

CHAPTER 6

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are the last three history books found in the Old Testament. These three books tell us what happened to the Jewish people after the Babylonian Captivity (see chapter 1 under the historical category described by the word "**Construction**").

The Babylonian Captivity lasted 70 years. Most of the kingdom of Judah (the Southern captivity) had been carried away to the land of Babylon. Were the Jewish people happy in this far away, foreign land (Psalm 137:1-4)? _____ They did not forget their homeland and their beloved city Jerusalem (Psalm 137:5). In fact, Daniel, who was one of the Jews in Babylon, prayed to his God three times every day. When he prayed, what direction did he face (Daniel 6:10)? _____

It was not God's plan that His people should stay forever in Babylon. God had told Jeremiah the prophet what His plan would be. What did God say He would do to the king of Babylon after the 70 years of Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 25:12)?

_____ This is exactly what happened! God sent a Persian King by the name of Cyrus and Cyrus conquered the kingdom of Babylon! God also promised that after the 70 years He would visit His people and cause them to R_____ to their beloved homeland (Jeremiah 29:10). God used king Cyrus to do this also! We read about this return in the last two verses of 2 Chronicles and in the first two verses of Ezra.

THE THREE RETURNS TO JERUSALEM

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us about three different times when the Jews returned to their homeland. Let's think about each of these returns:

The First Return Under the Leadership of Zerubbabel

Zerubbabel was the governor (leader) of the children of Israel and he was also a descendant of King David. Zerubbabel was the man who led the first group of captives back to Jerusalem. We read about this return in the early chapters of Ezra.

How many Jews returned with Zerubbabel? The answer to this question is found in Ezra 2:64-65. Counting the servants, there were only about 50,000 people who returned to the land of their fathers. This is a very small group! The Bible calls this very small group a **remnant**. Many of the Jews who were living in Babylon and in other countries were living in comfortable houses and they were glad to stay right where they were. But a few of the Jews had a love in their hearts for the land which God had given to them and they wanted to return. As soon as Cyrus gave them permission, they were ready to go (see Ezra 1:1-3)!

Fifty thousand people may seem like a large group, but it was not in comparison with the number of Jews who came into the promised land under Joshua. According to the book of Numbers, about how many Jews went into the promised land? See Numbers 26:51. Next to this number, fifty thousand is not a large group!

Note: Fifty thousand people would fill up a major league ballpark; Two million people would fill up every major league ball park in the country!

When the Jews returned to the land, their first job was to *rebuild the temple*. What did the Babylonians do to the beautiful temple (house of God) which Solomon had built (2 Chronicles 36:19)? _____ When the *Jewish remnant* (small group of Jews) returned to the city of Jerusalem nothing was left of the temple except ashes, heaps of stone and rubble. These Jews had a great work to do!

The Second Return Under the Leadership Of Ezra

About 80 years later another group of Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra who was a great Bible teacher. This was a much smaller group of people (only about two thousand people). We can read about the amazing journey these people took in Ezra chapters 7 and 8.

The Third Return Under the Leadership Of Nehemiah

About 13 years later Nehemiah led a group of Jews back to Jerusalem. We read about this in Nehemiah chapter 2. The Bible does not tell us how many people returned with Nehemiah, but it was probably not a very large group. When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he encouraged the Jews to rebuild the walls of the city. By this time the temple had been rebuilt but the walls of the city were still in ruins. Why do you think it was important for a city to have tall and strong walls?

- a. For decoration
- b. To keep children from wandering away and getting lost
- c. For protection from the enemy who might try to conquer the city
- d. To keep people's pets from wandering away

The Jews living in the days of Nehemiah had a great work to do!

THE KINGS OF PERSIA

As you read the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, you will come across the names of different kings. These men were Persian kings. When you read the names of these kings you can look on this list which will help you to understand who the king was and when he lived.

1. CYRUS THE GREAT (550-530 B.C.)

This is the king that Isaiah had long ago promised would come and deliver the children of Israel (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-5). He conquered the Babylonians and then allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild their temple (Ezra chapter 1). Daniel was still alive when Cyrus was king (Daniel 1:21; 10:1).

2. CAMBYSES (530-522 B.C.)

3. SMERDIS (He ruled less than a year.)

4. DARIUS THE GREAT (522-486 B.C.)

Darius made a decree that the work of the temple should be continued without any hindrance (Ezra chapter 6). It was during his reign that the temple was completed (Ezra chapter 6).

Note: Don't confuse this king with Darius the Mede who is mentioned in the book of Daniel (see Daniel 5:31; 6:1). Darius the Mede was the governor of Babylon under Cyrus the Great.

5. AHASUERUS or XERXES (486-464 B.C.)

This is the king that we read about in the book of Esther. Esther became his queen. He is also mentioned in Ezra 4:6.

6. ARTAXERXES I (464-423 B.C.)

At first this king sent a decree ordering the Jews to stop rebuilding the city and the walls (see Ezra 4:6-23). Later, however, he allowed his cupbearer, Nehemiah, to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah chapters 1-2). This is also the same king who had earlier allowed Ezra to return (Ezra chapters 7-8).

These were all great kings, but as we read the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, we learn that there is a much greater **King** in heaven who is in control of all things!

THREE BOOKS AND FOUR TRUE STORIES!

The book of Ezra is a very interesting book! It is actually two books in one! We find the first book in the first six chapters and we find the second book in the last four chapters. In between chapters 6 and 7 there is a time gap of about 58 years!

<p style="text-align: center;">BOOK NUMBER 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE ACCOUNT OF ZERUBBABEL</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ezra Chapters 1-6</p>
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In between chapters 6 and 7 we find:

A Gap of about 58 years!
During this time all of the events in the book of Esther took place!

<p style="text-align: center;">BOOK NUMBER 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE ACCOUNT OF EZRA</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Ezra Chapters 7-10</p>

After Ezra Chapter 10 all of the events in the book of Nehemiah took place! So

although we have three books (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther) we actually have four true accounts:

- 1) THE ACCOUNT OF ZERUBBABEL (Ezra chapters 1-6)
- 2) THE ACCOUNT OF ESTHER (the book of Esther)
- 3) THE ACCOUNT OF EZRA (Ezra chapters 7-10)
- 4) THE ACCOUNT OF NEHEMIAH (the book of Nehemiah)

Let us now consider each of these accounts one at a time!

THE ACCOUNT OF ZERUBBABEL

(Ezra Chapters 1-6)

MAIN CHARACTERS:

Zerubbabel (also called Sheshbazzar), the governor
Jeshua (Joshua) the High Priest
Haggai and Zechariah the Prophets (these two men
encouraged the Jews to work hard and to build the temple)

PERSIAN KINGS:

Cyrus the Great (allowed the Jews to return to the land)
Darius the Great (the temple was finished during his reign)

MAIN PROBLEM:

Getting the temple rebuilt

OPPOSITION:

Samaritan enemies (Ezra chapters 4-5)

The Key Verse

One key verse is found in Ezra 5:5: "But the _____ of their _____ was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease (building the temple)." God's good eye was upon His people! God was watching out for His people.

Another key verse is found in Ezra 1:5: "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all them whose _____ God had raised (stirred up), to go up to _____ the **house of the LORD** (the temple) which is in Jerusalem." God moved in the hearts of these people! He stirred them up and put that desire in their hearts to build the temple. *God's good eye was upon His people!*

Remember, there were not many Jews who returned to the land and they were certainly not a mighty army. As they came to Jerusalem they were surrounded by the people of the land who were their enemies. We read about these enemies in Ezra chapters 4 and 5. These enemies tried to do everything they could to get the Jews to stop building the temple. Did these enemies succeed or did they fail? Were the Jews able to finish God's house (Ezra 6:15)? _____ There is only one reason why the Jews were successful: **God's good eye was upon them!** They had a great God watching over them and protecting them! The enemies of the Jews were no match for the God of the Jews!

If you are a believer, then you can be sure that God's eye is upon you! In 1 Peter 2:25 the Lord Jesus Christ is called our S _____ and our B _____. Of course a shepherd's job is to **watch over** His sheep. The word "bishop" means "one who watches over, one who cares for." We have a great Shepherd who watches out for us! Does the believer face enemies in the world? Is our God greater than these enemies? Even though we cannot see God, we can be sure that **He sees us!** Every believer should say what Hagar once said in Genesis 16:13: "Thou God _____ me!"

THE ACCOUNT OF ESTHER

(The Book of Esther)

MAIN CHARACTERS:

Ahasuerus the king

Esther the queen

Mordecai the Jew

Wicked Haman the enemy

PERSIAN KING:

Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes)

MAIN PROBLEM:

The entire Jewish nation was going to be destroyed!

OPPOSITION:

Wicked Haman, the devil's man, who devised a plot to destroy the Jews.

God's Name is Nowhere to be Found

One of the most interesting things about the book of Esther is an amazing omission! The Name of God is nowhere mentioned in this book! All of the other books of the Bible make mention of God's Name, except for Esther and the Song of Solomon. Why is the book of Esther silent when it comes to the Divine Name?

Let's think about this carefully. As the book of Esther opens, a great Persian Ruler is on the throne (Esther 1:2). His kingdom is so great that it extends from India all the way to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). There was no greater king on earth!

Where was Israel's king? Where was **Jehovah**, the God of the Jews? The Jews had been carried captive by the Babylonians, and in the days of Ahasuerus, most of the Jews were still away from their homeland. Only a small remnant of Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple as we learned in the story of Zerubbabel (Ezra chapters 1-6). Was the God of Israel still on the throne? Was Jehovah still ruling? Did the Babylonians and the Persians bring God's Rule to an end? Did Persia control the world and the affairs of men, or did God?

Was God still very much concerned and involved with His people the Jews? *Yes He was!* Although God's Name is nowhere seen in this book, **God's hand** is seen moving and directing throughout!

God often works "behind the scenes" accomplishing His purposes! To many, it may seem as if God is not working at all; but to the spiritual person, it is obvious that God is at work, moving and directing and controlling "all _____ after the counsel of His own _____" (Ephesians 1:11). Even as king Nebuchadnezzar once had to learn, **God is still on the throne** (see Daniel 4:33-37). God is "over the kingdoms of the _____" (including the kingdom of Persia!)-see 2 Chronicles 20:6. God is on the _____ of the universe (Psalm 103:19)!

Not only is the Name of God absent from the pages of the book of Esther, but Satan's name is nowhere to be found. The Devil is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther, yet throughout the book we see Satan's **evil hand** at work. Satan is active "behind the scenes," working through his man Haman, in a diabolical attempt to exterminate the people of God.

Bad News for the Jews

Satan's man, Haman, devised a wicked plot to destroy all the Jewish people in the entire kingdom! He was even able to get the king to sign a decree saying that all the Jews would be destroyed and killed on a certain day (see Esther 3:13)! Moreover, the king's decree could not be changed! It looked like the Jews were doomed to destruction! It seemed as if the nation would come to an end!

In this terrible situation God began to do His wonderful work! There was one event which changed the entire course of history and made it possible for the Jewish nation to be saved. What was this event? We read about it in Esther 6:1--**the king could not sleep!** One night the king had trouble sleeping, and because he could not sleep certain things happened in such a way that wicked Haman was defeated and the Jewish nation was saved! God is so great that He can even take a king's sleepless night and use this to work out His perfect plan! It was no accident that the king could not sleep on this particular night!

We should not say that the Jews were just "**lucky**." No, God was doing His work and carrying out His plan in a strange and mysterious way! Esther is the book where God's Name is nowhere found but where His hand is everywhere seen! And this same God is working out His plan and program **today**!

The Key Verse

The key verse in Esther is found in Esther 4:14 (the last part of the verse): "and who knoweth whether thou art come to the _____ for such a time as this?" Mordecai the Jew was talking to Esther. He was hoping that as queen she would go in and talk to the king and try to save the Jewish nation. In this verse Mordecai seemed to realize that God's hand was involved in the situation. He knew that God would deliver His people. And Mordecai knew deep down in his heart that it was no accident that Esther became queen (we learn about how she became queen in Esther chapters 1-2). It was not a matter of being "**lucky**." It was God's purpose that she should be queen "for such a time as this." Mordecai was sure that it was part of God's wonderful plan for His people that Esther should be queen at this time. And as we read the book of Esther we find out that Mordecai was right! God made sure that Esther was the right person in the right place at the right time and saying the right thing!

The same thing is true for each one of us. It was no accident that you were born into this world and that you have the parents that you do and that you live in the house where you live. All of these things did not just happen by chance. God has a wonderful plan that He is working out and we need to realize that He is in complete control. God is working things out so that you can be the right person in the right place at the right time! Most people are too blind to see God's hand at work in their lives, but every believer needs to be aware of this. The God of the Bible is not only Someone who once lived thousands of years ago and helped people like Esther and Ezra. The God of the Bible is also the **King of the universe** who is working out His perfect plan today! Are you letting Him control your life? Are you letting Him rule from the throne of your heart? Don't try to fight against God's plan! Haman tried this and he ended up dead!

For a more detailed study on the book of Esther, see our [Lessons on Esther](#).

THE ACCOUNT OF EZRA

(Ezra Chapters 7-10)

MAIN CHARACTER:
Ezra the priest (the Scribe)

PERSIAN KING:
Artaxerxes I

MAIN PROBLEM:
Mixed Marriages (Jews getting married to pagans who did not love the Lord)

OPPOSITION:
Opposition from within: SIN

Key Verse

The key verse is found in Ezra 8:22 (the last part of the verse): "The _____ of our God is upon all them for _____ that _____ Him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that _____ Him." Those who seek God will find God's hand of blessing on them! Those who seek God will never be sorry they did! Those who forsake God and turn away from God will be in great trouble! We learned the same truth in our **key verse** from the books of Samuel, found in 1 Samuel 2:30 (see Chapter 5 of these notes). God will honor those who honor Him! Those who do not honor God will be in trouble!

In Ezra chapters 7-8 you will find the phrase "the good hand of God was upon us" six times! Can you find these six places? _____ God's good hand is upon those who seek Him! This was true in Ezra's day and it is true today.

In Ezra chapters 9-10 we no longer find the phrase "the good hand of God was upon us." Even though we read this again and again in chapters 7-8, we read it no more in the last two chapters. Why is this? The last two chapters tell us about the children of Israel falling into a great sin. Many men married pagan (non-Jewish) wives which is something that God had told them never to do (see Deuteronomy 7:1-4). When people forsake the Lord and disobey Him, then God must take away His good hand of blessing.

Because of Ezra's good example, the people confessed their sin and put away their foreign wives, just as Ezra told them to do. When we confess our sins and do what God tells us to do, then once again we can enjoy God's good hand of blessing. After the Jews turned away from their sin, what wonderful phrase do we read again (see Nehemiah 2:8 and 2:18)?

Do you want God's' hand of blessing on your life? Are you seeking Him or forsaking Him? Are you turning to God or are you turning away from God? Remember, God is a rewarder of them that diligently _____ Him (Hebrews 11:6).

THE ACCOUNT OF NEHEMIAH

(The Book of Nehemiah)

MAIN CHARACTERS:
Nehemiah and Ezra

PERSIAN KING:
Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah was his cupbearer)

MAIN PROBLEM:
Getting the walls of the city built

OPPOSITION:
The peoples of the land who tried to hinder the work
(see Nehemiah chapter 4).

Key Verse

The key verse in the book of Nehemiah is found in Nehemiah 6:3: "And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a G _____ W _____, so that I cannot come down!" Nehemiah's enemies wanted him to come down from his work and meet them in a village (Nehemiah 6:2). This was a clever plot to try to destroy Nehemiah (Nehemiah 6:2). Nehemiah knew that he was doing a **great work**! He was doing God's work! And he did not want anything to stop Him from doing God's work! He would not let anything or anyone hinder him, not even the devil himself! Should believers today let anything stop them from doing God's work (1 Corinthians 15:58)? _____

Prayer and God's Word

Why was Nehemiah so successful in doing God's work? He had a very simple secret: **PRAYER!** Nehemiah was a mighty man of prayer! Another *key verse* in the book of Nehemiah is found in Nehemiah 1:4---"And it came to pass, when I heard these words (see v. 3), that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days and fasted and _____ before the _____ of heaven."

Nehemiah received word that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and he brought this matter before His God in prayer! As we read the book of Nehemiah we see that God answered his prayer in a wonderful way and even used Nehemiah to be the man who would lead the people in this **great work** of rebuilding the walls.

Yes, Nehemiah knew how to trust God and depend on God throughout the day! He knew how to talk to God throughout the day! Eleven times in the book of Nehemiah we find Nehemiah praying! One of these times is found in Nehemiah 2:4-5 (this was a quick prayer--it was silently uttered in a brief moment of time [in a second or two?] so that he would know how to answer the king's question). As you read through the book of Nehemiah can you find the other ten places where Nehemiah prays?

In the book of Nehemiah we find **prayer** again and again; in the book of Ezra we find **God's Word** again and again. In the book of Ezra the Word of God is mentioned ten times: Ezra 1:1; 3:2; 6:14; 6:18; 7:6 (Ezra was a great scribe or Bible teacher); 7:10; 7:14; 9:4; 10:3; 10:5. In Nehemiah chapter 8 we once again find Ezra reading and teaching God's Word to the Jewish people!

God's people today need to realize the importance of *prayer* and *the Word of God* (see Acts 6:4)! Nothing is more important than talking to God through prayer and letting God talk to you through Bible reading. In Ezra 9:4 and 10:3 we see that the Jews **trembled** at the words of God. What attitude did Ezra and the people have towards God's Word? Did they take it seriously? Are you a person of prayer like Nehemiah? Are you a person of God's word like Ezra?

