

# THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL: EZRA & NEHEMIAH

## Background - Israel's Decline & Captivity

*We are beginning our class on "The Rebuilding of Israel" with a study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Before we look at the text of these books, we shall spend this week's class on Israel's decline and captivity, which will set the stage for the events described by Ezra.*

### **Introduction**

We learn from several Old Testament books that after a period of general unity, peace, and prosperity in the time of David and Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel divided politically and also began a long period of spiritual decline. Eventually, God saw that there was no way to cure his people other than to allow them to be conquered by their enemies. The nation was overrun and largely destroyed by pagan armies, and most of the Jews were carried off as slaves or captives. Later, after God had purified and disciplined them, he brought them back home to begin the job of rebuilding the nation of Israel both physically and spiritually. They faced this challenge of doing the rebuilding while continuing to learn some important spiritual lessons.

The theme of rebuilding provides many practical lessons, both for individual Christians and for bodies of believers. Let us consider first what is implied in the word "rebuilding". The building that the Jews did during this period was of several kinds. They had to build the physical elements of their land - their homes, the temple, and so forth - since these had all been destroyed earlier by their enemies. They had to build spiritually, by re-establishing worship practices and by learning the spiritual lessons God was teaching them about their identity and purpose. They also had to build numerically, since their numbers had experienced a drastic decline since the days of independence and strength. And in all of this building, they had to rebuild, to get back to a place they had attained before, and then to be prepared to move ahead.

Consider the parallels in our lives and ministries. Many Christians go through periods of growth alternating with periods of discipline and struggle, which must often be followed by a time of rebuilding. So too, congregations of believers often experience this same pattern. There is no reason to be ashamed of this, and there is also no reason to feel that we should be exempt from this. There are many times when, like the ancient Jews, we have spiritual needs that God can only cure through discipline. There are also times when we must be "pruned", as Jesus teaches in John 15 - that is, there are times when we must apparently go backwards in human terms, in order for God to prepare us to move forwards. Sometimes the hardest part in rebuilding is the "re" - it can seem frustrating to redo something or relearn a lesson, but it is often God's plan.

God said through Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). Israel's rebuilding process revealed God's hand at work, and God's hand is also at work in our lives when we must rebuild.

Study Suggestion: Consider how the "rebuilding" theme might be of importance to you and to those around you. Keep in mind the various types of "building", and consider the possible reasons God may have to bring those he loves through a time of discipline and rebuilding before leading them on to something new.

## *Israel's Decline & Captivity*

Israel had to rebuild because their nation had previously been conquered and destroyed. God allowed this to happen, because of some deep and otherwise incurable spiritual disorders. We have covered the history of this period in detail in previous courses, so here we shall make only a brief overview to refresh our minds about the most important events and ideas.

Israel became a kingdom in the 11th century BC. After the first king, Saul, was removed from his position by God, David led Israel into an era of prosperity and growth that continued into the reign of his son Solomon. Although there were some underlying problems during this era (partly the fruit of mistakes made by David and Solomon in their family lives), it was a period of outward strength. After Solomon's death, a crisis occurred. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, could have turned things around by discontinuing some of his father's practices, but chose not to. The rebel Jeroboam took advantage of this situation to lead the northern half of the nation away from the line of David, and the nation split into two rival kingdoms. This was in about 930 BC. It was no accident, but was from God, because of the idolatry and other evils into which Solomon led the nation through his infatuation with pagan women (1 Kings 11:26-40).

Each of these two kingdoms had a characteristic pattern of history. The Northern Kingdom (called either Samaria or Israel) was never faithful to God. Jeroboam introduced open idolatry as an approved practice, and after that every northern king was involved in or accepted some kind of false worship, and only one (the bloody reformer Jehu) made any attempt to clean the idols out of the kingdom. During its history, the north was led by thoroughly pagan rulers, several of whom gained power through rebellion and murder. The people of the north accepted this, caring only about whether their kings kept them prosperous.

The Southern Kingdom (usually called Judah, since that tribe contained the royal line) had periods of faithfulness, but never showed any long-term spiritual growth. Judah had more citizens who were faithful to God, and periodically a reformer king would institute a wide-scale program of repentance and turning to God. Judah had 20 kings, 4 of whom were reformers (Asa, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah), but the rest ranged from good but weak kings to rulers who openly led the nation back into idolatry. This hopeless cycle went on for over 300 years, and God eventually gave them over to the Babylonians to be taken captive. The history of these two kingdoms from the division to the captivity is in 1 Kings 12-22 and 2 Kings. In Kings, the narrative goes back & forth between the two kingdoms. Chronicles follows only the history of Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

The Northern Kingdom lasted just about 200 years. In 722 BC, God gave them over to the growing Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians ravaged the land and enslaved those who survived the fighting. In 2 Kings 17:7-41, we read about this event and the reasons for it. They were given over to their enemies because they worshiped other gods (verse 8) and rejected God's covenant (verse 15). We are told that "they followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless" (verse 15). After their fall, the Northern tribes ceased to have significance in the history of Israel. Most of the survivors who were allowed to remain in their homeland intermarried with the unbelievers who came to resettle the land (verses 24-42), producing the race known as the Samaritans.

The Southern Kingdom lasted for over a century longer, but it too fell. In 606 BC, a Babylonian army made a reconnaissance in force on the outskirts of Jerusalem, taking a good amount of plunder and a band of captives, including the future prophet Daniel and his three friends.

Another attack in 597 BC devastated the land and saw a much larger group of captives taken to Babylon, including the prophet Ezekiel. The end came in 586 BC, when Jerusalem was conquered and sacked, all but the old and weak were taken as captives to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:15-21), and Judah's independence came to an end. The Bible's account of the history of the final fall of Judah appears in 2 Kings 24-25 and 2 Chronicles 36. Again we see that the people reveled in following practices of other nations (2 Chronicles 36:14), and so they were given over to these other nations whom they so much wanted to be like. Life under Babylonian rule forced God's people to decide whether they wished to retain their identity as a chosen people, or whether they wished to blend in. Babylon was an idolatrous, corrupt, and often violent society. In the higher circles of society, there was more of an emphasis on learning and study, but with the understanding that it was done for the sake of the empire.

There were many spiritual disorders that led to the captivity, but the fundamental problems all occurred from the reluctance of God's people to embrace their special identity and purpose. They constantly wanted to be like other nations, and to copy the practices of other cultures. We can sympathize with their desires, since we too often find it demoralizing to have so many basic differences with those around us. And just as they felt that it was acceptable to adopt more and more of the ways of the world, so too that is always a grave temptation for God's people. Each generation of the church has its own set of particular struggles in the ways that it relates to the world. But if we can understand their mistake, we also must be careful not to fall into it. For it is this same mistake - the failure to appreciate or remember who we are - that leads to most of the periods of discipline that God must lead us into.

Study Suggestion: Read on your own the passages in Kings and Chronicles about the fall of the kingdoms of Israel. (There are many other significant references other than those listed in the notes.) What lessons do you see from their experience? How do they help us to understand what God wanted to do through the rebuilding?

### ***God's Plans For the Captivity - Jeremiah's Prophecies***

The prophet Jeremiah was a key part of God's plans for the captivity and rebuilding. Jeremiah prophesied about the coming captivity, giving God's people their last chance to avoid it. He himself had to live through the experience of seeing Jerusalem taken by the Babylonians, and then prophesied about God's plans for the future, when he would rebuild Israel through the captives' descendants. The three prophecies we shall study from Jeremiah will explain all of the important themes about the captivity.

Jeremiah first of all stressed that, while it was indeed an act of discipline, it was also an opportunity for a much-needed fresh start. In his image of the baskets of figs (Jeremiah 24), he told the captives that it was they, not the apparently luckier ones who were allowed to remain in their homes, who were blessed to be the seed of a new start. God would give them a chance to re-evaluate their priorities and perspectives in a foreign land. True, they would lack the security of living in a nation entirely made up of God's people, but they would also get a chance to escape the meaningless ritual and empty slogans into which their worship had deteriorated.

Jeremiah also stressed repeatedly that the exile would not be indefinite, but only for a fixed period. In Jeremiah 25:8-14 and again in 29:4-14, he specifies that the exile would be for seventy years. This time period corresponds to the years from the taking of the first Judean captives (606 BC) up to the fall of Babylon (538 BC), followed shortly by the Persians letting the Jews return to their homeland in (536 BC). The time of seventy years has the symbolic

significance of being 7 times 10, and it also worked well from the practical perspective, in that those who returned were almost a completely new people who had thrown off completely the spiritual hindrances that caused God to exile them.

As Judah's collapse was becoming clear, there were many false prophets who proclaimed that the trouble would pass quickly, and that God would surely deliver his people from the Babylonians. Jeremiah contradicted these liars and their popular but misguided messages. In chapter 27, he warns that it was God's hand that had given the nation to their enemies, and God's hand also would prevent his people from escaping this time. Even the great temple was to be broken up and carried off by the pagans. Jeremiah warned that destruction would befall anyone who listened to the false prophets and who tried to resist the Babylonians.

Jeremiah also sent a long letter of exhortation to those who been taken away captive (Jeremiah 29:1-23). He told them to settle down in Babylon, and live normal lives of faithfulness. He assured them that, although they could not count on the easy way out that the false prophets offered, everything was very much in God's hands, and that God's plans were to make them prosper, not to harm them (verse 11). The goal was to see them turn back to God (verses 12-14), and only then would it be time for the return and rebuilding.

### ***Suggested References For Introductory Study of Old Testament History***

Norman Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*

Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquity of the Jews*

Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*

Lasor, Hubbard & Bush, *Old Testament Survey*

### ***Basic Chronology Leading To The Fall Of Jerusalem***

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| 1010 BC | Approximate date that David became king.   |
| 930 BC  | Israel splits into Northern and Southern Kingdoms.<br>(This date used to be given as 975 BC. Improved research has shown that a date between 931 and 922 BC harmonizes better with the Bible and history.) |
| 722 BC  | Assyria conquers the Northern Kingdom.   |
| 628 BC  | Josiah's reforms begin (Southern Kingdom), the last attempt to halt spiritual decline. Kingdom around. Jeremiah's ministry began about the same time.  |
| 606 BC  | First Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem - Daniel and his three friends are among those taken to Babylon.  |
| 597 BC  | Second Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem - Ezekiel is among those taken captive in this invasion.   |
| 586 BC  | Jerusalem falls in third Babylonian invasion.  |

The notes to Ezra will include a chronology for events relating to Ezra and Nehemiah.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2001*

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(Originally taught as Lesson One of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

## **THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, PART ONE: THE BOOK OF EZRA**

### **Notes For Part One: The Initial Return (Ezra 1-2)**

*We shall begin our study of the book of Ezra this week. The book begins where 2 Chronicles ends, with Cyrus the Great of Persia issuing the decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland. Our study shall also include a brief review of the fall of Babylon.*

#### ***Cyrus' Decree (Ezra 1:1-4)***

When the seventy year period of captivity had been completed, as Jeremiah had prophesied, God gave the Babylonians over to the Persians and their allies, the Medes, who conquered Babylon and took control of its territories and peoples. Soon afterwards, Persia's ruler Cyrus the Great allowed the first group of Jews to return home and begin the great job of rebuilding Israel.

The Bible tells of the fall of Babylon in Daniel 5. The Babylonian Empire had served its purpose in God's plan. Although it was filled with wickedness, God used it to discipline his people. After the period of discipline was over, God gave Babylon over to destruction. Unlike with Israel, there would be no rebuilding for Babylon. This parallels an important point in our study of rebuilding: those unbelievers who are hardened, like the Babylonians, will find nothing positive in their sufferings or in periods of discipline. But we who believe can know that our lives and ministries are always in God's hand, and God can always turn any situation into good if we will only let him have his way, and stop fighting to try to impose our own agenda on him.

Babylon was conquered by Persia and its lesser ally, the Medes, in 538 BC. The Persians were led by Cyrus the Great, one of the most successful rulers of the ancient world. From their perspective, the conquest of Babylon relieved them of a dangerous enemy and also began their period as a great empire. But from God's perspective, there was something more important going on. The Persians had a different policy towards conquered peoples than did the Babylonians. While the Persians could be quite ruthless with enemies whom they feared, they were usually benevolent towards smaller countries or peoples. With a group like the Jews, too small to be a threat to a large country like Persia, the Persians preferred to win their friendship by lenient treatment, rather than to intimidate them by oppressing them or enslaving them.

This explains why in 536 BC, two years after the conquest of Babylon and 70 years after the first captives had been taken to Babylon, Persia's ruler Cyrus the Great issued a decree that allowed the Jews to begin returning home. His decree is quoted in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4. For Cyrus, this was simply an act of kindness and generosity, in the hopes of winning the Jews' goodwill. But from our perspective, it is easy to see God's hand at work.

Study Suggestion: The Jews knew it was time to return and rebuild because of Cyrus' decree. How might we be able to tell when God is calling us to do some rebuilding of our own? Consider also the other ways that the Jews would have known that the time of rebuilding was near.

Before moving ahead, let's make a very brief overview of the book of Ezra. Ezra 1-2 describes the initial return to Israel, and gives some details about the first group that returned. We shall cover these chapters in class today. Ezra 3-6 give a history of the rebuilding of the temple, one

of the most important parts of the rebuilding process. The rebuilding on the temple began at once, but then suffered some interruptions and had to be completed later. We shall spend a couple of weeks on the temple rebuilding. Then, in Ezra 7-10 we see Ezra himself for the first time. These chapters describe his ministry of spiritual reforms, which were just as important as the more obvious physical rebuilding that the Jews carried out. We shall spend about two weeks on these chapters, and after that we shall move on to study Nehemiah.

### ***Return of the Temple Articles (Ezra 1:5-11)***

Cyrus not only permitted the Jews to return, but in accordance with God's will he gave them valuable assistance. He also gave back to them the articles from the temple, looted by the Babylonians decades earlier. Cyrus's help was thus of both practical and symbolic significance. When God asks us to build or rebuild, he also gives us what we need to carry out his will.

As soon as Cyrus announced his decree, some of the Jews began to prepare for the return, and quickly received valuable assistance (1:5-6). Certain family heads "whose heart God had moved" were to lead the first group of returnees. As Cyrus had specified (verse 4), their neighbors helped them with many gifts of all kinds. The scene is reminiscent of the Exodus, when the Egyptians gave so generously to the Jews as they left Egypt.

Cyrus also made a gesture of great symbolic significance, in returning the temple articles that had been taken to Babylon years before when the Babylonians looted the temple (1:7-11). As the inventory in these verses shows, this was quite a valuable collection, but the symbolic significance was still greater. At the time of captivity, God allowed the pagans to take even the sacred articles from his temple, as an emphatic sign that Israel had rejected his presence. But now the return and rebuilding would not be complete unless he made it clear that he was fully re-establishing his presence among his people. It is noteworthy that the pagan ruler Cyrus appreciated the meaning of these articles to the Jews, and it is a reminder for us to appreciate and respect the ways that God shows his presence in our lives.

Study Suggestion: Study the practical ways that Cyrus assisted the Jews in their initial return to the Promised Land. How do these parallel the kinds of assistance that God gives us when he asks us to undertake a project of building or of rebuilding?

### ***The List of the First Exiles Who Returned (Ezra 2:1-70)***

Ezra 2:1-70 gives us a detailed list of the first group who returned from exile. This is the kind of material that modern readers often ignore, thinking there could be no spiritual value in a list of names and numbers. But there are several reasons why the Holy Spirit recorded the list of returning exiles in such great detail. The same general reasons explain the presence of many other similar passages in the Old Testament, such as genealogies and censuses. There are at least three general types of reasons why passages like this can be spiritually significant.

Most basically, passages such as Ezra 2 have factual significance. Among other helpful details, they provide the dimensions of the task at hand. Here, the records show us the size of the group that God led back and cared for. With over 40,000 men, it was a large group that needed many resources for their journey, yet it was only a fraction of the size of the former kingdom of Israel - so there was a big job ahead. God has often had to reduce the size of his people in order better to prepare them for the challenges ahead. Gideon (Judges 7) and other examples in the Scriptures

remind us that numerical loss, at least in the short term, does not necessarily mean spiritual loss. If there is a big job to be done, it is more important for a group to give themselves fully to God, and to be unified, than it is for the group to be as large as possible.

There is also a vital testimonial significance to this kind of passage, in reminding us that these were real events that happened to real persons. By listing at great length the family names, home towns, and so forth, they eliminate any doubt that this might be a made-up story. Passages like this remind us of how many times God has led his people through all of the same kinds of experiences that we go through. In this particular case, when we face the sometimes discouraging job of rebuilding something in our lives and ministries, it is very helpful to remember that God has centuries of experience of doing the same thing with his people - just ask the 2172 descendants of Parosh, the 372 descendants of Shephatiah, and so on.

Lastly, there is a theological significance - something that teaches us about God himself - in almost any passage in the Bible. Here in Ezra 2, it is a reminder that God keeps his promises. The persons who participated in the rebuilding came from the same families that had been exiled years before. They could link their own experience with God's past promises, and so can we. It is always good to remember that God's people, the church of Christ, is much larger than what we see in our own time. God kept his promise to bring his people back from exile, he kept all of his promises for all of the generations of his people whom we read about in the Bible, and he will keep his promises to us. Ezra 2 gives us over 40,000 witnesses who remind us of that.

Study Suggestion: Consider further the ways that this passage can help you gain perspective on the rebuilding that God has done in the past, and on the building or rebuilding that he might call us to do in the present. If you have time, consider some similar passages in other books of the Bible, and see if you can think of reasons why these other apparently dry passages are also of spiritual importance.

### ***References For Studying Ezra & Nehemiah***

Commentaries generally cover these two books together, since they are so closely related. Two books that I would recommend for study of Ezra and Nehemiah are:

F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT series)

Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Tyndale series)

Both of the above books combine good background and historical material with a solid study of the content of the Scriptures. There is also a good study on Ezra and Nehemiah by Edwin Yamauchi in Volume Four of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. See me if you want assistance in finding these or other references for the study of Ezra and Nehemiah.

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2001*

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(Originally taught as Lesson Two of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

## **THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, PART ONE: THE BOOK OF EZRA**

### **Notes For Part Two: Rebuilding the Temple, Part One (Ezra 3-4)**

*One of the most vital aspects of the rebuilding was rebuilding the temple, the center of so much of Israel's life and worship. We shall study the temple rebuilding this week and next week.*

#### ***Work on the Temple Begins (Ezra 3)***

The Jews all understood how important it was to rebuild the temple, and almost immediately began this project. Filled with enthusiasm, they got off to a good start, and the only apparent down note was the disappointment of the oldest Jews who had seen the former, more glorious temple. At first, it looked as if the temple would be rebuilt quickly. Although this was not to be the case, there are still some helpful lessons for us to learn from their example.

The very first step was to rebuild the altar itself (3:1-6). Ezra's account tells us that as soon as the group of returnees had arrived and settled into their towns, they assembled "as one man" in Jerusalem (verse 1) to make this first step in the ministry of rebuilding. Although not the most special or holy part of the temple, the altar was the most visible and most frequently used, so for those reasons it was the first step in rebuilding. One of the basic reasons for Israel's earlier spiritual apostasy had been their rejection of the system of proper and appropriate sacrifice that God had given them, and thus the rebuilt altar also held great symbolic significance.

This was not a huge project, and the actual work was done by just a few persons (verse 2). The people did have to overcome their fear of the surrounding peoples of the area (verse 3), who would not have been too pleased to see the returned exiles. But at this time there were no serious attempts to stop their work, and the people merely needed to overcome their own fears, not any actual opposition. Although some significant opposition would arise later, God made sure that they had enough time of calm to make the first few steps without hindrance. Soon the altar was ready for the first sacrifices (last part of verse 3), and the people celebrated the return of the appointed sacrifices and holy days (verses 4-6).

Work then turned to the next step, laying the foundation of the temple (3:7-13). Laying sound foundations is always important, so the people planned carefully, making arrangements for the necessary building materials (verse 7) and carefully assigning responsibilities (verses 8-9). Their progress brought great joy and thanksgiving (verses 10-11), as the people realized the significance of these first steps. Yet there was also a note of disappointment (verse 12), from some of the Jews who had seen the former temple, and who were disappointed that this one was not going to be nearly as lavish as the first. Their expectations and insistence on comparing the old temple to the new one prevented them from appreciating the temple's true purpose, and their misunderstanding formed a striking contrast with the joy of the rest of the people (verse 13).

Study Suggestions: (i) In the lives and ministries of Christians, what are the most direct parallels to the temple rebuilding? (Remember what the temple signifies.) (ii) What constructive lessons can we learn from the earliest steps taken by the people in the rebuilding? Give practical examples or parallels if at all possible. (iii) What possible pitfalls do we see in these first steps of Israel's rebuilding, and how can we learn from them?

## *Opposition & Discouragement (Ezra 4)*

But this good start did not result in a smooth and easy project. Shortly after the Jews began to rebuild, there were those who tried to stop the work or slow it down, using a variety of tactics that at times were quite effective in demoralizing God's people. Their experiences give us a good parallel to the types of daily discouragements we face from the world. Ezra 4 tells about some of the immediate opposition aroused by the temple rebuilding, and also includes a preview of efforts made much later to stop the rebuilding of the city walls and other buildings.

Opposition to the temple rebuilding arose from those who were living in the area when the exiles began their return (4:1-5). These peoples would have included Samaritans and also pagan peoples who had settled in the area after the fall of Israel and Judah\*. These peoples had long since gotten used to being in control of the land of Israel, and resented the return of the exiles. And, as is always true of the worldly, they had no real purpose in their lives, and thus resented and felt threatened by a group that had a real meaning to their lives that motivated them to work together and to make sacrifices for a common goal.

\* Esarhaddon (verse 2) was king of Assyria not long after the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, and was involved in resettling other peoples in the area. Over time, the Jews from the northern tribes who survived the fall of the Northern Kingdom intermarried with these pagan peoples, producing the "Samaritans".

Their first strategy was to try to pass themselves off as friends of the exiles, in order to subvert the rebuilding from within (verses 1-2). In the same way, the worldly will often try to redirect our ministries by reminding us of the worldly goals we could accomplish if we would use our time and energies according to their priorities, instead of according to God's. But the leaders of the exiles recognized this false offer of friendship, and maintained a firm course (verse 3). This should not be construed as a rejection of genuine help, nor should we reject anyone whose desire is genuinely to seek God. But just as Zerubbabel and Jeshua rejected the false help of those who had worldly priorities, so also the church of Jesus Christ must be resolute in rejecting worldly methods and mind-sets, even if they would produce more immediate results.

Having failed in this subtle attempt to undermine the rebuilding, the enemies of the exiles turned to more overt methods (verse 4-5), which continued not only throughout the temple rebuilding but also through the later stages of the rebuilding (see below). They "set out to discourage" the people of Judah, they tried to "make them afraid", and they provoked others to "work against them" and to "frustrate their plans". Such opposition is all too familiar to any Christian who has tried to follow Christ in a world ruled by unbelievers. Just as this opposition went on during the entire history of the rebuilding of Israel, so too we must accept the fact that it will always be a part of our interactions with the world. Remember that the world has always opposed those who serve God, and that God has always been there to protect and lead his people - this won't make opposition go away, but it will help make it seem less threatening and discouraging.

Ezra then flashes forward, past the rebuilding of the temple, to emphasize that the pattern of opposition was ongoing (4:6-23)\*. The opposition described in these verses was not against the temple rebuilding, completed by the times mentioned here, but towards the rebuilding of the city walls and other important structures (see, for example, verse 12). After a brief mention of opposition during the reign of Xerxes (verse 6), there are accounts from the later reign of Artaxerxes (verses 7-23). See the chronology below for more about these kings. Jerusalem is described as "rebellious and wicked" (verse 12), "troublesome" (verse 15), as a city that "has a long history of revolt" (verse 19), and "a place of rebellion and sedition" (verse 19) - exaggerated

descriptions with little justification, showing the dishonesty and cleverness of the enemies of the rebuilding, who said just what an insecure pagan ruler would most fear.

\* Unbelievers and "scholars" often use verses like Ezra 4:6-23 to attack the Bible's accuracy. They claim that because Ezra mentions, in discussing the temple rebuilding, two kings who reigned long after the temple was finished, this means that the Bible is historically inaccurate. But it is plainly obvious that he is flashing forward to tell us that the opposition to the temple continued into later aspects of the rebuilding. Ezra returns to his main chronology in verse 24, and there are no inconsistencies or inaccuracies in his book.

Besides the effects on later stages of the rebuilding, these forms of opposition led to the abandonment of the work on the temple shortly after it began in earnest (verse 24). For 15 years nothing more was done, and the people turned (as described in Haggai) to taking care of their own homes and affairs. For a while, the opposition of unbelievers had attained its goal.

Study Suggestion: How do these various forms of opposition parallel the opposition Christians face from the world? How can we learn from examples of opposition in the past to be better prepared for responding to opposition? Think of other passages about opposition or persecution, and consider how they might tie in.

### ***Reference Material: Chronology***

Here is a chronology of some of the events connected with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some non-biblical historical events are included, to provide some historical context.

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| 553 BC | Cyrus II "the Great" becomes ruler of Persia.  |
| 538 BC | Babylonian Empire is conquered by the Medes and Persians, under Cyrus.   |
| 536 BC | Cyrus decrees that the Jews may return, 70 years after the first captives taken.   |
| 535 BC | Reconstruction on the temple is abandoned shortly after it begins.   |
| 522 BC | Darius I Hystaspes becomes ruler of Persia, succeeding Cyrus's son Cambyses, who reigned 529-522 BC. (Note: this is not Darius the Mede from Daniel 6.)  |
| 520 BC | Haggai & Zechariah exhort the people to rebuild the temple.  |
| 516 BC | Temple construction completed.   |
| 490 BC | Persia invades Greece, but is halted at the decisive battle of Marathon.   |
| 486 BC | Xerxes ("Ahasuerus" in some O.T. versions) succeeds Darius as ruler of Persia.   |
| 480 BC | Persia again threatens to conquer Greece, but is stopped at Salamis.   |
| 478 BC | Esther marries Xerxes and becomes Queen of Persia.   |
| 465 BC | Xerxes is assassinated by his guards, and succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I.   |
| 458 BC | Ezra's reforms and teachings.  |
| 444 BC | Nehemiah (Artaxerxes' cupbearer) comes to Jerusalem and leads wall rebuilding.   |
| 431 BC | The Peloponnesian War breaks out in Greece. This wasteful and foolish war, which lasted until 404 BC, had many repercussions in ancient secular history. |
| 420 BC | Approximate date that O.T. is completed, with writing of the book of Malachi.  |

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2001*

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## **THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, PART ONE: THE BOOK OF EZRA**

### **Notes For Part Three: Rebuilding the Temple, Part Two (Ezra 5-6)**

*Last week we began our study of the temple rebuilding. The exiles quickly rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation for the temple. But they then began to encounter some opposition, which soon resulted in the work being interrupted. This time, we shall see how the people overcame the opposition and completed the new temple.*

#### ***Review***

Work on the temple had gotten off to a great start. Working together, the people rebuilt the altar and then laid the foundation. Even though this was only a small part of the project, these first steps brought them great joy, because they appreciated what God had done and knew that these modest beginnings would lead to future progress. (This is a good example to us, to take satisfaction in even the small victories that God gives us.) But their enemies - the other peoples living in the area - began to oppose and discourage them, and work on the temple soon stopped.

#### ***Work on the Temple Resumes (Ezra 5)***

Work on the temple ceased in 535 BC, as described in Ezra 4:24, and the people settled into smaller and less challenging projects in the rebuilding. In 521 BC, God spoke through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, telling them that it was time to resume the rebuilding. The people responded, and soon afterwards the opposition to their work also began again. The Persian governor of Trans-Euphrates sent a letter to the king, asking for instructions.

In the fall, we shall study the books of Haggai and Zechariah, so here we shall only mention them briefly. These were the two prophets whom God used to exhort the people to get back the job of rebuilding the temple (5:1-2). We shall see later in Haggai that, after the earlier opposition had caused them to abandon the rebuilding of the temple, the people had instead concentrated on building their own homes and pursuing their own goals. The two prophets called the people to re-examine their priorities, and convicted them of the need to devote their attention to the house of God, regardless of the risks and sacrifices involved.

The people responded to this call, but as soon as they did, the opposition also resumed (5:3-5). No one likes having to deal with opposition, but the only certain way to avoid the world's persecution or criticism or intimidation is simply to abandon our ministries. Whenever we begin an important project of building or rebuilding, at some point we must expect some resistance from the world. Here, the governor came to the Jews and asked them who had authorized them to resume the building. The governor also demanded the names of those involved, intending to write a report to the king. Significantly, though, while the governor waited for an answer from the king, no one actually prevented the building from continuing. Ezra tells us that "the eye of their God" was watching over them. So too, we ought always to continue to do whatever we know God has called us to do, not worrying over whether the world will try to prevent it, but knowing that God can take care of us until there is a permanent resolution to the situation.

Governor Tattenai's letter (5:6-17) was actually quite truthful, reporting the situation as objectively as possible and asking for the king to research the Jews' claims and then to provide him with direction. He told the king that "the work is being carried on with diligence", a testimony to the eagerness with which the exiles approached the renewed building. He also reported the answers given by the exiles to his questions. The Jews' directness and honesty are noticeable in the governor's report. They openly stated that they had been sent into exile by God's hand, because of their sin, and they honestly and correctly stated the terms of the decree of Cyrus that allowed them to return. Their replies to the governor are a good illustration, in several respects, of how to approach many of the questions that unbelievers ask. The exiles openly answered in spiritual terms, without being afraid of the response, they presented all the facts, not just the ones favorable to them, and they did not make claims that were not true or not capable of being documented. They would be rewarded for this faithful and truthful policy.

The governor forwarded all this to the king, with a request that he research the royal archives to determine the validity of the Jews' claims.

Study Suggestion: Consider the decision to resume work on the temple, and the ways that the exiles handled the governor's questions. What parallel situations might we find in our own experience, and how might their example be of use to us? Consider also the general similarities between the exiles' reply to the governor and the principles taught by Peter in 1 Peter 3:15-16.

### ***The Decree of Darius (Ezra 6:1-12)***

The governor's letter was sent to Persia's King Darius, who researched the Jews' claims and found them to be true. Darius\* then issued a decree similar to Cyrus' original proclamation, allowing the work to continue and offering support. The exiles had benefitted from their diligence, their courage, and their honesty.

\* Darius Hystaspes became king of Persia in 522 BC, about 7 years after the death of Cyrus the Great. Cyrus' son Cambyses reigned 529-522 BC, and after Cambyses' death an imposter claiming to be his dead brother held the throne for a few months. Darius took effective control in 521 BC; his reign is usually dated from 522 BC. Note that this ruler is not the same as the man called "Darius the Mede" in the book of Daniel.

Upon the king's order, a search was made in the royal archives, and Cyrus' original decree was soon found (6:1-5). Because the Jews had been honest in what they told the governor, the records perfectly supported what they had said. The full decree as found by Darius also indicates some additional details not mentioned earlier by Ezra, specifying the authorized size of the temple and the materials to be used for the rebuilding.

Because everything in the records supported the Jews' claims and their building projects, Darius issued a new decree (6:6-12) that went even farther, in some respects, than that of Cyrus. First, he told the governor not to interfere with the work on the temple. He also specified several ways that the governor was to support the work out of the Persian treasury, even to providing the necessary animals for sacrifice. He backed it all up with royal authority, prescribing severe punishments for anyone who continued to disturb the rebuilding. All this shows God's hand at

work, and gives us encouragement to carry out our ministries with the same diligence and honesty shown here by the returned exiles.

Study Suggestion: In what ways might God work in our ministries similar to the ways that he worked through Tattenai and Darius? What might we be able to do that could make it possible for us to see God work like this?

### ***Completion, Dedication, & Worship (Ezra 6:13-22)***

After the decree of Darius, work continued steadily, and the temple was completed and dedicated within a few years. The people both celebrated the completion and also resumed the Passover and other important worship observations. The first important step in the rebuilding had been fully accomplished.

Once the work was allowed to resume unhindered, it proceeded steadily until the temple was completed (6:13-18). Ezra notes that the work was completed in part because of the authority of the Persian rulers who assisted it, but even more so according to the command of God. God's hand is very clear in the history of the temple rebuilding, both in the ways that he arranged for his people to have what they needed, and also in the ways that he led them patiently through difficulties and made them overcome some obstacles.

The people knew where this victory had come from, and they appreciated its significance. And so they celebrated it not by self-indulgence, but through sacrifice. They also resumed the Levitical practices and took care to follow the laws that had been so long neglected (verse 18). Ezra also describes their celebration of the Passover (6:19-22). God's help in enabling them to complete the temple in spite of opposition and in spite of their own weakness was a deliverance on a smaller scale than was the Exodus, but the similarities were still clear, and it filled the people with joy to know that God had been with them, and to be able to see his hand at work.

Study Suggestion: Review all of the ways that God helped his people rebuild the temple. What did he do for them? What did he require them to do for themselves? What help did he give them? What lessons can you see that we can apply in our own ministries, whether we are building or rebuilding?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 2001*

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(Originally taught as Lesson Four of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

## **THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, PART ONE: THE BOOK OF EZRA**

### **Notes For Part Four: Ezra Comes to Jerusalem (Ezra 7-8)**

*Last week we saw how the people completed the rebuilding of the temple. This time we shall see a new stage in the rebuilding of Israel, as we begin our study of Ezra's own ministry of teaching and spiritual reforms in Jerusalem. This week, we shall see the beginnings of Ezra's ministry, and next week we shall see more of his specific reforms.*

#### ***Review***

Last time, we concluded the account of the temple rebuilding, the first major step in the rebuilding of Israel. If you have time, it is a good idea to look back over Ezra 1-6, to recall the main lessons and to consider the ways that they apply to our own lives and ministries. On this week's lesson outline, there is a worksheet that you can use for this purpose.

#### ***Ezra's Commission & Preparations (Ezra 7)***

After the new temple was completed, the people settled into normal routines of worship and living. While there was much more work to be done, God waited almost 60 years before initiating the next step in the rebuilding. Then he did so by sending Ezra from Persia to Jerusalem to teach the law to the people and institute spiritual reforms. Throughout the rebuilding era, both God's patience and his leadership are quite noteworthy.

We meet Ezra himself for the first time in Ezra 7:1-10. His ancestry is traced back directly to Aaron, the original high priest, and he is described as a teacher well-versed in the law (verse 7), who had devoted himself to studying and observing the Word of God (verse 10). He returned to Israel in 458 BC with a new group of returning exiles, to carry on a ministry of teaching the law and instituting spiritual reforms. He brought with him priests, Levites, and others who would help him fulfill the responsibilities that God gave him.

Ezra came in response to God's call, but also under the authority of a personal commission from Persia's King Artaxerxes (7:11-28). For the third time, we see a Persian monarch give royal assistance to the exiles, as Ezra is granted money and other practical assistance for his journey. The king also warns his officials not to tax or otherwise interfere with Ezra's projects, and he openly acknowledges the spiritual importance of what Ezra is about to do. Ezra himself sees the hand of God in all this (verses 27-28), knowing that it was God, not his own skill or brilliance, that had won him such favor before the king. This awareness of spiritual reality will be seen throughout Ezra's ministry, and it is a quality we will do well to emulate.

Study Suggestion: What kinds of spiritual needs might Ezra be preparing to meet? That is, having finished the new temple, what kinds of lessons might the exiles might need to learn next? What parallels might there be in our lives and ministries? What do we see so far about Ezra himself that we can apply ourselves? (Be as specific as possible.)

#### ***Ezra & His Group Arrive in Jerusalem (Ezra 8)***

This chapter gives us a listing of those who came to Jerusalem with Ezra, a description of their journey, and an account Ezra's first activities upon arriving in Jerusalem. These narratives, often rather dry in appearance, are primarily significant in establishing Ezra's responsibilities and

perspective. As priests of the New Covenant, we are all to some degree called to share in a ministry similar to that of Ezra.

We are first given a list of the fellow exiles who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra (8:1-14). The numbers show that this is a much smaller group than the original group that came in 536 BC (as enumerated in Ezra 2). In Ezra 7:7, we are told that most of this new group had primarily spiritual responsibilities: priests, Levites, singers, and other temple servants. This was a smaller group, for a different job. God is always all-knowing in assigning ministry responsibilities. Among the people of God, sometimes there are big jobs that require everyone, while at other times there are needs that need to be filled by a few particularly suitable persons. None of us shall ever see more than a small part of God's plans, and we shall never be able to calculate out exactly what he wants a particular person to do. But we can always be ready when he moves our hearts (recall Ezra 1:5), and can respond to God's call whenever he makes it clear to us, in his own way, what he wills.

Next, Ezra describes their trip to Jerusalem (8:15-31). He began by assembling the group, and by making sure that the group contained everyone that it needed. Ezra was both perceptive and thorough, and he realized that additional help was needed to fulfill some of the group's responsibilities. He saw to it that the needs were filled before departing. The journey was long, and often hazardous. Although Ezra had been well-provisioned by the king's generosity, the travellers would also face many dangers from robbers and enemies along the way. Ezra made the interesting choice of declining to ask the king for any special protection (verse 21-23), despite being well aware of the dangers. He decided to place full reliance on God, asking his companions to join him in a fast to ask for a safe journey. As he tells us later, God did protect them as Ezra had prayed (verse 31). Ezra's perspective on this and on his ministry are summed up in verse 28 - he indicates that both the people and the articles they were transporting had been consecrated to the Lord; it all belonged to God, and God would take care of it.

The chapter concludes with their arrival in Jerusalem (8:32-36). Ezra wisely lets everyone rest for three days after the long trip (verse 32) before beginning their ministry. Then, he began by weighing out the consecrated articles, making sure everything was accounted for, and only then did he begin his ministry with a series of sacrifices. Just as the workers who completed the temple celebrated by sacrifice, so also Ezra's first action in Jerusalem is to sacrifice in thanksgiving for what God had done in bringing him safely there. Ezra's work was just beginning, but already we can see the wisdom, diligence, faith, and understanding that God had given him for the job ahead.

Study Suggestion: How do we see God take care of Ezra and his companions? What does Ezra mean when he says that the people and the articles are "consecrated to the Lord", and how does this affect his perspective on their travels and their ministry? In what ways can we apply Ezra's perspectives in our own lives and ministries?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2001*

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(Originally taught as Lesson Five of a series on the Rebuilding Of Israel)

## **THE REBUILDING OF ISRAEL, PART ONE: THE BOOK OF EZRA**

### **Notes For Part Five: Ezra's Spiritual Reforms (Ezra 9-10)**

*Last week we began to study Ezra's ministry of spiritual reforms in Jerusalem. We saw his preparations, journey, and first actions. Now we shall conclude the book of Ezra by studying the last two chapters, which detail one important example of Ezra's reforms. These chapters focus primarily on the problems that arose when the Jews intermarried with pagan neighbors.*

#### ***Ezra's Distress & Prayer (Ezra 9)***

Chapters 9-10 of Ezra give us one specific example of the spiritual reforms that Ezra was sent to carry out. Not long after his arrival in Jerusalem, Ezra discovered that many of the Jews had intermarried with some of the pagan peoples who lived in the area. This was a most distressing problem, because it was this very practice that had originally led the nation into idolatry, apostasy, and eventually exile. Ezra's response is worthy of careful study, because it shows not just an awareness of the problem, but also Ezra's deep trust in God and commitment to God.

While Ezra was just beginning his ministry in Jerusalem, some of the leaders of the people came to him and told him that a widespread problem had arisen with inter-marriage between the Jews and their idolatrous pagan neighbors (9:1-2). Worse yet, some of the leaders had led astray others in the community by involving themselves. Ezra would have immediately recognized both the immediate dangers and the broader significance of this mistake. So many times in Israel's history, it had been their reluctance to be different from other nations, their refusal to see themselves as distinct from their neighbors, that had led them into idolatry and other sins.

Ezra's response to this news is noteworthy in several respects (9:3-6a). He is quite distressed, to the point of tearing both his clothes and his hair. Notice both what he does and what he does not do. His response to this news of spiritual disobedience is primarily two-fold: he expresses his distress, and goes to God in prayer. He does not, at this point, blast the people or even lecture them on what they have done, but turns first to God. As a leader, Ezra accepts responsibility for the situation, even though he himself had not committed any sin.

Ezra's Prayer (9:6b-15) first of all shows his awareness of grace and deliverance, as he acknowledges the ways that God has always cared for his people, keeping them both safe and special. Ezra knows that their current entanglements with idolaters shows a failure to appreciate who they are to God. Ezra confesses the sins of the people, and shows his awareness of the way that these sins have damaged their relationship with God. He concludes with an implicit plea for God not to destroy his people for what they have done. He knows that they are God's remnant, entrusted with the important job of building for the future.

Study Suggestion: Consider the kinds of sins that might sometimes put us in Ezra's position - that is, the kinds of sins that we might have to deal with in other Christians. What do we learn from Ezra about how to handle such situations when they arise?

#### ***Confession & Reform (Ezra 10)***

Ezra's example of prayerful humility and faith soon spread throughout the community, and the people began to realize the severity of what they had done. Their repentance was genuine; they accepted responsibility and dealt with the problem, at least for the time being. Once again, note

that the importance of this passage goes beyond the specific issues involved - this series of events holds many important general lessons about sin, repentance, and spiritual leadership.

Seeing Ezra's sincere distress, and realizing the implications of their actions, the people respond (10:1-6). They admit "we have been unfaithful" (verse 2), and agree to deal with the problem promptly and decisively. Ezra approves, but still retains a deep feeling of sorrow (verse 6) over what has happened. Although the situation will be put right, it still saddens him that such a thing had happened, in spite of the convicting examples in Israel's past history.

A proclamation is made about inter-marriage (10:7-17), commanding everyone to appear in Jerusalem, to deal with the problem plainly and openly, and to handle it as a community. Ezra gave a short speech (verses 10-11), calling them to confess and to pull away from the pagans they had married\* - a harsh condition, but they agreed, realizing that to do otherwise could only lead to worse problems. When caught in sin, the best way to handle it is to flee from it entirely, rather than gradually pulling away. The latter seems easier to our flesh, but if we genuinely repent, we shall not continue to flirt with sins in our past. And, just as a few proud hold-outs refused to heed Ezra's plea (verse 15), there are always those who think the urges of their flesh are more important than God's wise commands. Let us not be among them, for just as the names of these proud men are forever recorded as examples of ignorance, all who continually disobey God risk disgracing themselves and damaging their lives and the lives of others.

\* This may seem like a drastic requirement, but these pagan wives were in most cases blatant idolaters, who practiced ritual immorality, infant sacrifice, and other horrible customs, besides the evils inherent in idolatry itself. (Note also that there are also many examples of approved intermarriages in the OT.) This passage should not be seen as a binding example for handling Christians who marry unbelievers, since not all of the principles involved are the same. It is, however, a good example of how to respond when we are convicted of sin, and there are also some broader lessons about becoming entangled with the world.

The rest of the chapter is a list of offenders (10:18-44). Throughout Ezra and Nehemiah, we see a call to take responsibility for our lives and ministries. Whether building or rebuilding, there is no time for excuses, rationalizations, or delays, which serve no constructive purpose. The persons listed here sinned, but they also repented. We should remember not that they erred (for all err frequently, believers and unbelievers alike), but that they had the humility and the zeal to make things right when convicted of sin, for those are rare and valuable qualities indeed.

These closing chapters of Ezra give us just one example of his reforms. When we study Nehemiah, we shall again meet Ezra and shall learn more about his ministry. He is an example of someone who had great wisdom and perception, but also, and more importantly, a deep reliance on God and a deep commitment to God's truth and righteousness.

Study Suggestion: What did the people learn from having this sin exposed? What qualities did they need to have in order to respond in this way? What did Ezra do that helped them to handle their mistakes appropriately?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 2001*

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