

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 1
A Brief Survey Of Old Testament History

To understand the significance of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, a quick survey of Israel's history is necessary.

A PROMISE TO A SINGLE MAN (GENESIS 11-25)

Abraham is called the father of our faith (**Romans 4:16**). The history of Israel begins with him. Abraham's father, Terah, was the descendant of Noah's son Shem. It appears that Jehovah God may have first appeared unto Terah to go into Canaan, but he only made it as far as Haran (**Genesis 11:31**).

The Bible then says that the LORD "**had spoken unto Abram to depart**" from all that he knew and head for a new land. Abram began to obey at the age of 75 (**Genesis 12:1-4**). God made a covenant with a man so that He might bless all of mankind.

EGYPTIAN CAPTIVITY (430 YEARS)

The book of Genesis ends with Joseph prophesying that God would eventually visit Israel in the land of Egypt and deliver them into the land promised to their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**Genesis 50:24**). The extended family of Jacob (now also called Israel) put down roots and flourished in Egypt until "**the land was filled of them**" (**Exodus 1:7**).

There arose a king that did not know Joseph, and out of fear he moved politically against the Israelites and made a second class out of them, eventually turning them into slaves. The more Egypt oppressed them, the more they flourished. Israel spent a total of 430 years in Egypt (**Exodus 12:41**), 400 years of it being in affliction (**Genesis 15:13**). Eventually, their oppression caused them to cry aloud enough unto God for God to deliver them. God sent a man named Moses to deliver them.

THE EXODUS AND THE LAW

Israel had not known the God of their fathers. God did not deliver Israel because they were afflicted. God did not deliver them because they cried for help. God delivered them because they cried for help and He remembered His covenant with their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**Exodus 2:23-25**). By the hand of God, Moses delivered Israel from the oppression of Pharaoh. God judged Egypt just as He said He would (**Genesis 15:14**).

The wrath of God was unleashed on a nation for the first time and the Passover was instituted. Israel spoiled the riches of Egypt and walked on dry ground through the Red Sea. The most powerful military in the world was drowned in the sea behind them. Moses led Israel to Mt. Horeb to meet the God of their fathers and they were terrified. Through Moses, God instituted the rules and regulations by which they were to both behave in life and behave toward God. This is called the Law. There were two parts to the Law: the ceremonial law and the moral law.

40 YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS

Only a few weeks after the Red Sea, Israel came to the border of their promised land—Canaan. Twelve spies were sent in to both prove the land and prove the hearts of the fledgling nation and their fledgling walk with Jehovah God. They failed the test. Ten spies brought back an evil report and provoked the whole of the nation to fear and rebellion. Only two spies had walked by faith and brought back the report of the LORD—Joshua and Caleb.

This rebellion provoked God to anger. As punishment for their excuses and disobedience, He condemned the entire nation to walk in circles until everyone over the age of 20 had died. This is known as the 40 years in the wilderness. However, God in His mercy still provided for His people. He provided provision and protection. Their shoes never wore out; they had fresh manna and quail every day; they had fire by night and a cloud by day. They experienced the supernatural provision of God without ever fulfilling their destiny.

God had delivered Israel from Egypt, but He was unable to remove Egypt from Israel. He had to wait for a younger generation that did not remember Egypt fondly enough to desire it anymore.

A SEASON OF JUDGES (351 YEARS)

After Moses died, Joshua took over. Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land and became their first judge as a fledgling nation while they slowly occupied Canaan. This began a season of leadership by many judges, or military governors. This season lasted about 351 years and included such famous judges as Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. These leaders governed the tribes and fought off oppressive enemies.

The 15 judges are: Joshua (28 years), Othniel (40 years), Ehud (80 years), Shamgar (unknown), Deborah (40 years), Gideon (40 years), Tola (23 years), Jair (22 years), Jephthah (6 years), Ibzan (7 years), Elon (10 years), Abdon (8 years), Samson (20 years), Eli (40 years), and Samuel (13 years as lone judge).

THE TIME OF THE KINGS (464 YEARS)

Because of the carnality of the prophet Samuel's two sons (**1 Samuel 8:1-5**) and the influence of the surrounding heathen countries, Israel desired a king. Samuel resisted but the LORD permitted Israel to have a king stating, **"they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them"** (**1 Samuel 8:7b**). Saul became their first king and reigned for 40 years before dying in battle. David replaced him and ruled for 40 years. Solomon was king after his father, David, and reigned for 40 years also.

Solomon is most known for his wisdom and for building the Temple. However, his rebellion led him to love many strange women. In his old age they turned his heart away from the LORD, and he worshipped many strange gods. God judged Solomon and stripped the kingdom from him, yet for the sake of David, the LORD left two tribes with Solomon's bloodline. This resulted in a divided kingdom.

THE DIVIDED KINGDOM (390 YEARS)

Beginning in 928 B.C., Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah and the Northern Kingdom was referred to as Israel. Rehoboam, Solomon's son,

was king over Judah. Jeroboam was king over Israel. Israel was comprised of ten tribes while Judah had only two: Judah and Benjamin. The relationship between the two was tumultuous and bloody at times.

After the reign of Solomon, Israel and Judah both had 20 kings. Every Northern king led Israel deeper into idolatry. Only Judah had a few kings that did “that which was right in the eyes of God.” These goodly kings included: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, and Josiah.

From 723 B.C., after 200 years of idolatry, God brought upon Israel severe judgment. God used Assyria to enslave Israel and its 10 tribes. It is estimated that 200,000 of Israel’s chief citizens were marched off to Assyria. While in Assyria these Israelites intermarried, effectively dissolving their lineage and bloodline, and never returned to Israel. At the same time the Assyrians relocated foreigners into Israel to intermarry with the weakest and poorest Israelites left behind. The mixed offspring became known as the Samaritans.

Beginning in 607 B.C., Judah experienced her own judgment. Three waves of Babylonian conquests, led by a young king named Nebuchadnezzar, left Judah ransacked, the city of Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple in ruins, and Judah 50,000 people less inhabited. Unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians never bothered to recolonize Judah. They left it a desolate abode for 70 years so the land could enjoy her Sabbaths (**2 Chronicles 36:21**).

- **Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. ¹⁵And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes (*continually and carefully*), and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: ¹⁶But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy. 2 Chronicles 36:14-16**

THE CAPTIVITY

The Jews in Babylon were treated much differently than their brothers in Assyria. In Babylon, they were permitted to own property, hold office, and worship their God. Most did not intermarry. After 70 years of flourishing in Babylon, when given the chance to return home to Jerusalem, many chose to stay and enjoy the comforts of their newfound life.

J. B. Tidwell summarizes the benefits of the captivity for the Jewish people (*Introducing the Old Testament*, p. 178).

- The Jews became a separate people who did not want to become like their neighbors ever again. The Pharisees came from this era of Jewish history.
- They became purely monotheistic, giving up idolatry completely.
- They developed theological literature and renewed interest in the Law of Moses.
- They repented of their sins against Yahweh.
- The synagogues were established as a place of worship centered on God’s Word, prayer, praise, and study.
- Judaism became personal rather than a formal ritualism.



- They became a missionary people to all the nations.
- During this time God placed a longing for the coming of the Messiah in their hearts. The Pharisees were especially instrumental in keeping the Messianic hope before the eyes of the people.

In 539 B.C., Babylon fell to Persia. One year later, in 538 B.C., the Persian king, Cyrus, decreed the Jews were free to return to their home, Jerusalem. Just as the Jews were carried away from Judah in three waves, they also returned in three waves:

- Zerubbabel (537 B.C.) returned with exiles to rebuild the temple.
- Ezra (458 B.C.) returned with exiles to start revival and jumpstart the priesthood and worship.
- Nehemiah (444 B.C.) returned with exiles to rebuild the wall and protect the city.

And thus, we conclude a brief survey of Israel's history.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

A Study Of Postexilic Israel

Lesson 2

Persian History, The Samaritans, And Syncretism

The total span of the postexilic revival was approximately 107 years, from 538 B.C. until about 430 B.C. This revival included three major waves:

1. Zerubbabel's remnant and Second Temple construction.
2. Ezra's remnant and spiritual reforms.
3. Nehemiah's remnant and wall construction.

This period of time also witnessed the rise and fall of six Persian kings:

1. Cyrus (539-530 B.C.)—The first king to release the Jews (**Ezra 1:1-11**).
2. Cambyses (530-522 B.C.)—Son of Cyrus. Remembered for conquering Egypt. Not mentioned by name in the Bible but alluded to in **Ezra 4:5**.
3. Pseudo-Smerdis-Gaumata (522 B.C.)—An impostor who took the throne from Cambyses while he was in Egypt. Only ruled for seven months. Not mentioned by name in the Bible but alluded to in **Ezra 4:5**.
4. Darius I-Hystaspis (522-486 B.C.)—Seized the throne from Smerdis. He searched out Cyrus' initial decree and re-enforced it. Darius recommissioned the building of the second temple (**Ezra 5:3-6:15**).
5. Xerxes I-Ahasuerus (486 B.C.-465 B.C.)—This was the husband of Esther, known for the battle of Thermopylae. A letter of accusation against the Jews was written to Ahasuerus by the Samaritans in order to hinder their work.
6. Artaxerxes I-Longimanus (465 B.C.-424 B.C.)—He ordered any work on the city of Jerusalem and its wall to be halted (**Ezra 4:7-23**) but then granted Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem and complete the wall (**Nehemiah 2:1-11**).

THE SOURCE OF OPPOSITION

Anytime God begins to move, there is always going to be opposition. As Zerubbabel and the children of captivity returned to Jerusalem to fulfill many Bible prophecies, their enemies arose to thwart them. The devil will always oppose the servants of God in any way possible.

The Jews had to endure opposition, hostility, and slander for six kings. The Jews never had trouble from the Persian kings 900 miles away. Almost all of their problems came from those closest to them—the Samaritans. It is important to have an understanding of the Samaritans and their history.

THE SAMARITANS

Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom during the time of Israel's divided kingdoms (Jerusalem was the Southern Kingdom's capital). The Northern Kingdom experienced several rounds of deportations by several Assyrian kings: Pul, Tilgath-pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sargon II (**1 Chronicles 5:26; 2 Kings 15:29, 17:3-6, 18:9-12**). The tribes that were carried away into Assyria came to be known as the Ten Lost Tribes.

Sargon and Asnappar (Ashurbanipal) repopulated Israel with foreigners (2 Kings 17:24). These foreigners intermarried with the remaining population of Israel, producing a group of people known later as Samaritans. They mixed the worship of Jehovah with the worship of the gods of their home countries.

- **And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them. ²⁶Wherefore they spake to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast removed, and placed in the cities of Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land: therefore he hath sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the manner of the God of the land. ²⁷Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, Carry thither one of the priests whom ye brought from thence; and let them go and dwell there, and teach them the manner of the God of the land . . . ²⁹Howbeit every nation made gods of their own, . . . ³³They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away thence. ³⁴Unto this day they do after the former manners: . . . 2 Kings 17:25-34a**

This perversion is called *syncretism*.

Syncretism: *the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in religion, cultures, or philosophies. Compromise.*

Syncretism is the very first concern God had for Israel when they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Scores of verses forbid God's people from worshipping other gods.

- **And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean; ¹¹And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses. Leviticus 10:10-11**

In terms of the true biblical doctrines delivered by the God of Israel, syncretism can be thought of as a mixing of truth with paganism, coupled together with the false sense of security that, in the minds of many Christians, sounds something like this:

"Because I have some truth in my doctrine, I am protected and immune from the harm that is normally produced by the lies, sin, and paganism I still retain."

SAMARITAN SYNCRETISM

Samaritans asserted their worship to be the true religion of the ancient Israelites prior to the Babylonian Exile, preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel, as opposed to Judaism, which they affirmed was related, but an altered and amended religion, brought back by those returning from the Babylonian Exile.

The Samaritans desired to be part of God's revival but on their terms and with their underlying agendas. Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah resisted them. This holy act of uncompromised resistance fostered hostility between the two nations for hundreds of years to come. Because they were excluded from participating in the reconstruction of the Second Temple, Jerusalem, and the wall, they built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria about 50 years after

Zerubbabel's Temple. They also developed their own form of worship, adopting their own Pentateuch, or Samaritan Torah, that contained many significant differences from the Jewish Masoretic texts. They believed Mt. Gerizim was *the* holy mountain and *the* location of Solomon's Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed.

Jesus Christ addressed the validity of the Samaritan religion in **John 4:**

- **And he must needs go through Samaria. ⁵Then cometh he to a city of Samaria, which is called Sychar (*Shechem*), near to the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph . . . ⁹How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans . . . ²⁰Our fathers worshipped in this mountain [Mt. Gerizim]; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, . . . ²²Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. John 4:5, 9, 20, 22**

It is obvious Jesus Christ did not give any weight to what is called Samaritanism—the religious beliefs of the Samaritans. He did not cast this woman off as hopeless, but rather, prepared her for the new and living way He was bringing.

MODERN SYNCRETISM: STILL ANTI-REVIVAL

This double-minded, mixed religiosity was at the heart of the opposition to Israel's postexilic revival. We can see this heart and attitude of compromise and comfort opposing God's current revivals as well. When God says "move," modern Christians have many pagan reasons why they can't and yet still believe they are servants of the true God. Today we are witnessing many churches combine the holy with the profane, even as Samaria did. Many self-professing Christians are more secular than they are Christian and still profess they are "right with God." They are looking for a church that suits them.

- **Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. James 4:8**
- **Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, ¹⁸And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. 2 Corinthians 6:17-18**
- **O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? Galatians 3:1**
- **But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, . . . ¹⁵So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Revelation 2:14a, 15**

Syncretism is, without a doubt, one of the greatest things we are fighting against in these last times!

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 3
Zerubbabel And The Second Temple

In the year 560 B.C., Cyrus II came to the throne of Persia. In 549 B.C. Cyrus conquered the Medes, producing the Medo-Persian Empire. Ten years later, in 539 B.C., he conquered Babylon to expand the Medo-Persian Empire. His empire now included the captive Jews. In the same year, after nearly 70 years of Jewish captivity, Cyrus, King of Persia, made a proclamation permitting the exiled Jews to return home and rebuild the temple at Jerusalem (**Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-13**).

WHO WAS ZERUBBABEL?

- Zerubbabel (*seed of Babylon*), also known by his Persian name Sheshbazzar—*worshiper of fire* (**Ezra 5:16**).
- He was a descendant of King David, and thus, the great grandfather of Jesus Christ. Matthew and Luke's Gospels include him in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (**Matthew 1:12-13; Luke 3:27**).
- He was made the governor of Judah under King Cyrus in 538 B.C. (**Ezra 1:8; Haggai 1:14, 2:2**).
- He was commissioned and commanded by Cyrus to lead a contingency of Jews back to Jerusalem to build the LORD God a new temple, also called the Second Temple. This was the beginning of the fulfillment of Jeremiah and Isaiah's prophecies about Israel's restoration (**Isaiah 44:26-28; Jeremiah 29:10-14**).

THE COMMISSION

When the LORD wants something done, He always commissions a leader to implement the plan. Whether it was Moses for the Exodus, Joshua to take the Promised Land, or David to build the Temple, God always begins with a commission. Zerubbabel's Temple was no different. God anointed Cyrus, the Persian King, to build His temple. This was prophesied 150 years before Cyrus was even born and 180 years before he fulfilled the prophecies.

- **That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof: ²⁷That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: ²⁸That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.** **Isaiah 44:26-28**

Furthermore, this was prophesied 80 years before the Jews were ever taken into exile. This prophecy would have made absolutely no sense to the Jews of Isaiah's day. Isaiah further prophesied about this Gentile king who would not be born for another 150 years:

- **Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to**

open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; ...¹³I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts.
Isaiah 45:1, 13

God declared that Cyrus would be His anointed leader and His pastor. It was foretold that Cyrus would release the LORD's captives for no personal gain or ransom. Jewish history records that certain Jews (perhaps even Daniel) brought to King Cyrus the prophecies of Isaiah and helped him to discover his role in history. The book of Ezra confirms his recognition of God's hand upon him:

- **Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, the LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.**
Ezra 1:2

This decree quotes the prophecies from both **Isaiah 44:28** and **45:1**. **Ezra 1:3** quotes **Isaiah 45:13**.

- **Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.**
Ezra 1:3

God went to great lengths to commission a national revival. The LORD continues to go to great lengths to move among us today.

THE WILLING SERVANTS

When the LORD commissions a work, He also supernaturally draws servants to the work. Every revival requires help. Zerubbabel had willing help.

- **Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.**
Ezra 1:5
- **The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,⁶⁵ Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.**

Ezra 2:64-65

Though the returning congregation was nearly 50,000 Jews, this was not the entire population of exiled Jews under Cyrus' rule. Here, thousands of Jews chose not to be a part of the revival of God they claimed to be eagerly awaiting. Rather, they stayed in the comfort of slavery and exile. Things haven't changed much today.

THE OPPOSITION

The devil will always oppose whatever God is doing. The devil seems to be able to always produce a two-front attack: the opposition within and the opposition without. Zerubbabel had opposition from within and without: the ancient men and the adversaries.

The Ancient Men Within

- **And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, . . . ¹²many of the priests and Levites and chief of their fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: ¹³So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: Ezra 3:10a, 12-13a**

The old-timers who remembered the grandness of Solomon's Temple wept when they saw the mere footprint of the reduced Second Temple. Then they realized that the new temple would never match the grandeur of Solomon's Temple and were bitter at the second-hand temple (**Haggai 2:3**). Maybe they forgot they were to blame for the destruction of the first temple (**Jeremiah 23:11**). Anytime God moves, it is often the old-timers who want to be critical and compare it to the former move of God.

The Adversaries Without

- **Then they [Samaritans] came to Zerubbabel, and the heads of the fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here. ³But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers' houses of Israel said to them, "You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." Ezra 4:2-3 NKJV**

The Samaritans were a race of mixed-blooded people who were part Israelite, part Gentile. They worshipped a myriad of gods along with Jehovah. These were the people who wanted to help Zerubbabel build a holy temple. He forbade them. They got mad and turned against him. Even today, the heathen and the backslidden Christian think they have a right to help the Church do what it is called to do.

- **Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, ⁵and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. Ezra 4:4-5 NKJV**

Opposition always looks the same: discouragement, harassment, wicked counsel, and frustration. The Jews endured all of these attacks and continued to build for 16 years. A letter of slander was even written when a new king, Darius, rose to power (**Ezra 5:6**). These five flavors of opposition (discouragement, harassment, wicked counsel, frustration, and slander) have always been the enemy's tactics. After 16 years of construction, the adversaries succeeded in stopping the work on the Second Temple.

After nearly 15 years of opposition, the discouragement and harassment succeeded in halting Zerubbabel's work on the Second Temple for about two years.

- **Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.** Ezra 4:24

God would have to encourage his servants to continue the ordained work.

SUPERNATURAL ENCOURAGEMENT

It seems as though every move of God must be prodded along. God uses men, and men are susceptible to discouragement. Discouragement has been called "the preacher's plague." Zerubbabel was no different. When he was discouraged, the LORD raised up two prophets to encourage him: Haggai and Zechariah.

- **And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.** Ezra 6:14a

Haggai's Prophecy

- **"Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? ⁴Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,' says the LORD; 'and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,' says the LORD, 'and work; for I am with you,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁵'According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!' ⁶"For thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; ⁷and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁸"The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,' says the LORD of hosts. ⁹'The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts."**

Haggai 2:3-9 NKJV

Zechariah's Prophecy

- **The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it; and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto you. ¹⁰For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth.** Zechariah 4:9-10

After 21 years of construction and opposition, Zerubbabel and a faithful remnant group of believers completed the Second Temple in 516 B.C.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 4
The Need For Ezra's Help

Every revival requires sound doctrine and teaching to maintain momentum and prevent perversion and goofiness from entering in. Israel's postexilic revival was no different. Approximately 58 years after the Second Temple was completed, God raised up a leader to bring about spiritual reforms in Israel. His name was Ezra.

JERUSALEM BETWEEN ZERUBBABEL AND EZRA

During the 58 years between the completion of the Second Temple and the ministry of Ezra, life in Judah continued to flourish. There are three critical things to observe during this time period: 1) the Jews had unprecedented favor with the Persian kings, 2) they continued to rebuild the city and the walls, and 3) they had constant opposition from the Samaritans and Assyrian colonists. The famous walls of Jerusalem were already under construction during the Second Temple as is evident from the opposition waged against Zerubbabel:

- **At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them [Zerubbabel and the elders], Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?** **Ezra 5:3**

A letter was written to King Darius by the regional governor Tatnai questioning the Jews' authority to continue with their construction project (**Ezra 5:6-17**). This means the walls were already being rebuilt as early as 520 B.C., or about 75 years before Nehemiah completed the work. The work of rebuilding the city and the walls continued after Zerubbabel, as is evident from the opposition they received as recorded in Ezra.

ROYAL PERSIAN SUPPORT, LOCAL OPPOSITION

The Jews had support from the kings, though the local heathen constantly harassed them. Remember the order of the Persian kings:

- Cyrus (539-530 B.C.)—Pro-Israel (**Ezra 1:1-11**).
- Cambyses (530-522 B.C.)—Son of Cyrus. No record of opposition from Cambyses.
- Pseudo-Smerdis-Gaumata (522 B.C.)—No record of opposition from Smerdis.
- Darius I-Hystaspis (522-486 B.C.)— Pro-Israel (**Ezra 5:3-6:15**).
- Xerxes I-Ahasuerus (486 B.C.-465 B.C.)—Pro-Israel.
- Artaxerxes I-Longimanus (465 B.C.-424 B.C.)—He ordered any work on the city of Jerusalem and its wall to be halted (**Ezra 4:7-23**) but then granted Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem and complete the wall (**Nehemiah 2:1-11**).

Opposition Under King Darius

Letters were written to King Darius in hopes of hindering the Jews. However, King Darius issued a decree in **Ezra 6:6-12** that shut down all opposition to the Jewish revival and related

construction projects for the entirety of his reign. Part of King Darius' decree included a curse upon anyone that opposed the Jews:

- **Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. ¹²And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.**

Ezra 6:11-12

There is no record that the Samaritans or regional governors moved against Israel the rest of King Darius' reign. They would have to wait for a new king.

Opposition Under King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I)

Eventually, Darius was replaced by King Ahasuerus (486 B.C.). The Samaritans wasted no time in attacking the Jews.

- **And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.**

Ezra 4:6

For all the hasty political maneuvering on the part of the Samaritans, there is no Bible record that King Ahasuerus ever did anything about this accusation, nor is there any record of him having any dealing with the Jews in Jerusalem. Construction of the wall and city would have been able to continue during the 21-year reign of King Ahasuerus.

Opposition Under King Artaxerxes I-Longinamus

Great opposition was met when Artaxerxes I became king. A great confederacy of Assyrian colonists led by their politicians wrote another letter. Notice what their letter indicated:

- **Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations. ¹³Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings.**

Ezra 4:12-13

It is apparent from this letter of slander that the Jews were, in fact, still building the city and the walls all through the previous king's reign and into Artaxerxes I's reign. Unlike his predecessor, Artaxerxes I replied to this letter:

- **Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. ²²Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?**

Ezra 4:21-22

King Artaxerxes I issued a decree empowering the regional governor and *his fellow associates performing the same function* to halt the construction project. Rehum and his associates took the decree to heart and acted with extreme prejudice against Jerusalem.

- **Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force (*power*) and power (*army*).** Ezra 4:23

The anti-God (antichrist) zeal was now authorized to do what it had attempted to do for the past two kings—destroy Jerusalem again. This forceful attack left the now-50-year-old Second Temple alone. The city and walls, however, were devastated. Something had gone horribly awry in Jerusalem to halt this 70-year-old revival. The Jews had somehow lost favor with a Persian king for the first time in nearly 80 years.

WHO WAS EZRA?

- **Ezra (*help*)** was from the tribe of Levi, and a direct descendant of the chief priest, Aaron (**Ezra 7:1-6**).
- The Bible describes him as “**a ready (*well-versed*) scribe in the law of Moses.**”
- He was, therefore, a scribe and a priest.

Ezra sought counsel with King Artaxerxes I and made a request of him.

- **This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.** Ezra 7:6

We can see what Ezra's requests were by the decree that Artaxerxes I issued for him. The chief of these was to “**enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem.**”

- **Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;** Ezra 7:14

Why would Ezra want to inquire of Judah and Jerusalem? To see what Israel had done to lose favor with the first king in nearly 80 years. He wanted to investigate his people. Ezra was a scribe and priest. If there was sin, he could bring about spiritual reforms to help his people. Upon his arrival to Jerusalem, he found syncretism flourishing among the Jews.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 5
Ezra And His Commission

As previously covered, after nearly 80 years of Persian kings and after 70 years of a reconstruction revival in Jerusalem, the Jews had lost favor with the king. For the first time since King Cyrus, a king was ordering the Jews to stop construction on Jerusalem. Ezra inquired of this same king, Artaxerxes I, if he might be permitted to travel to Jerusalem to make inquiry of the status of the people according to the law of God.

- **Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;** **Ezra 7:14**

The postexilic revival had faltered halfway to completion and would need a hand to guide it along. Ezra wanted to travel to Jerusalem to investigate where the people were failing God. He knew that if the prophecies of God were not coming to pass as they once were, it would not be because of God's inability to perform, but rather man's unwillingness to do the Word.

EZRA'S QUALIFICATIONS

It appears God chose Ezra out of all the available priests because of his heart.

- **For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.** **Ezra 7:10**

His qualification was threefold:

1. He prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD.
2. He prepared his heart to do the law of the LORD.
3. He prepared his heart to teach the law of the LORD.

He had prepared his heart. He saw the need in Israel, and he prepared his heart to be the one God would use. He prepared his heart to "**teach in Israel**" the statutes and judgments. He didn't prepare his heart to stay in Persia. He prepared his heart to go.

THE COMMISSION

Ezra's commission to return to Jerusalem came from King Artaxerxes I. Ezra approached King Artaxerxes I concerning his trip to Jerusalem. This is different from Zerubbabel's journey, which was initiated by King Cyrus.

- **This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.** **Ezra 7:6**

- . . . **to enquire** concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand; ¹⁵And **to carry** the silver and gold, . . . ²³**Whatsoever** is commanded by the God of heaven, **let it be diligently done for the house** of the God of heaven: . . . ²⁵And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, **set magistrates and judges**, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and **teach ye them that know them not**. ²⁶And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, **let judgment be executed speedily upon him**, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment. Ezra 7:14b-15a, 23, 25-26

Ezra's commission was not a construction project. His commission was based on his own request from the king. His commission was sixfold:

1. To inquire of the spiritual conditions of Jerusalem and Judah.
2. To carry a massive offering to Jerusalem.
3. To check on and maintain the house of God.
4. To appoint magistrates and judges.
5. To teach the Law of Moses.
6. To execute judgment.

We do not know what year the commission actually came in, but we do know that Ezra and his remnant left for Israel in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes I, 445 B.C. (**Ezra 7:1-7**). We can safely assume that Ezra also spent some time preparing for his mission.

THE WILLING SERVANTS

Ezra's group totaled 1,754 people (**Ezra 8:2-20**). This includes 1,496 general people, 38 Levites, and 220 temple servants. The families of Ezra's return trip are listed in **Ezra 8:2-14**. Every family name from Ezra's group (Pharosh to Bigvai) is also found in **Ezra 2:3-14** as members of Zerubbabel's trip. This demonstrates that not every exiled family member chose to return to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. It also indicates that not every member went with Ezra's group. Some still chose to stay behind.

These willing servants would be needed to help carry the offering presented by the Jews, the king, and his chief officials 900 miles across the desert. This offering (**Ezra 8:24-30**) included:

- 650 talents of silver (25 tons)
- 100 talents of silver items (3.75 tons)
- 100 talents of gold (3.75 tons)
- 20 bowls (19 pounds)
- 2 stems of polished bronze

This offering was for use in the house of God at Jerusalem. By providing this offering, King Artaxerxes I assured himself a place in Scripture as a benefactor to the house of God as found in **Ezra 6:14**. Coincidentally enough, this Second Temple, whose glory Haggai prophesied was to be greater than Solomon's Temple (**Haggai 2:9**), was almost completely financed by

Gentile kings. It would later be enlarged and added onto by another Gentile king, Herod, before it saw its “greater glory”—Jesus Christ of Nazareth!

Ezra, being a high priest, was more mindful of spiritual reforms and the law than he was buildings and walls. He, therefore, had a keen eye to take with him Levites and Nethinims (temple servants). These had to be coaxed into going (**Ezra 8:15-20**). The Levites and Nethinims would be critical to effectively reinstituting the Law and proper worship at the Second Temple. One can only speculate why they would have chosen to remain in exile, for there was no temple in Persia in which to be a priest.

The 900-mile journey from Shushan, Persia to Jerusalem was uneventful but required a three-day rest. On the fourth day the treasures were accounted for and reweighed. Offerings were made to the LORD and the orders from King Artaxerxes I were delivered to his lieutenants and governors.

THE OPPOSITION

Ezra’s main purpose was to investigate the spiritual condition of Jerusalem, Judah, and her inhabitants. What Ezra discovered was unconscionable.

- Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, **The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. ²For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that 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.** Ezra 9:1-2

In less than 60 years (from the completion of the Second Temple until Artaxerxes I’s order against Jerusalem) the Jews at Jerusalem had fallen away from God. The princes and rulers had led the way back into syncretism—the very sin that marched them off into Babylonian slavery.

Syncretism: *the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in religion, cultures, or philosophies. Compromise.*

The sin of the Samaritans had effectively crept into Jerusalem and succeeded in getting many of the Jews to intermarry with the surrounding heathen. Notice the phrase, “**the holy seed have mingled themselves.**” This phrase reveals the real reason for the constant attacks against the Jews.

All demonic opposition has one motivation—to render the Word of God void. The first several rounds of opposition were against the construction of the Second Temple because God said it would be rebuilt (**Isaiah 44:28**). When these attacks failed, a new tactic was used. If the Jews couldn’t be stopped by force, then they could be hindered by perversion. This is the doctrine



of Balaam (**Numbers 31:16**). You can't curse God's people when they are holy, but get them to pervert themselves and God Himself will resist and destroy them.

This tactic, if successful, would accomplish two things: 1) God would destroy His own people as He had been ought to do numerous times in the past, and 2) the holy seed would be so defiled that the Messiah would not be able to be born into the earth. Don't forget that Zerubbabel was the great grandfather of Jesus Christ. Pervert his lineage through intermarrying and there would be no pure bloodline for Christ to be born through.

Ezra had found the problem—syncretism. With King Artaxerxes I's decree against Jerusalem, Israel had begun to see the hand of God resist them yet again. Something would have to be done.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 6
Ezra's Spiritual Reforms

As previously covered, the Jews had received unprecedented favor from five Persian kings and financial support from two of those kings, all over a period of nearly 100 years (from Cyrus to Darius). Then with the ascension of Artaxerxes I to the Persian throne, the Jews in Jerusalem faced their first royal Persian opposition. Ezra made a request of King Artaxerxes I to travel to Jerusalem and inquire of the condition of the Jews according to the Law of Moses. Ezra wanted to know why they had lost favor with Persia.

SYNCRETISM

Ezra discovered syncretism at work, yet again, in Jerusalem.

- **The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, ...²so that the holy seed have mingled (*to braid*) themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.** **Ezra 9:1b, 2b**

God has always hated His people mixing the holy with the unholy and the clean with the unclean.

- **When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, ...³⁰Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.³¹[You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, NIV]: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods;** **Deuteronomy 12:29a, 30-31**

THE TWO KINDS OF REVIVALS

God's people seem to always be living in one of two revivals: 1) a revival of syncretism, or 2) a revival of holiness. When holiness flows, syncretism will ebb. When holiness ebbs, syncretism will flow.

EZRA'S THREE-STEP RESPONSE

Ezra truly had no idea what had gone wrong in Jerusalem. Ezra's response to the news of revived syncretism is the key to starting any God-filled revival.

1. Brokenness

- **And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished (*stunned*),**

***stupefied*) . . . ⁴and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice . . . ⁵And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness (*affliction, depression*); . . .
Ezra 9:3, 4b, 5a**

Ezra was horrified at the news of the people's sin. The sin was so atrocious and blatant it literally left him speechless. All he could do was tear his clothes and pull his hair and beard out. The news of the people's syncretism even caused a depression or heaviness to fall upon him for several hours. Truly, his heart was broken because of what the people had done.

2. Prayer And Repentance

- . . . I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, ⁶And 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 . . . ¹⁰And now, O God what shall we say after this? . . . ¹³seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, . . . ¹⁴Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity [intermarry] with the people of these abominations? . . . so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? . . . ¹⁵for we cannot stand before thee because of this. Ezra 9:5b-6, 10a, 13c, 14a,d, 15e
- Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore. Ezra 10:1

Ezra acknowledged the sins of Israel and made no excuses for them. The true stakes are revealed here. Israel faced certain annihilation for this sin.

3. Action

- And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. ¹¹Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. ¹²Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. Ezra 10:10-12

True repentance is always followed by action. In this case, the action demanded by God was a national wave of separation and divorce from the people of the land. King Artaxerxes I had commissioned and authorized Ezra to check on the condition of Jerusalem, to teach the Law of God, and to execute judgment upon those that refused to do the Law of God. Once again, God had used a Persian king to authorize and aid in revival.

- Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they swear. Ezra 10:5

Ezra used his authority to demand that all those with him swear to an oath of obedience and commitment, and they did.

THE SEVERITY

In order to deal with the widespread syncretism, Ezra, the princes, and the elders issued a severe ultimatum in order to gather the remnant of Jews dwelling in Judea.

- **And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; ⁸And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.** Ezra 10:7-8

The Jews were given three days to come to the meeting to have their sin exposed. Those that failed to show would forfeit all their belongings and be ostracized from the body of believers. Oddly enough, every man in Judah and Benjamin attended the meeting. Revival requires severe motivation.

THE REVIVAL SERMON

Ezra's message to the backslidden Jews reveals to us the catalyst necessary to rekindle the fires of God.

- **And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. ¹¹Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.** Ezra 10:10-11

Revival requires a purging of sin by those who know better. Revival begins when those who are trained begin to live what they know.

THE UNEXPECTED RESPONSE

The response to Ezra's sermon is quite astonishing:

- **Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. ¹³But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed [so many of us are involved in this sin] in this thing. ¹⁴Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us.** Ezra 10:12-14

The whole of Judah and Benjamin openly confessed their guilt. They also acknowledged that it was widespread and that it could not be dealt with in just a day or two. Due to the rainy

season, they asked for each guilty man to come at an appointed time and stand before his local ruler, elder, and judge in order to put out the strange wives and mixed children.

The total divorce proceedings took three months to complete. Out of an entire remnant of Jews, many of which were guilty, only four men resisted Ezra's decree: Jonathan, Jahaziah, Meshullam, and Shabbethai (**Ezra 10:15**). Of all the family names that are listed as having originally come with Zerubbabel (**2:3-35**), roughly twenty-five percent were found guilty of syncretism in Ezra's day (**10:18-43**).

SPIRITUAL DIVORCE: THE BEGINNING OF REVIVAL

Ezra's spiritual reforms were very simple: divorce yourself from the things God hates in your life. The New Testament teaches us the same thing.

- **Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.** James 4:8
- **Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, ¹⁸And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.** 2 Corinthians 6:17-18
- **Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.** James 4:4
- **Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.** 1 John 2:15

Ezra had succeeded in dealing with syncretism. It wouldn't be a problem again for another 25 years.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

A Study Of Postexilic Israel

Lesson 7

Nehemiah The Motivator

WHAT'S THE TIMELINE?

The book of Nehemiah begins in the 20th year (445 B.C.) of Artaxerxes I-Longinamus (**Nehemiah 1:1**), or 13 years after Ezra's spiritual reforms (**Ezra 7:8**).

WHO WAS NEHEMIAH?

- **Nehemiah** (*Jehovah comforts*) was a Jew born while in captivity.
- He had somehow become the trusted cupbearer for King Artaxerxes I (**Nehemiah 1:11**). This was not only a position of royal food tasting to prevent poisoning but also one of trusted confidant to the king.
- He had a joyful reputation. He had never had a sad countenance in the king's presence (**Nehemiah 2:1**).
- He became governor of Judah upon returning to Jerusalem (**Ezra 5:14**).

THE PROBLEM

Jerusalem and its city wall were still in ruins from Artaxerxes I's second year (462 B.C.). The destruction hadn't been repaired in 17 years—since Rehum, Shimshai and their companions destroyed it (**Ezra 4:23**). The people's syncretism had caused the move of God to come to a standstill. It also appears that syncretism had sucked the desire to rebuild Jerusalem out of the Jews. Syncretism is, above all things, selfish and spiritually debilitating. Once you start feeding the flesh, it becomes nearly impossible to stop.

Nehemiah had to ask the Jews some eye-opening questions. Nehemiah's heart for Israel should be our heart for the Church:

- **Then I said unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach (a disgrace).**

Nehemiah 2:17

The Jews were just satisfied to let their city—their pride and joy—lie desolate. And why shouldn't they? They had their homes to go to. They had food in their stomachs. They had jobs to tend to. Why should they make the effort to work? God had to raise up and send a motivator to get His will accomplished.

THE MOTIVATION

As usual, God's people demonstrated that they are totally incapable of leading themselves into greatness for His glory. For the 17 years following Ezra's revival, no one had bothered to stir up the people to get back to work on rebuilding the city or the walls. Complacency had set in upon the people. God's people are capable of great things—with the right leadership. Nehemiah was the right leader.

- **Then I [Nehemiah] told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened [resolved] their hands for this good work.** **Nehemiah 2:18**

Nehemiah preached to them one simple sermon, exposed Israel's true condition (disgraceful), and testified of God's favor, and they arose to the occasion. They also strengthened their hands to do "this good work." They resolved to obey God until this assignment got into their hearts:

- **So we built the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work (*a heart to accomplish*).** **Nehemiah 4:6**
- **... for the people worked with all their heart.** **Nehemiah 4:6b NIV**
- **... for the people had worked with enthusiasm.** **Nehemiah 4:6b NLT**

This is in contrast to what they had been experiencing from the enemy since the days of Cyrus:

- **Then the people of the land weakened the hands (*disheartened to slackness*) of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building,** **Ezra 4:4**

The devil used this same tactic in Nehemiah's day as they were finishing the wall.

- **For they [Sanballat and Tobiah] all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.** **Nehemiah 6:9**

If the wicked heathen could weaken Israel's hands through speech and threats, then Israel could certainly strengthen their hands through speech.

THE COMMISSION

All three leaders of the postexilic revival were commissioned (Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah). However, each of their commissions was unique:

- Zerubbabel was commissioned by King Cyrus to build the Second Temple and take exiles home. Cyrus approached Zerubbabel (537 B.C.).
 - Ezra was commissioned by King Artaxerxes I to investigate the Jews and judge them according to the Law of Moses. Ezra approached Artaxerxes I in his 7th year (458 B.C.).
 - Nehemiah was commissioned by King Artaxerxes I to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah approached Artaxerxes I in his 20th year (445 B.C.). His request was threefold:
1. **[S]end me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may rebuild it.** **Nehemiah 2:5b**
 2. Letters of conveyance given for all the governors assuring safe passage throughout the Persian kingdom (**Nehemiah 2:7**).

3. A letter for Asaph, the royal timber supervisor, granting Nehemiah all the timber necessary for the gates of the palace, the wall, and for his personal house (**Nehemiah 2:8**).
- Without request, the king generously granted Nehemiah military captains and horsemen.
 - Without request, the king also generously appointed Nehemiah to be governor of Judah.

THE MOTIVATED

A unique thing happened when the God-appointed leader spoke—Israel was motivated into action. **Nehemiah 3** is dedicated to giving a list of those men who were motivated and where they worked on the wall. These men are included in the Holy Scriptures because of their obedience. Would you have been found there if you lived in Nehemiah's day? Over 45 names and groups are named specifically. Some of the notable entries are:

- Eliashib the high priest and his brethren built the sheep gate (**v.1**).
- The men of Jericho helped to build (**v.2**).
- The Tekoites helped but their nobles refused to (**v.5**).
- Men of Gibeon and men of Mizpah (**v.7**).
- Uzziel of the goldsmiths (**v.8**).
- Hananiah, the son of a pharmacist (**v.8**).
- Rephaiah, ruler of half of Jerusalem (**v.9**).
- Shallum, ruler of the other half of Jerusalem (**v.12**).
- Shallun, ruler of part of Mizpah (**v.15**).
- The Levites helped (**v.17**).
- The priests helped (**v.22**).
- The Nethinims helped (**v.26**).
- Shemaiah, the east gate keeper, helped (**v.29**).
- Malchiah the goldsmith's son helped (**v.31**).

Aiding in the construction was an act of consecration because this was a project that God had ordained. With all the men doing their part, even with extreme persecution and opposition, the Jews finished the wall in 52 days, fulfilling the will of God and set the stage for more revival.

Are you motivated for God or excuse-filled for self?

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 8
Nehemiah's Primary Opposition

THE OPPOSITION

Nehemiah faced more opposition than his two predecessors combined. He not only faced the typical opposition from without (Samaritans) and from within (nay-sayers and sluggards), but he also had to fight syncretism all over again within the priesthood.

The critical pattern to be learned from the attacks against the postexilic revival is this: if the devil cannot make you quit serving God through discouragement, he will look to pervert your service to God through syncretism. If syncretism is resisted, he will resort back to discouraging you. He will repeat this process until you fight back and gain the victory over him or until you have a total spiritual meltdown and he wins.

Discouragement—Syncretism—Discouragement—Syncretism—Discouragement

Satan will never quit this pattern. Will you quit your fight against it?

The Hellish Trinity

Nehemiah's favor with King Artaxerxes I and his desire to help Israel instantly caused problems for him in Judah. Three regional leaders, also under Artaxerxes I's rule, rose up against Nehemiah out of envy and hate. This hellish trinity of opposition was comprised of three leaders:

- Sanballat—Governor of Samaria. Samaria is to the north of Judah.
- Tobiah (Ammonite leader)—Governor in Ammon. Ammon is to the east of Judah.
- Geshem—Arab chief. Geshem was an Arab controlling several Arabian tribes of Moab and Edom. Moab and Edom are to the east and south of Judah.

Nehemiah and the people of Israel were literally surrounded by opposition on every side. Every revival of God will experience opposition from every side. There will always be those that hate to see God's work flourishing.

- **When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel.** **Nehemiah 2:10**

WAVES OF OPPOSITION

The hellish trinity of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem demonstrated an escalating attack on Nehemiah. They brought wave after wave of demonic opposition to Nehemiah and the work. It should also be noted that everything Nehemiah and the Jews accomplished for the LORD eventually made its way to the ears of the surrounding community.

1. Mocking Ridicule

- **But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arabian, heard it, they laughed (mocked) us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?**
Nehemiah 2:19

In the beginning there were only three individuals opposing Nehemiah and his revival: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. This number was to grow. Demonic opposition always seems to begin small and with childish mocking and laughter. This is a powerful and effective strategy against many Christians who desire the world's approval.

Nehemiah's Response

- **Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right [claim], nor memorial [historic right], in Jerusalem.**
Nehemiah 2:20

Nehemiah responded to ridicule by reaffirming that he answered to God, not man, and God would prosper His servants. He also firmly reminded the opposition that it was none of their business what went on in Jerusalem, for they were pagan outsiders.

2. Angry Ridicule

- **But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. ²And he spake before his brethren and before the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? . . . ³Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him,**
Nehemiah 4:1-2a, 3a

Opposition has grown. Sanballat included his brethren and the army. Opposition is always angered by its own failure; therefore, we should not be surprised when our opposition returns angry, and in greater numbers. In the second wave of opposition here, the attack has been intensified. We no longer have laughing ridicule, it has become angry ridicule (which usually manifests as insults), along with name-calling and troop gathering.

Nehemiah's Response

- **Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, . . . ⁶So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.**
Nehemiah 4:4a, 6

When the attack increases, so must prayer. Nehemiah's response to the new wave of attack was to pray and keep on working. He only slowed down long enough to pray. His leadership must have been contagious for his helpers had a mind to work and not a mind to dwell on the venomous words of the enemy.

3. Threats, Conspiracies, And Plans

- **But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, ⁸And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder [fashion perversion, make error] it.**

Nehemiah 4:7-8

Now, even more opposition has been mustered. The original three opponents involved their people: the Arabians, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites (Western enemies—Jerusalem is now surrounded on every side by enemies). They banded together against a common enemy to fight against it, hinder it, and pervert it.

Nehemiah's Response

- **But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.**

Nehemiah 4:9 NIV

Nehemiah's response was to increase prayer, adjust the workload by pulling some workers and making them watchmen to counter the threat, and keep on working. He was not going to allow Israel to quit like they had done in the days of Zerubbabel.

4. Death Threats

- **Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." ¹²Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."**

Nehemiah 4:11-12 NIV

By this point, Nehemiah's enemies are so numerous, he doesn't even bother to distinguish them by name. Their constant talk is murder and rampage. Remember that in order to stop the progress on the city, this same tactic of rampage and attack was used against Jerusalem 17 years prior. The attack has escalated to include murder.

Nehemiah's Response

- **Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. ¹⁴And I looked, and rose up, and said to the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.**

Nehemiah 4:13-14

It should be apparent that nothing was going to stop the construction of this wall. Nehemiah pulled more workers off the wall and made them guards, arming them with swords, spears, and bows. Then, in the midst of a building project, he delivered a speech worthy of war. His other countermeasures included:

- Half of Nehemiah's men were workers, the other half were armed security (4:16).
- All of the wall workers were armed (4:17-18).
- An alarm system comprised of trumpeters was installed (4:19-20).
- All of the workers and servants were moved into Jerusalem for the remainder of the project to provide better nighttime security (4:22).
- Everyone was armed at all times, even on water errands (4:23 NIV).

5. Feigned Peace Accord (Assassination)

- Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein; (though at that time I had not set up the doors upon the gates;) ²That Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me, saying, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief [scheming to harm me].

Nehemiah 6:1-2

It appears that an assassination attempt was being planned in order to demoralize the people of God.

Nehemiah's Response

- And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?

Nehemiah 6:3

This has become Nehemiah's most famous response: I am too busy doing a great work for God; go away. Every Christian should learn to tell their enemies to go away, and just keep on working for God. Nehemiah's enemies invited him five times to the peace accord and five times he rejected them. The fifth invitation came with a letter from Sanballat.

6. False Accusations

- ... "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king ⁷and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together."

Nehemiah 6:6-7 NIV

Another tactic the devil will seek to use is distraction through false accusation. Christians should never leave the work of God to chase false accusations.

Nehemiah's Response

- I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." ⁹They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

Nehemiah 6:8-9 NIV

False accusations come just to frighten us. They are a demonic tactic designed to distract us from the real work at hand, weaken our hands, and provoke us into wasting time doing unnecessary damage control. Nehemiah saw through this, called it out, and simply prayed for strength.

7. False Friends/Prophets

- **Afterward I came unto the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah the son of Mehetabeel, who was shut up (*shut in*); and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee. . . ¹²And, lo, I perceived that God had not sent him; but that he pronounced this prophecy against me: for Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³Therefore was he hired, that I should be afraid, and do so, and sin, and that they might have matter for an evil report, that they might reproach me.**
Nehemiah 6:10, 12-13

The desperate Sanballat had resorted to hiring a Jewish shut-in with close ties to Nehemiah to instill fear in him and set him up. Even Nehemiah had a Judas.

Nehemiah's Response

- **My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear. ¹⁵So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.**
Nehemiah 6:14-15

Once again, Nehemiah simply prayed for God to remember them according to their works and finished the wall.

- **When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.**
Nehemiah 6:16 NIV

Nehemiah's persistence and unflagging leadership accomplished a work that had begun nearly 100 years earlier. May God help us to complete every assignment He gives us. Amen!

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH
A Study Of Postexilic Israel
Lesson 9
Nehemiah's Other Accomplishments

Nehemiah will always be known for being the leader that rebuilt Jerusalem's walls in 52 days. However, that is not the end of his story. Under his leadership, many other significant obstacles were overcome. Many of these great accomplishments are still necessary if we are to have a successful move of God's Spirit.

CITY SECURITY

- **Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, . . . ²That I gave my brother Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many [more than most]. ³And I said unto them, Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot; . . . "Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."**

Nehemiah 7:1a, 2-3a, (3c NIV)

Completing the wall of Jerusalem was just the beginning of Nehemiah's assignment from God. Every body of believers must establish some form of security in order to protect the people from interruption and crime. Nehemiah chose his brother to head this task. Not because of kinship, but because of faithfulness and holiness. He involved the whole assembly in its own security.

FAMILY REGISTRATION

- **So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return . . . ⁶⁴These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. ⁶⁵The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.**

Nehemiah 7:5, 64-65 NIV

God's purpose in this registry was to confirm who was and was not qualified to partake of this postexilic revival. Some inhabitants merely claimed they were of priestly stock, but when it could not be proven, they were disqualified. This was not an absolute disqualification. Nehemiah gave room for mercy should a priest arise who could minister by the Urim and Thummim, presumably to prove their pedigree. In the New Testament Church, we must also take inventory of God's people and make a distinction between people, and even leaders, who merely claim to be qualified and those whose fruit speaks for itself.

REINSTITUTION OF HOLY ORDINANCES AND WORSHIP

As governor of Judah, Nehemiah continued to honor God long after the wall was completed. He also worked to restore the Jew's faith and walk with Jehovah.

- He promoted Ezra's ministry and the reading of the Law (**Nehemiah 8:1-8**).
- He encouraged Israel to be confident and joyful towards their God.
 - **[F]or this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength. Nehemiah 8:10b**
- He promoted the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jewish feast celebrating God's provision for Israel in the wilderness. The postexilic celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was the greatest Israel had ever celebrated (**Nehemiah 8:13-18**).
- He led Israel in national worship, prayer, fasting, and repentance (**Nehemiah 9:1-5**).
- He led Israel in renewing their covenant with Jehovah God (**Nehemiah 9:38-10:39**).
 - **They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes; Nehemiah 10:29**
- He led Israel away from intermarrying and syncretism (**Nehemiah 10:30**).
- He renewed ordinances that provided for the priesthood, the house of God, and the ministry. He also reinstituted the tithe (**Nehemiah 10:32-39**).

He did all of this that the people of God would be able to say, "**we will not forsake the house of our God**" (**Nehemiah 10:39f**).

REPOPULATION OF JERUSALEM

The population of Jerusalem was very sparse at this time (**Nehemiah 7:4**); therefore, there was a movement to repopulate the holy city. Some people moved to the city willingly and were blessed; others had to be compelled through a lottery system (**Nehemiah 11:1-2**).

RECONSECRATION OF POPULATION

In the 32nd year of Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah had returned unto Babylon. Nehemiah governed for 12 years before being called back to Babylon. At some point, he requested permission to return to Jerusalem and set things in order, again (**Nehemiah 13:6**). The last accomplishment the book of Nehemiah records is the removal of the mixed multitude from among the Jews. This was in obedience to:

- **... the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever; ²Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing. Nehemiah 13:1b-2**
- **Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever. Deuteronomy 23:6**

For any man weaker than Nehemiah, this would have been an intimidating effort for numerous political reasons:

1. Eliashib the high priest was an ally of Tobiah an Ammonite (**Nehemiah 13:4-9**).
 - This religious leader helped lead the building of the wall (**Nehemiah 13:1**).
 - This religious leader was secretly a close friend with one of Nehemiah's most severe enemies.
 - When Nehemiah returned to Persia for a few years, this religious leader allowed Tobiah to live in the Temple of God in a storeroom where the holy things of God were stored.
 - Upon returning to Jerusalem, Nehemiah threw Tobiah and his belongings out, purified that room, and moved all of God's belongings back into it. Imagine, removing God's possessions to allow a sworn enemy of Jehovah to live in His house.
2. The officials/rulers had neglected the Levites in their due portions, forcing the Levites and the singers to depart from their ministry duties and return to farming (**Nehemiah 13:10-14**).
 - Nehemiah had to rebuke the rulers for their negligence.
 - Nehemiah reinstituted the tithe, again.
 - Nehemiah placed trusted men over the treasury, dividing the responsibility among the priests, the scribes, and the Levites.
3. The whole nation had returned to desecrating the Sabbath Day by working, buying, selling, and trading (**Nehemiah 13:15-22**).
 - Nehemiah had to rebuke the nobles for their blatant disrespect for God's Law.
 - Nehemiah ordered the city gates to be shut for the Sabbath, terminating all outside business. He placed his trusted men at the gates as guards.
 - Nehemiah confronted the merchants who slept outside the city and threatened to have them arrested.
 - Nehemiah commanded the priests to purify themselves and do their job in this matter.
4. Many of the Jews had returned to intermarrying Ashdodites, Ammonites, and Moabites (**Nehemiah 13:23-31**). This was syncretism creeping in all over again.
 - The children could not speak Hebrew and were so indoctrinated by their heathen parent that they actually spoke the foreign language even though they lived in Jerusalem.
 - Nehemiah rebuked all of the guilty citizens, invoking a curse upon them, pulling out their hair, and made them to swear an oath before God.
 - The high priest Eliashib's grandson had married Sanballat's daughter. Nehemiah drove him away.
 - Nehemiah declared: **"They have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites."**
 - Nehemiah cleansed the priesthood and the people from all strangers.

This concludes the biblical account of Nehemiah. Not a bad testimony for the man who began as a fearful cupbearer.