after the rebuilding of the walls is complete... **All the people gathered together in the plaza which was in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly which included men and women and all those who were able to understand what they heard. So he read it before the plaza in front of the Water Gate from dawn till noon before those men and women and those children who could understand. All the people were eager to hear the book of the law.** (Nehemiah 8:1-3)

The people spend time studying the Law. They fast, confess their sins and worship God. Ezra acknowledges God's majesty and recalls important events in Israel's history. He closes with a prayer of a national confession of sin. The people make a binding commitment to continue to observe God's law. Basically revival breaks out.

Nehemiah repopulates Jerusalem. He registers and organizes the priests and Levites. There is a great dedication of the city walls. It is accompanied by music and celebration. The people offer thanks to God. This is a positive time of spiritual renewal for God's people. They are back in their homeland, safe and secure in a walled

Jerusalem, worshiping God in the temple. This happy occasion is the last time that Ezra's name is mentioned. He dies shortly afterward and Eliashib becomes the priest.

Some years later Nehemiah travels to Persia on official business. While he's away the people revert to their old ways. When Nehemiah returns many months later he observes that the people are not doing what is right. The temple is being neglected. It is staffed by unqualified people. People are working on the Sabbath. Once again he finds out that Israelites are marrying foreign women. Nehemiah is quite upset by what he sees. He rebukes the people harshly for their failure to keep God's law. His final words are a prayer: **"Please remember me for good, O my God."** (Nehemiah 13:31). You can just sense Nehemiah's frustration. And this is how the book ends.

So what are we to make of all this? The book of Ezra began on a high note with Cyrus' decree releasing the Israelites to return home. There was so much hope that the prophetic promises about a messianic king, the temple, and the kingdom of God would be fulfilled soon. Some 90 years later NONE of those promises have come to pass. Even though the Israelites are back in their land, their spiritual condition appears to be unchanged. In many ways, except for a lack of idolatry, they are not that much different than they were before the exile. While Ezra and Nehemiah have done everything they can possibly do, their efforts appear to have fallen way short.

This underscores a key truth that the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed years before...

God speaking through Jeremiah said this: **"But I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land. I will put My law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be My people."** (Jeremiah 31:33)

Then through Ezekiel God made this statement: **"I will give them one heart and I will put a new spirit within them; I will remove the hearts of stone from their bodies and I will give them tender hearts, so that they may follow My statutes and observe My regulations and carry them out. Then they will be My people, and I will be their God."** (Ezekiel 11:19-20)

The truth is that if God's people are ever going to be able to love and obey God as they should, they will need to have a complete transformation of their hearts. How will that happen? Well, God has a plan to accomplish this and He will soon unfold it.