EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

BIBLE STUDY

A Verse-by-Verse Study



Home from exile: the temple rebuilt, the wall raised with trowel and sword, and a queen in Persia placed by God for a time like this

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Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther Bible Study

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A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Study

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this study direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to work through this verse-by-verse study of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. My purpose in writing this study guide is the same as it was for my study of Revelation: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

I have had to rebuild my marriage, my family and a home with my wife and daughters. God was the cornerstone and the bedrock of all of it. Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt on the old foundation. I learned that nothing I rebuilt stood unless it was built on Him.

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther tell what happened to God's people after the exile, when the Babylonian empire had fallen and Persia ruled the world. Ezra tells of the first Jews who went home to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, and of a priest who taught them God's Law. Nehemiah tells of a man who left the king's palace to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem and to call the people back to the covenant. Esther tells of the Jews who stayed behind in Persia, and how God saved them from a plot to wipe them out, though His name is never once written in the book. I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible or on these books. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and understand how He keeps His promises to His people, even when they are few, weak and far from home. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal in these three books. They come at the end of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and they only make sense if we remember what came before. God had warned His people for centuries through Moses and the prophets that if they kept turning to other gods, He would send them out of the land. They did not listen, and in 586 B.C. the Babylonians burned

Jerusalem and the temple and carried the people away. But God had also promised that the exile would not last forever. Jeremiah said it would last seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10), and Isaiah even named the king who would send the people home, Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28). Ezra opens by telling us that this is exactly what happened: Cyrus made his decree "to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah" (Ezra 1:1). If we forget that background, Ezra 1 reads like a dry royal order. If we remember it, it reads like the morning after a long, dark night.

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

Exegesis means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

Eisegesis means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate

context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written. Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are real history, and this study takes them at their word: these were real kings, real letters, real gates and walls, and God really did stir the heart of a Persian king, give a cupbearer favor before his master, and place a young Jewish woman on the throne of Persia at the very time her people needed her. These books also include long lists of names, letters copied from the royal files, and plain records of who built what. They were written by people who wanted us to know that this happened, to real families, in real places. A note on the name of God: in the SLB, when you see "the LORD" in capital letters, it stands for God's personal name, YHWH, often written Yahweh, which He made known to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14-15). When you see "Lord" in regular letters, it translates a word that means master. When you see "God," it usually translates Elohim, the general Hebrew word for God. Parts of Ezra (4:8 to 6:18 and 7:12-26) were written in Aramaic, the language of the Persian government, rather than Hebrew, and the Aramaic word for God is Elah.

This study uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) unless I note otherwise. To better understand the original Hebrew, I also used The Interlinear Bible (Jay P. Green Sr., ISBN 1-56563-977-4).

How This Study Is Laid Out

Each chapter of this study follows the same pattern as my study of Revelation:

- Scripture: the full text of the chapter, broken into sections, so you can read it straight through first.
- Preview: a short look at what the chapter covers.
- Study: the chapter again, verse by verse, with my notes on what each verse says and what it means for us.
- Summary: the main points of the chapter in a few lines.
- Study Questions: questions for personal study or a small group, from simple fact questions to questions about how we live. Some of them are personal. In a group, no one should ever have to answer one aloud, and what is shared in the group stays there.

Each book also has its own Overview and Background before its first chapter, so you know who wrote it, when its events happened, and why it was written.

Why Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther Are Studied Together

These three books cover the same hundred years or so, from Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C. to the last reforms of Nehemiah about 430 B.C., and they all take place under the kings of Persia. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book, and they read that way. Ezra tells of two returns from exile, the first under Zerubbabel and Jeshua to rebuild the temple, finished in 516 B.C., and the second under Ezra about 458 B.C. to teach the Law. Nehemiah tells of a third return in 445 B.C. to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and then Ezra and Nehemiah stand side by side

as the Law is read and the people renew the covenant. Esther fits in the middle of that story. Its events happen under King Ahasuerus, better known as Xerxes, in the years between the end of Ezra 6 and the start of Ezra 7, and it shows us the Jews who did not go home.

Put together, the three books tell one story: God keeping His promise to bring His people back after the exile. The temple was rebuilt so that God could be worshiped again in the place He had chosen. The wall was rebuilt so that Jerusalem could stand as a city again and not be a reproach among the nations. And in Persia, where most of the Jews still lived, God watched over His people in His hidden care, even when no prophet spoke and no miracle was seen. In all three books God works through the hearts of pagan kings, through ordinary people who pray and work, and through events that look like chance. He had promised that a Savior would come from Abraham's family, from the tribe of Judah, from the house of David, and would be born in Bethlehem and come to the temple in Jerusalem (Micah 5:2; Malachi 3:1). For that to happen, there had to be a people, a city and a temple. These three books show God keeping all three safe until the right time came.

Using This Study With a Group

This study works for one person or for a group. Ezra has ten chapters, Nehemiah has thirteen and Esther has ten, thirty-three in all, so here are two ways a group can pace it:

- One chapter a week: thirty-three weeks, about eight months. If you like, add a first meeting to read the Introduction and the Background of Ezra together, and one more before Nehemiah and before Esther for their Backgrounds.
- Two chapters a week: about seventeen weeks. Some chapters pair well, especially the list chapters with the chapters around them (Ezra 1 and 2, Nehemiah 3 and 4, Nehemiah 7 and 8, Nehemiah 11 and 12). Ezra 9 and 10 belong together, and so do Esther 6 and 7. Take Ezra 4 and Nehemiah 9 on their own if you can, because they cover a lot of ground.

For each meeting, I suggest reading the Scripture out loud together first, straight through, before anyone comments. Then walk through the Study section, stopping where the group has questions, and finish with the Study Questions and prayer. The first questions in each list can be answered from the text. The later ones are more personal, and no one should feel pressed to answer them aloud.

For the long lists of names (Ezra 2, Ezra 10, Nehemiah 3, 7, 10, 11 and 12), you do not need to read every name aloud as a group. Read a few, then read the notes on why the list is there.

Some parts of these books are hard. In Ezra 9 and 10, and again in Nehemiah 13, men who had married women from the peoples around them were told to send those wives and their children away. Esther 2 tells of young women taken into a pagan king's palace, and Esther 9 tells of the Jews killing their enemies on the day set for their own destruction. Nehemiah also prays that God would judge his enemies (Nehemiah 4:4-5). The study handles each one plainly and with care, and it does not pretend that Scripture approves of everything it reports. Some people in your group may have been through a divorce, may be married to someone who does not share their faith, may have grown up in a home that broke apart, or may carry wounds from being used or

overlooked by people in power. These chapters can stir that up. If you lead a group, read those sections ahead of time and be ready to listen. If someone shares something that puts them or another person in danger, help them get help right away.

I look forward to walking with you through the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. If you'd like to share feedback, please email me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

May God bless you and your time studying and getting to know Him better.

Overview of Ezra

Ezra is the fifteenth book of the Bible. In our English Bibles it comes right after 2 Chronicles and right before Nehemiah. It picks up exactly where Chronicles stops. The last two verses of 2 Chronicles and the first verses of Ezra tell of the same decree of Cyrus, almost word for word (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-3). In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book, and Nehemiah carries the same story on.

Ezra is a book about going home and starting over with God. The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. and carried the people of Judah away. Then Babylon itself fell to Cyrus king of Persia in 539 B.C. In his first year Cyrus let the Jews go home and rebuild the temple. The book follows two groups who went. The first, about 50,000 people under Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest, rebuilt the altar and laid the foundation of the temple, faced years of opposition, and finally finished the temple in 516 B.C. The second, about sixty years later, came with Ezra himself, a priest and a scribe who had given his life to studying and teaching the Law of Moses. Ezra found that many of the people had already drifted back toward the sins that had sent their fathers into exile, and the book ends with the people confessing their sin and putting it away.

The theme of Ezra is God's faithfulness in bringing His people back, and the people's need to be faithful in return. God moved the hearts of kings to keep His word (1:1; 6:22; 7:27). The people rebuilt the house of God and restored its worship. And God's Word was put back at the center of their lives. The key verse is Ezra's own purpose:

Ezra 7:10 (SLB)

"For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do ***it***, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel."

Another phrase runs all through the book: "the hand of the LORD his God on him" (7:6), or "the good hand of his God on him" (7:9; also 7:28; 8:18, 22, 31). Whatever the people did, they did because God's hand was on them.

Ezra has 10 chapters and 280 verses. Here is its structure:

Part One: The First Return and the Temple Rebuilt (chapters 1 to 6)

- Ezra 1: Cyrus Lets God's People Go Home
- Ezra 2: The List of Those Who Returned
- Ezra 3: The Altar and the Temple Foundation
- Ezra 4: Enemies Stop the Work
- Ezra 5: The Prophets Stir Up the Builders
- Ezra 6: Darius' Decree and the Temple Finished

Part Two: Ezra's Return and Reforms (chapters 7 to 10)

- Ezra 7: Ezra Comes to Jerusalem
- Ezra 8: The Journey Under God's Good Hand
- Ezra 9: Ezra's Prayer of Confession
- Ezra 10: The People Put Away Foreign Wives

Where this book points to Christ: the New Testament does not quote Ezra directly, but the book is part of the road that leads to Jesus. God had promised that the Messiah would come from the line of David, and Zerubbabel, the governor who led the first return, was a grandson of King Jehoiachin and is named in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:12; Luke 3:27). God had promised that the Lord would come to His temple (Malachi 3:1), and Haggai, who preached during the building in Ezra 5, said the glory of this house would be greater than the glory of the first (Haggai 2:9). That second temple, later enlarged by Herod, is the temple where Jesus was presented as a baby, taught as a boy, and cleansed as a man. Jesus also spoke of His own body as the true temple (John 2:19-21). Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law is a small picture of the One who would teach God's Word with authority and who would Himself be our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14).

Background of Ezra

Author: The book does not name its writer in a title line, but from 7:27 to 9:15 Ezra speaks in the first person ("me," "I"), and Jewish tradition names Ezra as the writer of this book, of Nehemiah, and of Chronicles. The SLB introduction names Ezra, a priest and scribe (7:1-10). Ezra used official records: the list of those who returned (chapter 2), copies of royal letters and decrees (chapters 4 to 7), and family lists (chapters 8 and 10). Some modern scholars think a later editor, often called the Chronicler, put Ezra and Nehemiah together from these sources a century or more later. I take the traditional view that Ezra wrote the book, using the records he had, because it fits the first-person sections and the close knowledge of Persian letters and offices the book shows.

When it was written: Most likely soon after the last events in the book, about 450 to 440 B.C.

When the events happened: The book covers about eighty years. Chapters 1 to 6 run from Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C. to the finished temple in 516 B.C. Chapters 7 to 10 begin in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, about 458 B.C., and end the next spring. Between chapters 6 and 7 there is a gap of nearly sixty years, and the events of the book of Esther happen in that gap. Ezra 4:6-23 also jumps ahead in time to show how the opposition kept going under later kings; we will look at that in chapter 4.

The kings of Persia in Ezra and Nehemiah: It helps to know the kings in order. Cyrus the Great (559 to 530 B.C.) took Babylon in 539 B.C. and issued the decree of Ezra 1. Cambyses (530 to 522 B.C.) is not named in Ezra. Darius I (522 to 486 B.C.) let the temple be finished (Ezra 5 and 6). Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes (486 to 465 B.C.), is the king of the book of Esther and of Ezra 4:6. Artaxerxes I (464 to 424 B.C.) sent Ezra (Ezra 7) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2), and is the king of the letters in Ezra 4:7-23.

Setting: The Persian Empire was the largest the world had yet seen, reaching from India to Egypt and up into what is now Turkey. Its kings ruled through governors over provinces. Judah was a small district in the province the Persians called "Beyond the River" (Ezra 4:10), meaning west of the Euphrates. Jerusalem was still mostly in ruins. Around it lived peoples who had moved into the land while the Jews were away, including the people of Samaria in the north, whom the Assyrian kings had settled there after 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:24-41). Many Jews stayed in Babylon and Persia, where they had built homes and businesses, as Jeremiah had told them to do (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Only a small number chose the hard road home.

Who it was written to: The Jews who had returned to Judah and their children. They needed to know that God had brought them back, that their temple and worship were connected to the worship of David's and Solomon's day, and that the danger that had sent their fathers into exile, turning to other gods, was still real.

Words to know: The exile is the time when the people of Judah were carried away to Babylon and lived there as captives, from the first deportation in 605 B.C. (Daniel 1:1) to the return. The sons of the exile, or the exiles, is Ezra's name for the people who came back. A remnant is the small part of a people left after a disaster, whom God keeps for Himself (Ezra 9:8, 15). A scribe was

a man trained to copy, read and explain the written Law. A Levite was a member of the tribe of Levi, set apart to serve at the temple; the priests were the Levites descended from Aaron, who offered the sacrifices.

Purpose: Ezra was written to show that God kept His word through Jeremiah and Isaiah and brought His people home, that the rebuilt temple and its worship were God's work and not just man's, and that God's people must build their lives on His Word. It also shows, honestly, how quickly a forgiven people can drift, and how they can come back to God through confession and repentance.

Ezra 1: Cyrus Lets God's People Go Home

Scripture

1:1-11 And in year one of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and he caused a proclamation to pass through all his kingdom, and also in writing, saying, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of the heavens, has given to me, and He has appointed me to build for Him a house in Jerusalem, which ***is*** in Judah. Who ***is*** among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which ***is*** in Judah, and let him build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He ***is*** the God who ***is*** in Jerusalem. And every one who remains, from all the places where he ***is*** sojourning, let the men of his place support him with silver and with gold and with property and with livestock, with the freewill offering for the house of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem." And the heads of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin arose, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up, to go up to build the house of the LORD which ***is*** in Jerusalem. And all those around them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with property, and with livestock, and with precious things, besides all ***that was*** offered willingly. And King Cyrus brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from Jerusalem and had put in the house of his gods. And Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. And this ***was*** their number: thirty basins of gold, one thousand basins of silver, twenty-nine knives, thirty bowls of gold, four hundred and ten bowls of silver of a second ***kind***, ***and*** one thousand other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver ***were*** five thousand and four hundred. Sheshbazzar brought up everything with the bringing up of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Preview

After seventy years of exile, God keeps His word. In the first year of his rule over Babylon, Cyrus king of Persia sends a proclamation through his whole empire. The God of the heavens, he says, has told him to build a house for Him in Jerusalem, and any of God's people who want to go and build it may go. Those who stay are to help them with silver, gold, goods and animals.

God stirs up the hearts of the leaders of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, and they get ready to go. Their neighbors load them with gifts. And Cyrus brings out the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off from the temple more than fifty years before and hands them, all counted, to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah, to take home.

Study

1:1 *And in year one of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, and he caused a proclamation to pass through all his kingdom, and also in writing, saying,*

"In year one of Cyrus king of Persia." Cyrus had been king of Persia for some years, but this means his first year as ruler of Babylon, after his army took the city in 539 B.C. So the decree came in 538 B.C. Daniel 5 tells of the night Babylon fell, and Daniel was still alive to see this decree (Daniel 1:21; 6:28).

Why did Cyrus do it? Ezra gives two answers in one sentence. First, "to fulfill the word of the LORD from the mouth of Jeremiah." Jeremiah had said that Babylon would rule seventy years, and then the LORD would bring His people back (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). Second, "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." The king made the decision, but God moved his heart. Proverbs says "the heart of a king in the hand of the LORD" is like streams of water that He turns wherever He wants (Proverbs 21:1).

Isaiah had even named Cyrus as the one who would say of Jerusalem, "Let her be rebuilt," about 150 years before he was born (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13). God does not just know the future. He shapes it.

How do we count the seventy years? Bible teachers count them two common ways. From the first deportation in 605 B.C. to the return about 538 or 536 B.C. is close to seventy years. From the burning of the temple in 586 B.C. to the finished temple in 516 B.C. is also seventy years. Either way, God kept His word to the year.

1:2-4 *"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of the heavens, has given to me, and He has appointed me to build for Him a house in Jerusalem, which **is** in Judah. Who **is** among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which **is** in Judah, and let him build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He **is** the God who **is** in Jerusalem. And every one who remains, from all the places where he **is** sojourning, let the men of his place support him with silver and with gold and with property and with livestock, with the freewill offering for the house of God which **is** in Jerusalem."*

Here is the decree itself. "All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of the heavens, has given to me, and He has appointed me to build for Him a house in Jerusalem."

Did Cyrus believe in the LORD as the only true God? Probably not in the way Daniel did. Cyrus was known for honoring the gods of the peoples he conquered and sending them home to rebuild their temples. An inscription from his reign, on a clay barrel known as the Cyrus Cylinder, tells how he returned peoples and their gods to their own lands. But that makes the point even stronger. Cyrus was a pagan king following his own policy, and God used that very policy to keep His promise to Israel. Isaiah said God would use Cyrus even though, as God said to him, "you have not known Me" (Isaiah 45:4-5).

The decree said three things. Anyone of God's people could go: "let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and let him build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel." Those who stayed were to help with "silver and with gold and with property and with livestock." And there was to be a "freewill offering for the house of God." No one was forced to go, and no one was forced to give. The going and the giving came from willing hearts.

This must have reminded the people of the exodus, when the Egyptians sent Israel out loaded with silver and gold (Exodus 12:35-36). God was bringing His people out of captivity a second time.

1:5-6 *And the heads of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin arose, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up, to go up to build the house of the LORD which* ***is*** *in Jerusalem. And all those around them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with property, and with livestock, and with precious things, besides all* ***that was*** *offered willingly.*

"The heads of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin arose, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up." The same God who stirred up Cyrus also stirred up His people. Judah and Benjamin were the two tribes of the southern kingdom that had been taken to Babylon, though people from other tribes came too (1 Chronicles 9:3). The "heads of the fathers" were the leaders of the family clans.

Not everyone went. Most of the Jews stayed in Babylon. After seventy years, many had been born there, owned houses and land there, and had never seen Jerusalem. Going home meant a long journey of about 900 miles to a ruined city and a hard life. Only those whose spirit God had stirred were willing.

That is still how God works. He calls, and He also gives the desire to answer (Philippians 2:13). If you feel a pull to follow God into something hard, that pull may be His hand on your heart.

"All those around them strengthened their hands" with silver, gold, goods, livestock and "precious things." The neighbors who stayed behind, perhaps Jews who were not going and Gentiles too, sent them off with gifts. Not everyone is called to go, but everyone can help those who do.

1:7-8 *And King Cyrus brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from Jerusalem and had put in the house of his gods. And Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.*

"King Cyrus brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from Jerusalem and had put in the house of his gods." These were the gold and silver bowls, basins and utensils used in the temple worship. Nebuchadnezzar had taken them as trophies, to show that his gods had beaten Israel's God (2 Kings 25:13-15; Daniel 1:2). Belshazzar had drunk wine from them at his feast on the night Babylon fell (Daniel 5:2-4). Now they were going home.

Cyrus gave them by the hand of "Mithredath the treasurer," who "counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah." The word prince here means a leader or ruler. Who was Sheshbazzar? Ezra 5:14 says Cyrus made him governor, and 5:16 says he laid the foundation of the temple. Ezra 3 says Zerubbabel and Jeshua did that. Some Bible teachers think Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same man, with one name used at the Persian court. Others think Sheshbazzar was an older leader, perhaps Zerubbabel's uncle Shenazzar (1 Chronicles 3:18), who led at first and then gave way to Zerubbabel. Scripture does not settle it.

1:9-11 *And this **was** their number: thirty basins of gold, one thousand basins of silver, twenty-nine knives, thirty bowls of gold, four hundred and ten bowls of silver of a second **kind**, **and** one thousand other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver **were** five thousand and four hundred. Sheshbazzar brought up everything with the bringing up of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.*

The vessels are counted: basins of gold and silver, knives, bowls of gold and silver, and "one thousand other vessels." The total was "five thousand and four hundred."

If you add up the numbers in verses 9 and 10, they come to 2,499, not 5,400. The common explanation is that verses 9 and 10 list only the larger or main items, and the total in verse 11 counts everything. Others suggest a copying error in one of the numbers, since numbers were easy to miscopy. Either way, the point is clear. Every piece was counted, and every piece was handed over.

Why does Ezra list them at all? Because these were holy things, and their return showed that the worship in the new temple was the same worship as in Solomon's temple. The God who had let them be taken had kept them safe in a pagan temple for decades and now brought them back. Nothing that belongs to God is ever lost to Him.

"Sheshbazzar brought up everything with the bringing up of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem." The exile, which began with Nebuchadnezzar bringing people and vessels out of Jerusalem, ends with Cyrus sending both back.

Summary

In 538 B.C., the first year of his rule over Babylon, Cyrus king of Persia made a proclamation through his empire, because the LORD stirred his spirit to fulfill the word He had spoken through Jeremiah. Cyrus declared that the LORD, the God of the heavens, had given him the kingdoms of the earth and charged him to build a house for Him in Jerusalem. Any of God's people could go up and build, and those who stayed were to help them with silver, gold, goods, livestock and freewill offerings. The leaders of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred, rose up to go, and their neighbors gave them gifts. Cyrus brought out the temple vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken and counted them out through his treasurer to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah, 5,400 vessels of gold and silver, and Sheshbazzar brought them up with the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Study Questions

1. When did Cyrus make his proclamation, and whose word was being fulfilled? (1:1)

2. Who stirred up Cyrus' spirit? What does that tell you about God and earthly rulers? (1:1)

3. What did Cyrus say the God of the heavens had given him and appointed him to do? (1:2)

4. What were those who stayed behind asked to do? (1:4)

5. Who rose up to go to Jerusalem, and what moved them to go? (1:5)

6. What did Cyrus bring out of the house of his gods, and to whom did he give them? (1:7-8)

7. Isaiah named Cyrus long before he was born (Isaiah 44:28). How does that strengthen your trust in the rest of God's promises?

8. Most of the Jews stayed in Babylon where life was comfortable. Is there a place of comfort God may be calling you to leave?

9. Some went, and some gave to help those who went. Which of those is God asking of you right now?

10. God kept the temple vessels safe for decades in a pagan temple. What in your life feels lost that you can trust God to keep?

Ezra 2: The List of Those Who Returned

Scripture

2:1-35 And these ***are*** the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile to Babylon, and they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city, who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, ***and*** Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: the sons of Parosh, two thousand one hundred seventy-two; the sons of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; the sons of Arah, seven hundred seventy-five; the sons of Pahath-moab, of the sons of Jeshua, Joab, two thousand eight hundred twelve; the sons of Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Zattu, nine hundred forty-five; the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty; the sons of Bani, six hundred forty-two; the sons of Bebai, six hundred twenty-three; the sons of Azgad, one thousand two hundred twenty-two; the sons of Adonikam, six hundred sixty-six; the sons of Bigvai, two thousand fifty-six; the sons of Adin, four hundred fifty-four; the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; the sons of Bezai, three hundred twenty-three; the sons of Jorah, one hundred twelve; the sons of Hashum, two hundred twenty-three; the sons of Gibbar, ninety-five; the sons of Bethlehem, one hundred twenty-three; the men of Netophah, fifty-six; the men of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Azmaveth, forty-two; the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-three; the sons of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty-one; the men of Michmash, one hundred twenty-two; the men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty-three; the sons of Nebo, fifty-two; the sons of Magbish, one hundred fifty-six; the sons of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Harim, three hundred twenty; the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-five; the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five; the sons of Senaah, three thousand six hundred thirty.

2:36-58 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three; the sons of Immer, one thousand fifty-two; the sons of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred forty-seven; the sons of Harim, one thousand seventeen. The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, seventy-four. The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred twenty-eight. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, all ***of them*** one hundred thirty-nine. The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephusim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. The sons of the servants of Solomon: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami. All the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon ***were*** three hundred ninety-two.

2:59-70 And these ***are*** those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, ***and*** Immer, and they were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they ***were*** from Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred fifty-two. And of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. These sought their record ***among*** those enrolled by genealogy, and they were not found, and they were defiled ***and removed*** from the priesthood. And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up for Urim and for Thummim. All the assembly together ***was*** forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male servants and their female servants; these ***were*** seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and to them ***belonged*** two hundred male singers and female singers. Their horses ***were*** seven hundred thirty-six; their mules, two hundred forty-five; their camels, four hundred thirty-five; donkeys, six thousand seven hundred twenty. And some of the heads of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which ***is*** in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work: gold, sixty-one thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 6,250 pounds (five thousand minas), and one hundred tunics of priests. And the priests and the Levites and some of the people and the singers and the gatekeepers and the temple servants dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Preview

This chapter is a list of the people who came home with Zerubbabel. It names the leaders, then counts the people by family and by hometown, then lists the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants. A few families could not prove their family line, and some priests were kept from serving until the matter could be settled.

The total was 42,360, besides 7,337 servants and 200 singers. When they reached Jerusalem, some of the family heads gave freely toward rebuilding the house of God, and then everyone settled in their own towns. Nehemiah 7 gives the same list again, with a few small differences.

Study

2:1-2 *And these **are** the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile to Babylon, and they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city, who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, **and** Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:*

"These are the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile." The province is Judah, now a small district of the Persian Empire. These were the people "whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile," or more often their children and grandchildren, and they "returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city."

Eleven leaders are named, beginning with "Zerubbabel, Jeshua." Zerubbabel was of the royal line of David (1 Chronicles 3:17-19) and served as governor (Haggai 1:1). Jeshua, also called Joshua, was

the high priest (Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 3:1). Together they stood for the throne and the altar. The Nehemiah and Mordecai named here are not the famous men of the books of Nehemiah and Esther, who lived later. Nehemiah 7:7 has the same list with a twelfth name, and many think the twelve leaders were meant to stand for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Why would God put a list like this in the Bible? Because these people mattered. They left everything to go back and rebuild. God remembers every one of them by name, and He wanted later generations to know where they came from.

2:3-35 *the sons of Parosh, two thousand one hundred seventy-two; the sons of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; the sons of Arah, seven hundred seventy-five; the sons of Pahath-moab, of the sons of Jeshua, Joab, two thousand eight hundred twelve; the sons of Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Zattu, nine hundred forty-five; the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty; the sons of Bani, six hundred forty-two; the sons of Bebai, six hundred twenty-three; the sons of Azgad, one thousand two hundred twenty-two; the sons of Adonikam, six hundred sixty-six; the sons of Bigvai, two thousand fifty-six; the sons of Adin, four hundred fifty-four; the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; the sons of Bezai, three hundred twenty-three; the sons of Jorah, one hundred twelve; the sons of Hashum, two hundred twenty-three; the sons of Gibbar, ninety-five; the sons of Bethlehem, one hundred twenty-three; the men of Netophah, fifty-six; the men of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Azmaveth, forty-two; the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-three; the sons of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty-one; the men of Michmash, one hundred twenty-two; the men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty-three; the sons of Nebo, fifty-two; the sons of Magbish, one hundred fifty-six; the sons of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Harim, three hundred twenty; the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-five; the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five; the sons of Senaah, three thousand six hundred thirty.*

The people are counted in two ways. Verses 3 to 20 list them by family, "the sons of Parosh," "the sons of Shephatiah," and so on, named after a forefather. Verses 21 to 35 list them by town: Bethlehem, Anathoth, Ramah, Michmash, Bethel and Ai, Jericho, and others. Most of these towns were within a day's walk of Jerusalem.

Many of the names bring back memories. Bethlehem was the town of Ruth, Boaz and David. Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown, where he bought a field just before the fall of Jerusalem as a sign that God would bring His people back to the land (Jeremiah 32:6-15). Now 128 men of Anathoth came home, just as he said. Bethel and Ai take us back to Abraham and Joshua.

The families and towns would also matter for claims to land. People wanted to show they belonged to the land their forefathers had owned. Some of these same family names appear again among those who came with Ezra (Ezra 8) and among those who signed the covenant (Nehemiah 10).

2:36-58 *The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three; the sons of Immer, one thousand fifty-two; the sons of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred forty-seven; the sons of Harim, one thousand seventeen. The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, seventy-four. The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred twenty-eight. The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, all* ***of them*** *one hundred thirty-nine. The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephusim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. The sons of the servants of Solomon: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami. All the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon* ***were*** *three hundred ninety-two.*

Then come those who served at the temple. "The priests" numbered over 4,000, from four families. That is about one in ten of the whole company, which shows how much the priests cared about the temple being rebuilt.

"The Levites" were only 74. The Levites helped the priests, taught the people and cared for the temple. Why so few? We are not told. Perhaps the lower duties of the Levites held less attraction than a settled life in Babylon. When Ezra came later, he also had trouble finding Levites to go (8:15).

"The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred twenty-eight." Asaph was one of the chief musicians David appointed (1 Chronicles 25:1), and twelve psalms bear his name. "The sons of the gatekeepers" kept watch over the temple gates. "The temple servants" (the Hebrew word is Nethinim, meaning those given) did the more basic work at the temple. "The sons of the servants of Solomon" may have descended from foreigners Solomon put to work on the temple. Some of the names in verses 43 to 57 look foreign, which means people from other nations had become part of God's people and served at His house.

The singers, gatekeepers and temple servants mattered because the worship was to be done the way God had set it up through David. The returned people were not starting a new religion. They were restoring the worship of the LORD.

2:59-63 *And these **are** those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, **and** Immer, and they were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they **were** from Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred fifty-two. And of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. These sought their record **among** those enrolled by genealogy, and they were not found, and they were defiled **and removed** from the priesthood. And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up for Urim and for Thummim.*

Some came who "were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they were from Israel." They could not prove their family line. They still came, and they still counted among the people, 652 of them.

Some priests had the same problem. One family was called by the name of Barzillai, because a forefather had married a daughter of "Barzillai the Gileadite," the old man who helped David when he fled from Absalom (2 Samuel 17:27-29; 19:31-39). "These sought their record among those enrolled by genealogy, and they were not found." So they were kept from the priesthood.

Was that harsh? Under the Law, only descendants of Aaron could serve as priests (Numbers 3:10; 16:40). The people had just come through an exile caused by careless worship, and they did not want to be careless again. But they did not shut these men out for good. "The governor," most likely Zerubbabel or Sheshbazzar, said they should not eat "from the most holy things" (the portions of the sacrifices only priests could eat) "until a priest stood up for Urim and for Thummim." The Urim and Thummim were objects kept by the high priest and used to learn God's will on a question (Exodus 28:30; Numbers 27:21). It seems they had been lost by this time. The matter was left in God's hands.

We do not have to prove our family line to come to God. In Christ, every believer is part of "a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5), and our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). The question is not whose son you are, but whether you belong to Christ.

2:64-67 *All the assembly together **was** forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male servants and their female servants; these **were** seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and to them **belonged** two hundred male singers and female singers. Their horses **were** seven hundred thirty-six; their mules, two hundred forty-five; their camels, four hundred thirty-five; donkeys, six thousand seven hundred twenty.*

"All the assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty." If you add up the family, town, priest and Levite numbers in this chapter, they come to a little under 30,000. Nehemiah 7 gives a total of 42,360 too, but its own numbers add up to a little over 31,000. The common explanation is that the total includes people not counted in the family lists, such as members of other tribes, people who could not trace their line, or perhaps women. Some numbers in the two lists also differ by small amounts, which most likely comes from the copying of numbers over many centuries, or from one list being made at the start of the journey and the other at its end.

Besides the 42,360, there were 7,337 servants and 200 male and female singers, so all together close to 50,000 people. The animals are counted too: horses, mules, camels and 6,720 donkeys. Most people walked. The donkeys carried the goods and the little ones.

2:68-70 *And some of the heads of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which **is** in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work: gold, sixty-one thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 6,250 pounds (five thousand minas), and one hundred tunics of priests. And the priests and the Levites and some of the people and the singers and the gatekeepers and the temple servants dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.*

"Some of the heads of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God, to erect it on its site." Notice that Ezra calls it "the house of the LORD" even though it lay in ruins. To them the place still belonged to God.

"According to their ability they gave." They gave gold, silver, and a hundred priestly garments. God does not ask us to give what we do not have. Paul taught the same thing when he wrote that a gift is acceptable according to what a person has (2 Corinthians 8:12).

Then the people "dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities." The writer calls them "all Israel." These few thousand from Judah and Benjamin stood for the whole people of God. The nation had not been wiped out. A remnant had come home.

Summary

Ezra 2 lists the exiles who came back from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah with Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the other leaders. It counts the people by families and by towns, then lists over 4,000 priests, 74 Levites, 128 singers of the sons of Asaph, 139 gatekeepers, and 392 temple servants and sons of Solomon's servants. Some, including some priests, could not prove their family line; the priests among them were kept from the priesthood and from eating the most holy things until a priest could ask God with the Urim and Thummim. The whole assembly numbered 42,360, besides 7,337 servants and 200 singers, along with their horses, mules, camels and donkeys. When they reached the house of the LORD, some of the family heads gave freely, according to their ability, to rebuild it, and the people settled in their towns.

Study Questions

1. Who were the first two leaders named, and what did each one stand for? (2:2; Haggai 1:1)

2. In what two ways are the people counted in verses 3 to 35? (2:3-35)

3. How many priests came, and how many Levites? What might the difference tell us? (2:36-40)

4. What problem did some families and priests have, and how did the governor handle it? (2:59-63)

5. How many people were in the whole assembly? (2:64-65)

6. How did the heads of the fathers give, and what did they give for? (2:68-69)

7. Why do you think God put this long list of names in the Bible? What does it say about how He sees ordinary people?

8. The priests waited for God to settle their case rather than pushing their way in. When have you had to wait for God to settle something?

9. They gave "according to their ability." What does that mean for your own giving?

10. In Christ we do not need a family record to belong to God. How does it feel to know your name is written in heaven (Luke 10:20)?

Ezra 3: The Altar and the Temple Foundation

Scripture

3:1-7 And the seventh month arrived, and the sons of Israel ***were*** in the cities; and the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. And Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose, and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer up burnt offerings on it, as ***it is*** written in the law of Moses, the man of God. And they established the altar on its bases, for terror ***was*** on them from the peoples of the lands; and they offered up burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings for the morning and for the evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths as ***it is*** written, and ***offered*** the burnt offering day by day by number, according to the ordinance, the matter of each day in its day, and after this the continual burnt offering, and for the new moons, and for all the consecrated appointed times of the LORD, and for everyone who offered willingly a freewill offering to the LORD. From day one of the seventh month they began to offer up burnt offerings to the LORD, and the temple of the LORD was not ***yet*** founded. And they gave money to the masons and to the craftsmen, and food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the permission of Cyrus king of Persia for them.

3:8-13 And in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers, the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come from the captivity to Jerusalem, began; and they appointed the Levites from a son of twenty years and upward to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua stood, his sons and his brothers, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, as one, to oversee the doers of the work in the house of God, the sons of Henadad, their sons and their brothers, the Levites. And the builders founded the temple of the LORD, and they appointed the priests, clothed ***in their vestments***, with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD by the hands of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively with praising and with giving thanks to the LORD: "For ***He is*** good, for His steadfast love ***is*** forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted a great shout, praising the LORD because the house of the LORD was founded. And many of the priests and the Levites and the heads of the fathers, the old men who had seen the first house, at the founding of this house before their eyes, ***were*** weeping with a great voice; and many ***were*** with a shout, with gladness, to lift up a voice, and the people ***were*** not distinguishing the sound of the shout of gladness from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people ***were*** shouting a great shout, and the sound was heard to a distance.

Preview

In the seventh month after their return, the people gather in Jerusalem as one man. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor build the altar of the God of Israel on its old foundations, even though they are afraid of the peoples around them, and the morning and evening burnt offerings begin again. They keep the Feast of Booths and the other appointed feasts, and they hire masons and carpenters and order cedar wood from Lebanon.

In the second year, the work on the temple itself begins. When the builders lay the foundation, the priests blow trumpets and the Levites sing the old song of David's day: the LORD is good, and His steadfast love is forever. The people shout for joy. But many of the old men who had seen Solomon's temple weep out loud, and no one can tell the sound of the joy from the sound of the weeping.

Study

3:1 *And the seventh month arrived, and the sons of Israel **were** in the cities; and the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.*

"The seventh month arrived." The seventh month of Israel's calendar, called Tishri, falls in September and October. It was the most holy month of the year. On its first day came the blowing of trumpets, on its tenth the Day of Atonement, and from its fifteenth the Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:23-36). This was most likely the seventh month of 538 or 537 B.C., soon after they arrived.

"The sons of Israel were in the cities; and the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem." They had scattered to their hometowns to find shelter and plant crops. But when the holy month came, they all came together. "As one man" means with one mind and one purpose. That unity is where every work of God begins (Acts 2:1, 46).

3:2-3 *And Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose, and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer up burnt offerings on it, as **it is** written in the law of Moses, the man of God. And they established the altar on its bases, for terror **was** on them from the peoples of the lands; and they offered up burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings for the morning and for the evening.*

"Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose, and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, and they built the altar of the God of Israel." The priest and the governor led together.

Why build the altar first, before the temple? Because the altar was where sin was dealt with and where God met His people. They could worship without walls and roof, but not without sacrifice. The altar came first because a right relationship with God comes first. They built it "as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God." They did not invent their own worship. They went back to the Book.

"They established the altar on its bases." They found the old foundations and built on the same spot where Solomon's altar had stood, the place God had chosen (Deuteronomy 12:5; 2 Chronicles 3:1).

"For terror was on them from the peoples of the lands." They were afraid of the people around them, and they built anyway. Some Bible teachers read it the other way: they built the altar because they were afraid, turning to God for help. Either way, the fear did not stop them. They began "burnt offerings for the morning and for the evening." The burnt offering was a whole

animal burned on the altar, given completely to God as a sign of full dedication and as a covering for sin (Leviticus 1:3-9). The Law commanded one lamb every morning and one every evening (Exodus 29:38-42). For the first time in about fifty years, the smoke of the daily offering rose again from Jerusalem.

Those offerings pointed forward. They had to be repeated every day, because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). They looked ahead to Jesus Christ, who offered Himself once for all (Hebrews 10:10-12).

3:4-6 *And they kept the Feast of Booths as **it is** written, and **offered** the burnt offering day by day by number, according to the ordinance, the matter of each day in its day, and after this the continual burnt offering, and for the new moons, and for all the consecrated appointed times of the LORD, and for everyone who offered willingly a freewill offering to the LORD. From day one of the seventh month they began to offer up burnt offerings to the LORD, and the temple of the LORD was not **yet** founded.*

"They kept the Feast of Booths as it is written." The Feast of Booths (also called Tabernacles) lasted seven days in the seventh month. The people lived in shelters made of branches to remember how God cared for Israel in the wilderness after He brought them out of Egypt (Leviticus 23:39-43). For people who had just made a long journey out of captivity, many of them still living in rough shelters, this feast must have meant a great deal.

They offered "the burnt offering day by day by number, according to the ordinance." Numbers 29:12-38 sets out a different number of bulls, rams and lambs for each day of the feast. After that came "the continual burnt offering," the offerings for "the new moons," the first day of each month, and for "all the consecrated appointed times of the LORD," the feasts of the year. They also accepted "a freewill offering," a gift above what was required.

"From day one of the seventh month they began to offer up burnt offerings to the LORD, and the temple of the LORD was not yet founded." The worship was running before the building was even started. That is a good order of things. God wants our hearts before He wants our buildings.

3:7 *And they gave money to the masons and to the craftsmen, and food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the permission of Cyrus king of Persia for them.*

"They gave money to the masons and to the craftsmen, and food and drink and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa." This is just how Solomon got the wood for the first temple. Hiram king of Tyre sent cedars from Lebanon down the coast by sea, and Solomon paid with food and oil (1 Kings 5:6-11; 2 Chronicles 2:16). Joppa was the port nearest Jerusalem, about 35 miles away. It was all done "according to the permission of Cyrus king of Persia." The work had the king's approval, and the people used it.

3:8-9 *And in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers, the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come from the captivity to Jerusalem, began; and they appointed the Levites from a son of twenty years and upward to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua stood, his sons and his brothers, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, as one, to oversee the doers of the work in the house of God, the sons of Henadad, their sons and their brothers, the Levites.*

"In the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month." This would be the spring of 536 B.C. It was the second month, the same month Solomon had begun the first temple (1 Kings 6:1). Zerubbabel and Jeshua "and all those who had come from the captivity" began the work.

"They appointed the Levites from a son of twenty years and upward to oversee the work" In David's day the age for Levites to serve was set at twenty (1 Chronicles 23:24-27). With so few Levites (2:40), they needed every one. Jeshua and his sons, Kadmiel and his sons, and the sons of Henadad stood "as one" to oversee the work. The phrase "as one" comes back again. It took everyone working together.

3:10-11 *And the builders founded the temple of the LORD, and they appointed the priests, clothed **in their vestments**, with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD by the hands of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively with praising and with giving thanks to the LORD: "For **He is** good, for His steadfast love **is** forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted a great shout, praising the LORD because the house of the LORD was founded.*

"The builders founded the temple of the LORD." The foundation was laid. So the priests stood in their robes "with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD by the hands of David king of Israel." The words "by the hands of David" mean according to the order David had set up for worship (1 Chronicles 16:4-6; 25:1). Once again they were doing things the way God had given them, not inventing something new.

"They sang responsively with praising and with giving thanks to the LORD: For He is good, for His steadfast love is forever toward Israel." This was the song of Israel's worship. It was sung when the ark came to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16:34), when Solomon dedicated the first temple (2 Chronicles 5:13; 7:3), and it begins and fills Psalm 136. "Steadfast love" is the Hebrew word hesed, God's loyal, covenant love that does not quit. The people had sinned and been sent into exile, and still God's love toward Israel was "forever." Here was the proof, a new foundation on the old site.

"All the people shouted a great shout, praising the LORD because the house of the LORD was founded."

3:12-13 *And many of the priests and the Levites and the heads of the fathers, the old men who had seen the first house, at the founding of this house before their eyes,* ***were*** *weeping with a great voice; and many* ***were*** *with a shout, with gladness, to lift up a voice, and the people* ***were*** *not distinguishing the sound of the shout of gladness from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people* ***were*** *shouting a great shout, and the sound was heard to a distance.*

Then something unexpected. "The old men who had seen the first house, at the founding of this house before their eyes, were weeping with a great voice." Solomon's temple had been burned about fifty years before. Men in their sixties and seventies remembered it. They could see from the size of the foundation that this temple would be much smaller and plainer. The prophet Haggai later spoke of exactly this: "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?" (Haggai 2:3).

Some wept for what had been lost. Perhaps some wept for joy that they had lived to see this day. "And many were with a shout, with gladness." The young people, who had never seen the old temple, were thrilled to see any temple at all.

"The people were not distinguishing the sound of the shout of gladness from the sound of the weeping of the people." Both were heard "to a distance."

Is it wrong to look back and grieve? No. The old men were not wrong to weep, and the young were not wrong to shout. But God had a word for the ones who were tempted to despise the small beginning. Through Zechariah He asked, "who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). And through Haggai He promised that the glory of this latter house would be greater than the former (Haggai 2:9). That promise came true when Jesus Christ Himself walked into this temple. If you are in a season of small things, do not despise it. God may be laying a foundation for something you cannot see yet.

Summary

In the seventh month after their return, the people gathered in Jerusalem as one man. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel built the altar on its old foundation as the Law of Moses required, even though they feared the peoples around them, and they offered the morning and evening burnt offerings. They kept the Feast of Booths and all the appointed feasts and freewill offerings, even before the temple foundation was laid. They hired masons and craftsmen and paid the men of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar from Lebanon to Joppa, as Cyrus allowed. In the second month of the second year, Zerubbabel and Jeshua began the work, with the Levites from twenty years old and up overseeing it. When the foundation was laid, the priests blew trumpets and the Levites sang, as David had ordered, that the LORD is good and His steadfast love is forever toward Israel. The people shouted for joy, but many old men who had seen the first temple wept aloud, and the sound of joy and weeping mixed together and was heard far away.

Study Questions

1. In what month did the people gather, and how did they gather? (3:1)

2. What did Jeshua and Zerubbabel build first, and why do you think they started there? (3:2)

3. What feeling did the people have toward the peoples of the lands, and did it stop them? (3:3)

4. Which feast did they keep, and what did it remind Israel of? (3:4; Leviticus 23:42-43)

5. Where did the cedar wood come from, and whose permission did they have? (3:7)

6. What did the priests and Levites sing when the foundation was laid? (3:10-11)

7. Why did the old men weep while others shouted for joy? (3:12-13)

8. The people built the altar before the walls or the temple. What does it look like to put worship first in your own life?

9. They worshiped and built even while afraid. What fear is God asking you to push through to obey Him?

10. Have you ever been tempted to despise a small beginning, in your church, your family or your own walk with God? What does Zechariah 4:10 say to you?

Ezra 4: Enemies Stop the Work

Scripture

4:1-5 And the opponents of Judah and Benjamin heard that the sons of the exile were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, and they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers, and they said to them, "Let us build with you, for like you we seek your God, and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here." And Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers of Israel said to them, "***It is*** not for you and for us to build a house for our God; but we ourselves together will build for the LORD, the God of Israel, as the king, Cyrus king of Persia, commanded us." And it was ***that*** the people of the land were weakening the hands of the people of Judah and terrifying them in building, and hiring counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, and until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

4:6-16 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter ***was*** written ***in*** Aramaic and translated ***into*** Aramaic. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote one letter concerning Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king, as follows: then Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates, the Dinaites and the officials, the Tarpelites, the Sipparites, the Erechites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and honorable Osnappar took into exile and settled in the city of Samaria, and the rest of the region beyond the River. And now, this ***is*** the copy of the letter which they sent to him, to Artaxerxes the king: "Your servants, the men of the region beyond the River. And now, let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from beside you to us have come to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and evil city, and they have finished the walls, and they are repairing the foundations. Now let it be known to the king that if this city is built and the walls are finished, they will not give tribute, tax, and toll, and it will injure the revenue of kings. Now because we eat the salt of the palace, and it is not proper for us to see the dishonor of the king, concerning this we have sent and made known to the king, that he may search in the book of the records of your fathers; and you will find in the book of the records and know that this city ***is*** a rebellious city, and injuring kings and provinces, and ***that*** they have been making revolt in its midst from the days of antiquity; on this ***account*** this city was laid waste. We are making known to the king that if this city is built and the walls are finished, because of this there will be no possession for you in the region beyond the River."

4:17-24 The king sent the word to Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who were dwelling in Samaria and the rest of the region beyond the River: "Peace. And now, the letter which you sent to us has been read clearly before me. And a decree was made by me, and they searched and found that this city from the days of antiquity has been rising up against kings, and rebellion and revolt have been made in it. And strong kings have been over Jerusalem, and having mastery over all the region beyond the River, and tribute, tax, and toll were being paid to them. Now make a decree to make these men cease, and this city will not be built

until the decree is made by me. And be cautious ***of*** doing negligence concerning this. Why should the damage grow great to the injury of kings?" Then, from ***when*** the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and made them cease by force and power. Then the work of the house of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem ceased, and it was ceasing until year two of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Preview

As soon as the temple foundation is laid, trouble comes. The people of the land, whose fathers had been settled there by the king of Assyria, offer to help build. Zerubbabel and Jeshua refuse. These neighbors then turn against the work. They discourage the builders, frighten them, and hire advisers to work against them at the Persian court, and the opposition goes on for years.

Then Ezra steps out of the time order to show how long this kind of opposition lasted. He tells of an accusation under King Ahasuerus, and of a letter written years later to King Artaxerxes that accused the Jews of rebuilding the city walls to rebel. Artaxerxes ordered the work stopped, and the enemies stopped it by force. The last verse comes back to the temple: the work on the house of God stopped until the second year of Darius king of Persia.

Study

4:1-2 *And the opponents of Judah and Benjamin heard that the sons of the exile were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, and they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers, and they said to them, "Let us build with you, for like you we seek your God, and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."*

"The opponents of Judah and Benjamin heard that the sons of the exile were building a temple for the LORD." Ezra tells us who they are before they open their mouths. They were opponents, adversaries.

They came to Zerubbabel with what sounded like a kind offer: "Let us build with you, for like you we seek your God, and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here." Esarhaddon ruled Assyria from 681 to 669 B.C. After Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., its kings moved people from other lands into the region of Samaria. Second Kings 17:24-41 tells what happened. These people learned to worship the LORD, but they also kept serving their own gods. "The LORD they were fearing, and their own gods they were serving" is how the writer of Kings puts it (2 Kings 17:33). Their descendants became the Samaritans of Jesus' day.

So when they said "like you we seek your God," it was only half true. Notice even the words "your God." He was not truly theirs.

4:3 *And Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers of Israel said to them, "**It is** not for you and for us to build a house for our God; but we ourselves together will build for the LORD, the God of Israel, as the king, Cyrus king of Persia, commanded us."*

"It is not for you and for us to build a house for our God." Zerubbabel and Jeshua said no.

Was that unkind? It can look that way. But the leaders saw the danger. To let people who mixed the worship of the LORD with other gods help build the temple would be to let that mixed worship into the house of God. That was the very sin that had sent Israel into exile. They also pointed to their orders: "as the king, Cyrus king of Persia, commanded us." The decree had been given to the people of the LORD.

We need the same discernment. Not every offer of help is help. Paul warned believers not to be "unequally yoked with unbelievers" in the work of God (2 Corinthians 6:14). That does not mean we stop loving our neighbors or sharing the gospel with them. It means the church cannot let the truth be watered down to make room for other gods. The rest of the chapter shows that these neighbors were not really friends of the work at all.

4:4-5 *And it was **that** the people of the land were weakening the hands of the people of Judah and terrifying them in building, and hiring counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, and until the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

Once their offer was refused, "the people of the land were weakening the hands of the people of Judah and terrifying them in building." To weaken someone's hands means to discourage them so that they lose the will to work. The enemy used fear and discouragement.

They also went to the court. They were "hiring counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, and until the reign of Darius king of Persia." Cyrus died in 530 B.C. Darius I came to the throne in 522 B.C. So for about sixteen years, from about 536 to 520 B.C., the work stood still. The foundation lay there, and weeds grew over it.

Notice how the enemy works. First he tries to join you and water you down. When that fails, he tries to scare you and wear you out. The goal is the same: to stop the work of God.

4:6 *And in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

Here the story jumps ahead. "In the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem." Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name better known as Xerxes, who ruled from 486 to 465 B.C., the king of the book of Esther. That is thirty years after the temple was finished.

Why does Ezra put it here? He is not telling things in time order in verses 6 to 23. He is gathering examples of the same opposition, from Cyrus through Darius, then Xerxes, then Artaxerxes, to show that the enemies of God's people never gave up. In verse 24 he comes back to where he left off, in the days of Darius. Once we see this, the chapter is not confusing. It is like a teacher stopping to say that this was not the only time, and then showing how long it went on.

4:7-10 *And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter **was** written **in** Aramaic and translated **into** Aramaic. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote one letter concerning Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king, as follows: then Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates, the Dinaites and the officials, the Tarpelites, the Sipparites, the Erechites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and honorable Osnappar took into exile and settled in the city of Samaria, and the rest of the region beyond the River. And now,*

"In the days of Artaxerxes," that is, Artaxerxes I, who ruled from 464 to 424 B.C. and who would later send both Ezra and Nehemiah, more letters were written. One was from "Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues." It was "written in Aramaic." Aramaic was the common language of the Persian government, and from verse 8 to 6:18 Ezra himself writes in Aramaic, copying the official letters as they were.

The main letter was from "Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe" and a long list of their associates, peoples from many lands "whom the great and honorable Osnappar took into exile and settled in the city of Samaria." Osnappar is most likely Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria (669 to about 627 B.C.), who moved more peoples into the area. These were the same kind of people who had opposed Zerubbabel, now a generation or two later. They called themselves "the region beyond the River," the Persian province west of the Euphrates.

4:11-16 *this **is** the copy of the letter which they sent to him, to Artaxerxes the king: "Your servants, the men of the region beyond the River. And now, let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from beside you to us have come to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and evil city, and they have finished the walls, and they are repairing the foundations. Now let it be known to the king that if this city is built and the walls are finished, they will not give tribute, tax, and toll, and it will injure the revenue of kings. Now because we eat the salt of the palace, and it is not proper for us to see the dishonor of the king, concerning this we have sent and made known to the king, that he may search in the book of the records of your fathers; and you will find in the book of the records and know that this city **is** a rebellious city, and injuring kings and provinces, and **that** they have been making revolt in its midst from the days of antiquity; on this **account** this city was laid waste. We are making known to the king that if this city is built and the walls are finished, because of this there will be no possession for you in the region beyond the River."*

Here is their letter. "The Jews who came up from beside you to us have come to Jerusalem; they are building the rebellious and evil city, and they have finished the walls, and they are repairing the foundations." This is about the city walls, not the temple. Some Jews, perhaps those who came with Ezra in 458 B.C., had started rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Look at how the letter works on the king. First, money: if the walls are finished, "they will not give tribute, tax, and toll." Second, loyalty: "because we eat the salt of the palace," a way of saying we are your loyal servants who are paid by you, "it is not proper for us to see the dishonor of the king." Third, history: search the records, and you will find that "this city is a rebellious city." Last,

a scare: "there will be no possession for you in the region beyond the River," you will lose the whole province.

There was a grain of truth in it. Jerusalem had rebelled against Assyria and Babylon (2 Kings 18:7; 24:1, 20). But the letter twisted that truth into a lie about the present. The enemy often uses half-truths. Jesus called the devil a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44), and his favorite lies often wear a little truth as a mask.

4:17-22 *The king sent the word to Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who were dwelling in Samaria and the rest of the region beyond the River: "Peace. And now, the letter which you sent to us has been read clearly before me. And a decree was made by me, and they searched and found that this city from the days of antiquity has been rising up against kings, and rebellion and revolt have been made in it. And strong kings have been over Jerusalem, and having mastery over all the region beyond the River, and tribute, tax, and toll were being paid to them. Now make a decree to make these men cease, and this city will not be built until the decree is made by me. And be cautious **of** doing negligence concerning this. Why should the damage grow great to the injury of kings?"*

The king answered. "Peace." He had the records searched, and "they searched and found that this city from the days of antiquity has been rising up against kings." He also learned that "strong kings have been over Jerusalem," which is an honest look back to David and Solomon, whose kingdom had reached far over the land.

So he gave the order: "make a decree to make these men cease, and this city will not be built until the decree is made by me." Notice those last words. Artaxerxes left the door open. The city would not be built until he himself gave a new order. Some years later, this same king would give exactly that order, to his own cupbearer, Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:1-8). God was already setting up the answer while the enemies thought they had won.

4:23 *Then, from **when** the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and made them cease by force and power.*

"They went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and made them cease by force and power." The enemies did not just stop the work. They used force. Many Bible teachers think this is why, when Nehemiah heard years later that the wall was broken down and the gates burned (Nehemiah 1:3), he was so crushed. It was fresh news, not a report of what Nebuchadnezzar had done 140 years before.

4:24 *Then the work of the house of God which **is** in Jerusalem ceased, and it was ceasing until year two of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

"Then the work of the house of God which is in Jerusalem ceased, and it was ceasing until year two of the reign of Darius king of Persia." Now Ezra comes back to the temple, and to the time of verse 5. The second year of Darius was 520 B.C. The temple work had stopped for about sixteen years.

It is a low note to end on. The foundation was laid, the people had sung, and then nothing happened for years. Have you ever been there? You started something for God with joy, and then opposition, discouragement and the cares of life brought it to a halt. The next chapter shows what God did about it. He sent two prophets.

Summary

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building the temple, they offered to help, claiming to have worshiped Israel's God since Esarhaddon brought them there. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the leaders refused, saying the work belonged to them alone as Cyrus had commanded. The people of the land then discouraged and frightened the builders and hired counselors to frustrate them through the reigns of Cyrus to Darius. Ezra then gathers later examples of the same hostility: an accusation in the reign of Ahasuerus, and a letter in Aramaic from Rehum and Shimshai to Artaxerxes, warning that if Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt the city would rebel and stop paying taxes. Artaxerxes searched the records, found that Jerusalem had rebelled against kings before, and ordered the work stopped until he gave a new decree, and the enemies stopped it by force. Returning to the temple, Ezra notes that the work on the house of God stopped until the second year of Darius.

Study Questions

1. Who were the adversaries, and what did they claim when they offered to help? (4:1-2; 2 Kings 17:24-33)

2. What answer did Zerubbabel and Jeshua give, and on what did they base it? (4:3)

3. What did the people of the land do once their offer was refused? (4:4-5)

4. Verses 6 to 23 jump ahead in time. Which kings are named, and why do you think Ezra placed these letters here? (4:6-7)

5. What did the letter to Artaxerxes say the Jews were building, and what reasons did it give the king to stop them? (4:12-16)

6. What did Artaxerxes order, and what door did he leave open? (4:21)

7. How long did the temple work stop, and until when? (4:24)

8. The enemy first tried to join the work and then to stop it. Where have you seen that pattern in the church or in your own life?

9. Discouragement can stop God's work as surely as open attack. What discourages you most, and what truth from God answers it?

10. Is there something you began for God with joy that has stalled? What would it take to pick it up again?

Ezra 5: The Prophets Stir Up the Builders

Scripture

5:1-5 And Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, the prophets, prophesied to the Jews who ***were*** in Judah and in Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, ***who was*** over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to build the house of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem; and with them ***were*** the prophets of God, supporting them. At that time Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them, and they were saying to them as follows: "Who made a decree for you to build this house and to finish this structure?" Then we said to them as follows: "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" And the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not make them cease until the report should go to Darius, and then they would send back a letter concerning this.

5:6-17 The copy of the letter which Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the officials who ***were*** in the region beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. They sent the word to him, and thus it was written in it: "To Darius the king, all peace. Let it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, and it is being built ***with*** huge stones, and timber is being set in the walls, and this work is being done diligently and is prospering in their hand. Then we asked those elders; we said to them as follows: 'Who made a decree for you to build this house and to finish this structure?' And also we asked them their names, to make known to you, that we might write the name of the men who ***are*** at their heads. And thus they sent back word to us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of the heavens and the earth, and we are building the house which was built many years before this, and a great king of Israel built it and finished it. But because our fathers enraged the God of the heavens, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, and he destroyed this house and took the people into exile to Babylon. However, in year one of Cyrus the king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree to build this house of God. And also the vessels of the house of God, of gold and of silver, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from the temple which ***was*** in Jerusalem and carried to the temple of Babylon, Cyrus the king brought them out from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to ***one*** whose name ***was*** Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. And he said to him, "Take these vessels; go, deposit them in the temple which ***is*** in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be built on its place." Then this Sheshbazzar came ***and*** laid the foundations of the house of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem; and from then until now it is being built, and it is not finished.' And now, if ***it is*** good to the king, let ***it*** be searched in the house of the treasures of the king, there in Babylon, whether it is ***so*** that a decree was made by Cyrus the king to build this house of God in Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his will concerning this."

Preview

After about sixteen years of silence on the temple site, God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. They preach to the people in the name of the God of Israel, and Zerubbabel and Jeshua start building again, with the prophets right beside them.

Soon Tattenai, the Persian governor of the whole province, comes to ask who gave them permission. God's eye is on the elders, and the governor lets the work go on while he writes to King Darius. His letter, copied here, is fair and careful. It reports the Jews' answer: they are servants of the God of heaven and earth, rebuilding the house a great king of Israel once built, which God let Nebuchadnezzar destroy because their fathers had sinned, and Cyrus himself had ordered it rebuilt. Tattenai asks the king to search the records and tell him what to do.

Study

5:1 *And Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, the prophets, prophesied to the Jews who **were** in Judah and in Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, **who was** over them.*

"Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, the prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and in Jerusalem." A prophet was a person God called to speak His word to His people. Both of these men have books in our Bible. Haggai's first message came "in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month" (Haggai 1:1), which is August of 520 B.C. Zechariah began two months later (Zechariah 1:1).

What did they preach? Haggai went right to the heart of it. The people had said the time had not yet come to build the house of the LORD, but they had found time to build their own fine houses. "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this house is desolate?" (Haggai 1:4). Their crops had failed and their money ran through their fingers because they had put God's house last (Haggai 1:5-11). Zechariah gave them hope: "Not by strength and not by power, but by My Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6).

They prophesied "in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them." The people had been looking at the Persian king and the enemies around them. The prophets reminded them who was really over them.

5:2 *Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to build the house of God which **is** in Jerusalem; and with them **were** the prophets of God, supporting them.*

"Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to build the house of God." They did not wait for a new decree from Darius. They did not wait for the opposition to go away. They obeyed the word of God, and the work started again.

"And with them were the prophets of God, supporting them." The prophets did not just preach and leave. They stayed and helped. Some think Haggai and Zechariah even worked with their hands. At the least they stood with the builders and kept encouraging them. That is what a good pastor or teacher does. He does not only tell people what God wants; he walks with them while they do it.

Notice the order. The work stopped because the people listened to fear (4:4). It started again when they listened to God's Word. The Word of God is what moves His people.

5:3-4 *At that time Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them, and they were saying to them as follows: "Who made a decree for you to build this house and to finish this structure?" Then we said to them as follows: "What are the names of the men who are building this building?"*

"At that time Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came." Tattenai was the Persian governor over the whole province west of the Euphrates, much higher in rank than the local enemies of chapter 4. A record from the Persian period names a governor of this region called Tattenai under Darius.

He asked a fair question: "Who made a decree for you to build this house and to finish this structure?" This is not the same as the hateful letter of chapter 4. Tattenai was doing his job. He wanted to know if the work was legal.

"Then we said to them as follows: What are the names of the men who are building this building?" The wording is a little hard here. In the Aramaic it reads "we said," as though the writer speaks for the Jews. The old Greek translation reads "they said," meaning Tattenai asked for the builders' names, and verse 10 shows that is what Tattenai did. Either way, the officials took down the names of the leaders.

5:5 *And the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not make them cease until the report should go to Darius, and then they would send back a letter concerning this.*

"And the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not make them cease until the report should go to Darius." This is the key verse of the chapter. The governor had the power to shut the work down while he checked. He did not. Why? Because the eye of God was on them.

When the Bible says God's eye is on someone, it means He is watching over them to care for and protect them (Psalm 33:18; 34:15). The builders went on working while the letter traveled hundreds of miles to the king and back, a matter of months. They worked in faith, not knowing what the answer would be.

That is what faith often looks like. We do what God has said, even before the answer comes back, trusting that His eye is on us.

5:6-10 *The copy of the letter which Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the officials who **were** in the region beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. They sent the word to him, and thus it was written in it: "To Darius the king, all peace. Let it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, and it is being built **with** huge stones, and timber is being set in the walls, and this work is being done diligently and is prospering in their hand. Then we asked those elders; we said to them as follows: 'Who made a decree for you to build this house and to finish this structure?' And also we asked them their names, to make known to you, that we might write the name of the men who **are** at their heads.*

Ezra now gives "the copy of the letter which Tattenai" sent to Darius. It opens, "To Darius the king, all peace." The governor reports what he saw: "the house of the great God, and it is being

built with huge stones, and timber is being set in the walls, and this work is being done diligently and is prospering in their hand."

It is interesting that a Persian governor calls the LORD "the great God." He was not a believer, but he could see something real was happening. The work was "prospering," moving ahead with success.

Then he repeats his two questions: who gave the decree, and what are the names of the men in charge. He was a careful official.

5:11-12 *And thus they sent back word to us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of the heavens and the earth, and we are building the house which was built many years before this, and a great king of Israel built it and finished it. But because our fathers enraged the God of the heavens, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, and he destroyed this house and took the people into exile to Babylon.*

Here is the Jews' answer, as Tattenai reported it. "We are the servants of the God of the heavens and the earth." They did not begin with their rights or their papers. They began with who they belonged to. They served the God who made everything, not a local god of one small land.

"We are building the house which was built many years before this, and a great king of Israel built it and finished it." That king was Solomon. They were not starting something new. They were restoring what God had set up long before.

Then comes an honest confession: "because our fathers enraged the God of the heavens, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, and he destroyed this house." They did not blame Babylon's strength. They said plainly that their own sin, and their fathers' sin, was the reason the temple fell. And they said God had done it. Nebuchadnezzar was only the tool.

That is how God's people should speak of their history. We do not hide our failures. We own them and give God the glory for His mercy.

5:13-16 *However, in year one of Cyrus the king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree to build this house of God. And also the vessels of the house of God, of gold and of silver, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from the temple which **was** in Jerusalem and carried to the temple of Babylon, Cyrus the king brought them out from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to **one** whose name **was** Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. And he said to him, "Take these vessels; go, deposit them in the temple which **is** in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be built on its place." Then this Sheshbazzar came **and** laid the foundations of the house of God which **is** in Jerusalem; and from then until now it is being built, and it is not finished.'*

"However, in year one of Cyrus the king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree to build this house of God." The Jews pointed to the decree of Ezra 1. Cyrus had also sent back the gold and silver vessels and given them to "Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor," and told him to "let the house of God be built on its place." Sheshbazzar "laid the foundations," and "from then until now it is being built, and it is not finished."

Was the work going on all those years? Not really. It had stopped for about sixteen years (4:24). But in the eyes of the Persian law, the project had been ordered and begun and never finished. The Jews were simply finishing what the king had authorized. They told the truth, and they had the law on their side.

5:17 *And now, if **it is** good to the king, let **it** be searched in the house of the treasures of the king, there in Babylon, whether it is **so** that a decree was made by Cyrus the king to build this house of God in Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his will concerning this."*

Tattenai ends with a sensible request. "Let it be searched in the house of the treasures of the king, there in Babylon, whether it is so that a decree was made by Cyrus the king." Then, "let the king send to us his will concerning this."

The Jews' whole case rested on a scroll filed away in a government archive eighteen years earlier. Would anyone find it? Did it still exist? The builders could not know. But God knew exactly where it was. The next chapter tells us.

Summary

After the long stop, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached to the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel. Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to build the house of God again, with the prophets supporting them. Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and his associates came and asked who had authorized the work and who the leaders were. Because the eye of God was on the elders, the officials did not stop the work while they wrote to King Darius. Their letter reported that the house of the great God was being built with large stones and timber and that the work was prospering. It gave the Jews' answer: they served the God of heaven and earth and were rebuilding the house a great king of Israel had built, which God had given into Nebuchadnezzar's hand because their fathers had angered Him. Cyrus had decreed that it be rebuilt, returned the temple vessels through Sheshbazzar the governor, who laid its foundations, and the work was not yet finished. Tattenai asked the king to search the royal records for Cyrus' decree and send his decision.

Study Questions

1. Which two prophets did God send, and in whose name did they speak? (5:1)

2. What did Zerubbabel and Jeshua do when they heard the prophets, and who was with them? (5:2)

3. What question did Tattenai ask the Jews? (5:3)

4. Why did the officials not stop the work while they wrote to the king? (5:5)

5. How did the Jews describe themselves and their God? (5:11)

6. What reason did they give for the destruction of the first temple? (5:12)

7. What did Tattenai ask the king to do? (5:17)

8. The prophets got the work moving again by preaching God's Word. How has God's Word gotten you moving again after a time of standing still?

9. Haggai said the people had time for their own houses but not God's. What in your life might be crowding out what God has asked you to do?

10. The builders kept working before they knew how the king would answer. Where is God asking you to keep obeying before you see how things will turn out?

Ezra 6: Darius' Decree and the Temple Finished

Scripture

6:1-12 Then Darius the king made a decree, and they searched in the house of the books, where the treasures were deposited, there in Babylon. And there was found in Ecbatana, in the citadel which ***is*** in the province of Media, one scroll, and thus it was written in it: "A memorandum: In year one of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king made a decree: ***As for*** the house of God in Jerusalem, let the house be built, a place where they sacrifice sacrifices, and let its foundations be retained; its height approximately 90 feet (sixty cubits), its width approximately 90 feet (sixty cubits); three rows of huge stones and a row of new timber; and let the expense be given from the house of the king. And also the vessels of the house of God, of gold and of silver, which Nebuchadnezzar brought out from the temple which ***was*** in Jerusalem and carried to Babylon, let them send back, and let ***each*** go to the temple which ***is*** in Jerusalem, to its place; and you shall deposit ***them*** in the house of God." "Now, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates, the officials who ***are*** in the region beyond the River, be far from there. Leave the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its place. And a decree is made by me regarding what you shall do with these elders of the Jews for the building of this house of God: that from the property of the king, which ***is*** the tribute of the region beyond the River, the expense be given diligently to these men, so as not to make ***them*** cease. And whatever ***is*** needed, both young bulls and rams and lambs for burnt offerings to the God of the heavens, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the word of the priests who ***are*** in Jerusalem, let it be given to them day by day, that ***there be*** no negligence, so that they may be offering soothing offerings to the God of the heavens and praying for the life of the king and of his sons. And a decree is made by me that every man who violates this word, let a beam be pulled from his house, and ***being*** lifted up, let him be impaled on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap on ***account of*** this. And may the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow every king and people who stretches out his hand to violate ***it***, to destroy this house of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have made a decree; let it be done diligently."

6:13-22 Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates, according to what Darius the king had sent, thus they did diligently. And the elders of the Jews were building and prospering through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo; and they built and finished according to the decree of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was completed by day three of the month of Adar, which was year six of the reign of Darius the king. And the sons of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the sons of the exile, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. And they offered for the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they appointed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their classes over the service of God which ***is*** in Jerusalem, according to the writing of the book of Moses. And the sons of the exile kept the Passover on the fourteenth ***day*** of the first month. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves as one; all of them ***were*** pure; and they slaughtered the Passover for all the sons of the

exile and for their brothers the priests and for themselves. And the sons of Israel who had returned from the exile ate ***it***, and everyone who had separated himself to them from the uncleanness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD, the God of Israel. And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with gladness, for the LORD had made them rejoice and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Preview

King Darius orders a search, and Cyrus' decree is found, not in Babylon but in the summer palace at Ecbatana in Media. It says the house of God in Jerusalem is to be rebuilt, paid for by the king, and the gold and silver vessels returned. Darius then writes his own decree. Tattenai is to keep away and let the work go on. The costs are to be paid in full from the royal taxes of the province, and the priests are to be given whatever animals and supplies they need for sacrifices, so they can pray for the king. Anyone who changes this order will be put to death.

Tattenai obeys at once. With the prophets still preaching, the elders build and finish the temple in the month of Adar, in Darius' sixth year, 516 B.C. The people dedicate it with joy and many sacrifices, set the priests and Levites in their divisions, and keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread with gladness, because the LORD had turned the king's heart toward them.

Study

6:1-2 *Then Darius the king made a decree, and they searched in the house of the books, where the treasures were deposited, there in Babylon. And there was found in Ecbatana, in the citadel which* ***is*** *in the province of Media, one scroll, and thus it was written in it: "A memorandum:*

"Darius the king made a decree, and they searched in the house of the books." The officials looked first in Babylon, where Tattenai had suggested (5:17). The scroll was not there. Instead, "there was found in Ecbatana, in the citadel which is in the province of Media, one scroll."

Ecbatana was one of the royal cities of Persia, a summer home for the kings in the cool mountains of Media, in what is now western Iran. Cyrus is thought to have spent the summer of his first year there, which would explain why his decree was filed there. Who would have thought to look in Ecbatana? Someone did, and the one scroll that mattered was found.

God's care often comes in details like this. One scroll in one archive in one city, found at just the right time. Nothing is too small for His hand.

6:3-5 *In year one of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king made a decree: **As for** the house of God in Jerusalem, let the house be built, a place where they sacrifice sacrifices, and let its foundations be retained; its height approximately 90 feet (sixty cubits), its width approximately 90 feet (sixty cubits); three rows of huge stones and a row of new timber; and let the expense be given from the house of the king. And also the vessels of the house of God, of gold and of silver, which Nebuchadnezzar brought out from the temple which **was** in Jerusalem and carried to Babylon, let them send back, and let **each** go to the temple which **is** in Jerusalem, to its place; and you shall deposit **them** in the house of God."*

The scroll was a "memorandum," an official record of the king's decision. It said, "let the house be built, a place where they sacrifice sacrifices, and let its foundations be retained." The size is given, "approximately 90 feet (sixty cubits)" high and wide. A cubit is about 18 inches. The building was to have "three rows of huge stones and a row of new timber." And here is the part the Jews had perhaps not even known: "let the expense be given from the house of the king." Cyrus had promised to pay for it.

The vessels of gold and silver were also to go back "to its place," each to its own place in the temple.

Notice that this memo is a little different from the proclamation in Ezra 1. The proclamation was what was announced to the Jews. The memo was the record kept for the king's officials, with the details of the building and the money. Both came from the same decree.

6:6-7 *"Now, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates, the officials who **are** in the region beyond the River, be far from there. Leave the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its place.*

Now Darius writes to Tattenai. "Be far from there. Leave the work of this house of God alone." In other words, stay out of the way. "Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its place."

Think about what God did here. The governor came to check on the Jews, and the result was an order from the king that protected them. What the enemy meant for harm, God used for good (Genesis 50:20).

6:8-10 *And a decree is made by me regarding what you shall do with these elders of the Jews for the building of this house of God: that from the property of the king, which **is** the tribute of the region beyond the River, the expense be given diligently to these men, so as not to make **them** cease. And whatever **is** needed, both young bulls and rams and lambs for burnt offerings to the God of the heavens, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the word of the priests who **are** in Jerusalem, let it be given to them day by day, that **there be** no negligence, so that they may be offering soothing offerings to the God of the heavens and praying for the life of the king and of his sons.*

Darius did more than allow the work. He paid for it. "From the property of the king, which is the tribute of the region beyond the River, the expense be given diligently to these men." The taxes

collected from the very region where the enemies lived would pay for the temple. Haggai had said, "the silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine" (Haggai 2:8), and here it was moving from the king's treasury to God's house.

Darius also ordered whatever was needed for the sacrifices, "young bulls and rams and lambs for burnt offerings to the God of the heavens, wheat, salt, wine, and oil," to be given "day by day." Why? "So that they may be offering soothing offerings to the God of the heavens and praying for the life of the king and of his sons." "Soothing offerings" means offerings pleasing to God, often called a pleasing aroma in the Law.

Darius was not a convert. Like Cyrus, he wanted the favor of every god in his empire. But it was right for the Jews to pray for him. Jeremiah had told the exiles to pray for the city where they lived (Jeremiah 29:7), and Paul told believers to pray for kings and all in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Do you pray for those who govern you, even when they do not share your faith?

6:11-12 *And a decree is made by me that every man who violates this word, let a beam be pulled from his house, and **being** lifted up, let him be impaled on it; and let his house be made a refuse heap on **account of** this. And may the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow every king and people who stretches out his hand to violate **it**, to destroy this house of God which **is** in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have made a decree; let it be done diligently."*

Then a hard warning. Anyone who changed this order would have a beam pulled from his house and be impaled on it, and his house made "a refuse heap." This was a common Persian punishment. It sounds harsh to us, and it was. Ezra records it as part of the king's decree, not as God's law. But it shows how firmly Darius meant to protect the work.

Darius added a prayer: "may the God who has caused His name to dwell there overthrow every king and people who stretches out his hand to violate it, to destroy this house of God." The words "caused His name to dwell there" come straight from the language of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12:11). A Persian king spoke of the temple in the words of Moses, most likely because Jewish advisers helped write the decree, as was common at the Persian court.

"I, Darius, have made a decree; let it be done diligently."

6:13-14 *Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates, according to what Darius the king had sent, thus they did diligently. And the elders of the Jews were building and prospering through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo; and they built and finished according to the decree of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.*

"According to what Darius the king had sent, thus they did diligently." The governor did exactly as he was told.

"The elders of the Jews were building and prospering through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo." Again Ezra gives the credit to the prophets, that is, to the Word of God. "And they built and finished according to the decree of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia."

Notice the order. First "the decree of the God of Israel," then the decrees of the kings. The kings only gave what God had already decided. Why is Artaxerxes named, when he ruled some sixty years later? Because he later gave gifts to beautify the temple (7:15-24, 27). Ezra names all three kings who helped the house of God.

6:15 *And this house was completed by day three of the month of Adar, which was year six of the reign of Darius the king.*

"This house was completed" on the third day of the month of Adar, "which was year six of the reign of Darius the king." Adar is the twelfth month, February to March. Darius' sixth year was 516 B.C. (some date the exact day in early 515 B.C.). It had taken about four and a half years since Haggai first preached, and about twenty years since the foundation was laid.

This temple stood, enlarged and beautified by Herod the Great, until the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70. That is about 585 years. It is the temple Jesus taught in, the house He called "a house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13).

It also completed seventy years. Solomon's temple was burned in 586 B.C. The new temple was finished in 516 B.C., seventy years later. God's timing is exact.

6:16-18 *And the sons of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the sons of the exile, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. And they offered for the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they appointed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their classes over the service of God which* ***is*** *in Jerusalem, according to the writing of the book of Moses.*

"The sons of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the sons of the exile, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy." Ezra calls them "the sons of Israel," the whole nation.

They offered "one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel, according to the number of the tribes of Israel." When Solomon dedicated the first temple, he offered 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep (1 Kings 8:63). This was a tiny offering by comparison. But God does not measure by size. He measures the heart.

The twelve goats were "a sin offering," an offering for the forgiveness of sin, one for each of the twelve tribes. Only a few from Judah and Benjamin had come back, but they offered for all twelve tribes. They believed God was still the God of all Israel and still had a plan for the whole nation. God has not forgotten that plan. Paul says "all Israel will be saved" when the Deliverer comes from Zion (Romans 11:26).

"They appointed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their classes," the work groups David had set up (1 Chronicles 23 to 24), "according to the writing of the book of Moses." Once again the worship was done by the Book.

6:19-22 *And the sons of the exile kept the Passover on the fourteenth **day** of the first month. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves as one; all of them **were** pure; and they slaughtered the Passover for all the sons of the exile and for their brothers the priests and for themselves. And the sons of Israel who had returned from the exile ate **it**, and everyone who had separated himself to them from the uncleanness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD, the God of Israel. And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with gladness, for the LORD had made them rejoice and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.*

Here Ezra switches back from Aramaic to Hebrew. "The sons of the exile kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month." The Passover remembered the night God brought Israel out of Egypt, when the blood of a lamb on the doorposts kept the firstborn safe (Exodus 12). It came about six weeks after the temple was finished.

"For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves as one; all of them were pure." Hezekiah's Passover had to be delayed because not enough priests were clean (2 Chronicles 30:3). This time everyone was ready.

Who ate it? "The sons of Israel who had returned from the exile," and "everyone who had separated himself to them from the uncleanness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD." This matters. People who were not born Jews, or who had lived among the nations, were welcome if they turned from idols and joined themselves to the LORD. The door was not shut by birth. It was opened by faith. That will matter when we read chapters 9 and 10.

"They kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with gladness, for the LORD had made them rejoice and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them." Why "king of Assyria"? Darius ruled the lands that had once been the Assyrian Empire, the empire that first scattered Israel. Now the ruler of those same lands was helping God's people rebuild. God had turned the tables.

The Passover points us to Christ. Paul writes, "our Passover was sacrificed for us: Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The new temple was finished, the lamb was slain, and the people rejoiced. One day the true Lamb of God would walk into that same temple.

Summary

King Darius ordered a search of the royal archives, and a scroll was found at Ecbatana in Media recording Cyrus' decree that the house of God in Jerusalem be rebuilt at royal expense and that the gold and silver vessels be returned. Darius then commanded Tattenai and his associates to stay away and let the Jews build, to pay the full cost from the royal taxes of the province, and to supply the priests daily with animals, grain, salt, wine and oil for sacrifices, so they could pray for the king and his sons. He warned that anyone who changed the decree would be put to death, and prayed that God would overthrow anyone who tried to destroy the temple. Tattenai obeyed, and the elders built and prospered through the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, finishing the temple on the third of Adar in Darius' sixth year, 516 B.C. The people dedicated it with joy, offering sacrifices and twelve goats as a sin offering for all Israel, and set the priests and Levites in their

divisions according to the book of Moses. Then the returned exiles and those who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations to seek the LORD kept the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread with gladness, because the LORD had turned the king's heart toward them.

Study Questions

1. Where was Cyrus' decree finally found? (6:1-2)

2. What did the decree say about paying for the temple? (6:4)

3. What did Darius order Tattenai to do, and to give? (6:6-9)

4. Why did Darius want sacrifices offered to the God of heaven? (6:10)

5. Through whose preaching did the elders prosper, and whose decree is named first? (6:14)

6. When was the temple finished, and how did the people dedicate it? (6:15-17)

7. Who was allowed to eat the Passover besides the returned exiles? (6:21)

8. The governor's check on the Jews ended with the king protecting and paying for them. When has God turned something you feared into a blessing?

9. Paul tells us to pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Who in authority over you needs your prayers this week?

10. The returned exiles offered sin offerings for all twelve tribes, though only a few had come back. What does that teach you about praying for God's whole people, not just your own group?

Ezra 7: Ezra Comes to Jerusalem

Scripture

7:1-10 And after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest, this Ezra went up from Babylon, and he ***was*** a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given; and the king gave him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God on him. And ***some*** of the sons of Israel and of the priests and the Levites and the singers and the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in year seven of Artaxerxes the king. And he came ***to*** Jerusalem in the fifth month; it ***was*** the seventh year of the king. For on ***day*** one of the first month, that ***was*** the beginning of the going up from Babylon, and on ***day*** one of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God on him. For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do ***it***, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel.

7:11-28 And this ***is*** the copy of the letter which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD and of His statutes for Israel: "Artaxerxes, king of the kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of the heavens, perfect. And now, a decree is made by me that everyone in my kingdom from the people of Israel and its priests and the Levites who volunteers to go to Jerusalem with you may go. Because ***you are*** sent from before the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem by the law of your God which ***is*** in your hand, and to carry silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling ***is*** in Jerusalem, and all the silver and gold which you find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, freely offering for the house of their God which ***is*** in Jerusalem, accordingly, with this silver you shall diligently buy bulls, rams, lambs, and their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God which ***is*** in Jerusalem. And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, you shall do according to the will of your God. And the vessels which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. And the rest of the needs of the house of your God which it falls to you to give, you shall give from the house of the treasures of the king. And by me, I, Artaxerxes the king, a decree is made to all the treasurers who ***are*** in the region beyond the River, that all that Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of the heavens, asks of you, let it be done diligently, up to approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents) of silver, and up to approximately 600 bushels (one hundred kors) of wheat, and up to approximately 600 gallons (one hundred baths) of wine, and up to approximately 600 gallons (one hundred baths) of oil, and salt without limit. All that ***is*** by the decree of the God of the heavens, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of the heavens, for why should there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons? And to you we are making known that ***as for*** all the priests and the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the temple servants, and the servants of this house of God, it is not authorized to impose tribute, tax, or toll on

them. And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which ***is*** in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may be judging all the people who ***are*** in the region beyond the River, all who know the laws of your God; and him who does not know, you shall teach. And anyone who will not be doing the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be done diligently on him, whether for death, or for banishment, or for confiscation of property, or for imprisonment." Blessed ***be*** the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put ***such a thing*** as this in the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which ***is*** in Jerusalem, and has extended steadfast love to me before the king and his counselors and to all the mighty officials of the king. And I strengthened myself according to the hand of the LORD my God on me, and I gathered heads from Israel to go up with me.

Preview

Nearly sixty years after the temple was finished, a new leader appears. Ezra is a priest descended from Aaron and a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses. In the seventh year of King Artaxerxes he leads a second group from Babylon to Jerusalem, a journey of four months, and arrives safely because the good hand of his God is on him. The secret of his life is in verse 10: he set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, to do it, and to teach it.

The rest of the chapter is the king's letter, copied in Aramaic. Artaxerxes lets any Israelite who wants to go with Ezra go, sends gold and silver for the temple, orders his treasurers to give Ezra what he needs, frees the temple workers from taxes, and gives Ezra authority to appoint judges and to teach God's Law. The chapter ends with Ezra himself speaking, blessing the LORD who put it in the king's heart to beautify His house.

Study

7:1-5 *And after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest,*

"After these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia." The words "after these things" cover a gap of almost sixty years, from 516 B.C. to about 458 B.C. In that gap Xerxes ruled, and the events of the book of Esther took place in Persia. Artaxerxes I was Xerxes' son.

Ezra's family line is traced back through Zadok, the high priest in the days of David and Solomon, to "Aaron the chief priest." This list skips some generations, as Hebrew family lines often do. Compare 1 Chronicles 6:3-15, which gives a longer list. Ezra was called "the son of Seraiah," who was the high priest when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:18-21). That would make Ezra a great-grandson or later descendant, since "son" can mean descendant. The point of the list is clear. Ezra was a true priest of the line of Aaron. He had the right to teach and serve.

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

"This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses." A scribe at this time was not just a man who copied documents. He was a student and teacher of God's Word, a man who knew the Law well enough to explain it and apply it. "Skilled" means quick and expert. Ezra had given his life to the Scriptures.

"The king gave him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God on him." This phrase about God's hand will come up again and again in Ezra and Nehemiah (7:9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Nehemiah 2:8, 18). The king said yes because God's hand was on Ezra. Ezra knew where his success came from.

7:7-9 *And **some** of the sons of Israel and of the priests and the Levites and the singers and the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in year seven of Artaxerxes the king. And he came **to** Jerusalem in the fifth month; it **was** the seventh year of the king. For on **day** one of the first month, that **was** the beginning of the going up from Babylon, and on **day** one of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God on him.*

A group went with him: Israelites, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants. They went "in year seven of Artaxerxes the king," which is 458 B.C.

"On day one of the first month, that was the beginning of the going up from Babylon, and on day one of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem." The journey took four months, from late March to late July or early August. The road ran up the Euphrates and around through Syria and down to Judah, about 900 miles, with women, children and animals. That is about seven or eight miles a day on average, with stops.

They arrived safely "according to the good hand of his God on him." Chapter 8 will tell us what a risk that trip was.

7:10 *For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do **it**, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel.*

This is the key verse of the book. "For Ezra had set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it, and to teach statute and judgment in Israel."

Notice the word "for." This explains why God's good hand was on him. It was not luck. It was a man whose heart was set on God's Word.

Notice also the order. First, "to seek the law," to study it, search it and ask what God is saying. Second, "to do it," to live it out himself. Third, "to teach," to pass it on to others. Ezra did not teach what he had not first studied and lived. Many people want to teach before they have studied, or study without ever obeying. Ezra put them in the right order.

"Set his heart" means he made up his mind. It was a decision, and he kept making it every day. James warns us not to be hearers of the word only, but doers of it (James 1:22). Ezra was both, and that is why his teaching had power. What about you? Have you set your heart to study God's Word, to do it, and to share it?

7:11-12 *And this **is** the copy of the letter which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD and of His statutes for Israel: "Artaxerxes, king of the kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of the heavens, perfect. And now,*

"This is the copy of the letter which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe." From verse 12 to verse 26, Ezra copies the king's letter in Aramaic, just as it was written.

The king calls himself "king of the kings," a common title for Persian kings, who ruled over many lesser kings. The true King of kings is the Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 19:16). The king calls Ezra "the scribe of the law of the God of the heavens." Even the king of Persia knew Ezra was a man of God's Word. The word "perfect" in the greeting is most likely a short way of saying "perfect peace" or a greeting of good will.

7:13-16 *a decree is made by me that everyone in my kingdom from the people of Israel and its priests and the Levites who volunteers to go to Jerusalem with you may go. Because **you are** sent from before the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem by the law of your God which **is** in your hand, and to carry silver and gold which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling **is** in Jerusalem, and all the silver and gold which you find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people and the priests, freely offering for the house of their God which **is** in Jerusalem,*

The king's decree has several parts. First, "everyone in my kingdom from the people of Israel and its priests and the Levites who volunteers to go to Jerusalem with you may go." No one was forced.

Second, Ezra was sent "to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem by the law of your God which is in your hand." The Law of God was Ezra's measuring line. He was to see how things stood in Judah compared with what God's Law required.

Third, Ezra was to carry gold and silver given by "the king and his counselors," along with all he could collect in Babylon, and the freewill offerings of the people and priests. The king and his advisers themselves gave to the God of Israel.

7:17-20 *accordingly, with this silver you shall diligently buy bulls, rams, lambs, and their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God which* ***is*** *in Jerusalem. And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, you shall do according to the will of your God. And the vessels which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. And the rest of the needs of the house of your God which it falls to you to give, you shall give from the house of the treasures of the king.*

Fourth, the money was to be used first for sacrifices: "bulls, rams, lambs, and their grain offerings and their drink offerings." Grain offerings were gifts of flour, oil and incense, and drink offerings were wine poured out at the altar (Numbers 15:1-10). What was left could be used "according to the will of your God." The king trusted Ezra to know God's will.

Fifth, Ezra was to deliver the vessels given for the temple service "in full before the God of Jerusalem." And anything else needed for the house of God would come "from the house of the treasures of the king."

7:21-23 *And by me, I, Artaxerxes the king, a decree is made to all the treasurers who* ***are*** *in the region beyond the River, that all that Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of the heavens, asks of you, let it be done diligently, up to approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents) of silver, and up to approximately 600 bushels (one hundred kors) of wheat, and up to approximately 600 gallons (one hundred baths) of wine, and up to approximately 600 gallons (one hundred baths) of oil, and salt without limit. All that* ***is*** *by the decree of the God of the heavens, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of the heavens, for why should there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons?*

Sixth, the king ordered his treasurers in the province to give Ezra whatever he asked, up to set limits: "approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents) of silver," and large amounts of wheat, wine and oil, "and salt without limit."

Why was the king so generous? He tells us in verse 23: "why should there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons?" Artaxerxes did not want the God of heaven angry with him. Egypt had rebelled against him around this time, and he may well have wanted every god on his side. His reasons were not pure. But God used them anyway.

7:24 *And to you we are making known that* ***as for*** *all the priests and the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the temple servants, and the servants of this house of God, it is not authorized to impose tribute, tax, or toll on them.*

Seventh, "all the priests and the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the temple servants, and the servants of this house of God," could not be taxed. They were free to give their time to God's house. This was a great help to the small community, and it was the kind of thing the Persian kings sometimes did for temples they favored.

7:25-26 *And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which **is** in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may be judging all the people who **are** in the region beyond the River, all who know the laws of your God; and him who does not know, you shall teach. And anyone who will not be doing the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be done diligently on him, whether for death, or for banishment, or for confiscation of property, or for imprisonment."*

Last, the king gave Ezra authority. "Appoint magistrates and judges who may be judging all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all who know the laws of your God; and him who does not know, you shall teach." This covered the Jews of the whole province, not just Jerusalem. Ezra was to set up judges who knew God's Law and teach those who did not.

The king backed it with force: anyone who would not keep "the law of your God and the law of the king" could be punished by death, banishment, loss of property or prison. This was Persian law giving the force of the state to the Law of Moses for the Jewish community. It was the right of a king of that time. We should not read it as a model for how the church should act today. The church has no sword. Our tools are the Word, prayer and love (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

7:27-28 *Blessed **be** the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put **such a thing** as this in the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which **is** in Jerusalem, and has extended steadfast love to me before the king and his counselors and to all the mighty officials of the king. And I strengthened myself according to the hand of the LORD my God on me, and I gathered heads from Israel to go up with me.*

Now Ezra speaks for himself, in Hebrew, and in the first person. "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem."

Ezra did not praise the king. He praised the LORD who moved the king. The same God who "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" (1:1) put this in the heart of Artaxerxes.

"And has extended steadfast love to me before the king and his counselors." Ezra saw God's hesed, His covenant love, in the favor he received.

"And I strengthened myself according to the hand of the LORD my God on me, and I gathered heads from Israel to go up with me." Ezra was encouraged by God's hand, and so he acted. He did not sit back and wait. He went and gathered leaders. God's favor is not a reason to relax. It is a reason to get to work.

Summary

In the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, about sixty years after the temple was finished, Ezra went up from Babylon. He was a priest descended from Aaron through Zadok and a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses, and the king granted all he asked because the hand of the LORD was on him. With priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants and other Israelites, he left Babylon on the first day of the first month of Artaxerxes' seventh year and reached Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, because he had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, to do it, and to

teach it in Israel. Artaxerxes' letter allowed any Israelite to go with him, sent him to inquire about Judah by God's Law, gave him silver and gold from the king, his counselors and the people for sacrifices and the temple, ordered the treasurers of the province to supply him within set limits, freed all temple workers from taxes, and authorized him to appoint judges who knew God's Law and to teach those who did not, with penalties for disobedience. Ezra blessed the LORD who had put it in the king's heart to beautify His house and had shown him steadfast love, and strengthened by God's hand, he gathered leaders to go with him.

Study Questions

1. How many years passed between the end of chapter 6 and the start of chapter 7, and what book's events fall in that gap? (7:1)

2. What two things does verse 6 say about Ezra? Why did the king give him all he asked? (7:6)

3. How long did the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem take? (7:9)

4. What three things had Ezra set his heart to do? Why does the order matter? (7:10)

5. What was the money from the king to be used for first? (7:17)

6. Why did Artaxerxes want everything done exactly for the house of God? (7:23)

7. Whom did Ezra praise for the king's favor, and what did he do next? (7:27-28)

8. Ezra studied, then did, then taught. Which of those three is the weakest in your own life right now?

9. What would it look like for you to set your heart on God's Word this year? What would change in your daily routine?

10. Ezra saw God's hand behind the king's favor. Where can you see God's hand behind the good things in your life, and have you thanked Him for them?

Ezra 8: The Journey Under God's Good Hand

Scripture

8:1-14 And these ***are*** the heads of their fathers, and their genealogical enrollment, who went up with me in the reign of Artaxerxes the king from Babylon: of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush; of the sons of Shecaniah, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, and with him one hundred fifty males enrolled by genealogy; of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males; of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males; and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males; and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males; and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him eighty males; of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred eighteen males; and of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah, and with him one hundred sixty males; and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred ten males; and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, and these ***are*** their names: Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males; and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with him seventy males.

8:15-23 And I gathered them to the river that goes to Ahava, and we encamped there three days; and I considered the people and the priests, and I did not find there ***any*** of the sons of Levi. And I sent for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, heads, and for Joiarib and for Elnathan, teachers. And I commanded them ***to go*** to Iddo the head at the place Casiphia, and I put words in their mouth to speak to Iddo ***and*** his brother, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, to bring to us ministers for the house of our God. And they brought to us, according to the good hand of our God on us, a man of insight from the sons of Mahli the son of Levi the son of Israel, and Sherebiah and his sons and his brothers, eighteen; and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty; and of the temple servants, whom David and the leaders had given for the service of the Levites, two hundred twenty temple servants; all of them were designated by names. And I proclaimed a fast there at the river Ahava, to humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a straight way for us and for our little ones and for all our property. For I was ashamed to ask from the king a force and horsemen to help us against an enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, saying, "The hand of our God ***is*** on all who seek Him for good, and His strength and His anger ***are*** against all who forsake Him." And we fasted and sought from our God concerning this, and He was entreated by us.

8:24-36 And I set apart twelve of the leaders of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers. And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the contribution for the house of our God, which the king and his counselors and his leaders and all Israel who were present had offered. And I weighed out into their hand approximately 49,000 pounds (six hundred fifty talents) of silver, and vessels of silver of approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents), ***and*** gold, approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents), and twenty bowls of gold of a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine gleaming bronze, precious as gold. And

I said to them, "You ***are*** holy to the LORD, and the vessels ***are*** holy, and the silver and the gold ***are*** a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. Watch and keep ***them*** until you weigh ***them*** out before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and the leaders of the fathers of Israel in Jerusalem, ***in*** the chambers of the house of the LORD." And the priests and the Levites received the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring ***them*** to Jerusalem to the house of our God. And we set out from the river Ahava on the twelfth ***day*** of the first month to go ***to*** Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of an enemy and an ambusher on the way. And we came ***to*** Jerusalem, and we remained there three days. And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him ***was*** Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them ***were*** Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, the Levites, by number ***and*** by weight for everything; and all the weight was written down at that time. Those who had come from the captivity, the sons of the exile, brought near burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, twelve male goats ***for*** a sin offering; all ***was*** a burnt offering to the LORD. And they gave the decrees of the king to the satraps of the king and the governors beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

Preview

Ezra lists the family leaders who went with him from Babylon, about 1,500 men besides women and children. At the river Ahava he stops for three days and finds that no Levites have come. He sends for them, and God provides about forty Levites and 220 temple servants.

Then Ezra proclaims a fast. He had told the king that God's hand is on all who seek Him, and he was ashamed to ask for soldiers to guard the road. So the people humble themselves and ask God for a safe journey, and God answers. Ezra weighs out the huge gift of silver, gold and vessels to twelve leading priests and twelve Levites to carry. Four months later they arrive safely, the treasure is weighed again in the temple to the last ounce, the exiles offer burnt offerings and sin offerings for all Israel, and the king's orders are delivered to the officials of the province.

Study

8:1-14 *And these **are** the heads of their fathers, and their genealogical enrollment, who went up with me in the reign of Artaxerxes the king from Babylon: of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush; of the sons of Shecaniah, of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, and with him one hundred fifty males enrolled by genealogy; of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerahiah, and with him two hundred males; of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males; and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males; and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males; and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him eighty males; of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred eighteen males; and of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah, and with him one hundred sixty males; and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty-eight males; and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him one hundred ten males; and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, and these **are** their names: Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them sixty males; and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with him seventy males.*

"These are the heads of their fathers, and their genealogical enrollment, who went up with me in the reign of Artaxerxes the king from Babylon." First come priests of the lines of Phinehas and Ithamar, Aaron's sons, and "of the sons of David, Hattush." Hattush was a descendant of David through Zerubbabel (1 Chronicles 3:19-22). The royal line was still alive and still among God's people.

Then come twelve family groups with the number of men in each. Most of these families had already sent members home with Zerubbabel eighty years before (2:3-15). Now more of the same families came. Some had waited a long time. The men add up to about 1,500. With wives and children, the group was likely five or six thousand people.

The family of Adonikam is called "the last ones." It may mean the last of that family to come, so that the whole clan was now home.

Why list them? For the same reasons as Ezra 2. These were real people who made a real choice to leave Babylon. God takes note of those who follow Him, even when they come late.

8:15 *And I gathered them to the river that goes to Ahava, and we encamped there three days; and I considered the people and the priests, and I did not find there **any** of the sons of Levi.*

"I gathered them to the river that goes to Ahava, and we encamped there three days." Ahava was a place or canal near Babylon, where the group gathered before setting out. Ezra took three days to look over the people.

"I did not find there any of the sons of Levi." Not one Levite had signed up. There were priests, but no Levites to serve with them at the temple. Only 74 had come with Zerubbabel (2:40). The Levites' work was often humble, carrying and cleaning and guarding, and life in Babylon was comfortable. It is often easier to find people who want to lead than people who are willing to serve.

8:16-20 *And I sent for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, heads, and for Joiarib and for Elnathan, teachers. And I commanded them **to go** to Iddo the head at the place Casiphia, and I put words in their mouth to speak to Iddo **and** his brother, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, to bring to us ministers for the house of our God. And they brought to us, according to the good hand of our God on us, a man of insight from the sons of Mahli the son of Levi the son of Israel, and Sherebiah and his sons and his brothers, eighteen; and Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brothers and their sons, twenty; and of the temple servants, whom David and the leaders had given for the service of the Levites, two hundred twenty temple servants; all of them were designated by names.*

So Ezra sent a team of leaders and "teachers," men of understanding, to "Iddo the head at the place Casiphia." Casiphia seems to have been a settlement where many Levites and temple servants lived, perhaps with a place of teaching or worship. Ezra "put words in their mouth," telling them exactly what to say.

"They brought to us, according to the good hand of our God on us, a man of insight from the sons of Mahli the son of Levi." The man of insight was likely Sherebiah, who came with his sons and brothers, eighteen in all. Hashabiah and Jeshaiah came with twenty more. Then 220 temple servants. About forty Levites in all, and a much larger group of helpers.

Ezra did not just complain about the lack of workers. He asked, he sent, and God provided. Jesus told us to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out workers into His harvest (Matthew 9:38). Ezra did the asking, and God did the sending.

Sherebiah became an important leader. He helped Ezra explain the Law to the people later (Nehemiah 8:7) and signed the covenant (Nehemiah 10:12).

8:21-23 *And I proclaimed a fast there at the river Ahava, to humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a straight way for us and for our little ones and for all our property. For I was ashamed to ask from the king a force and horsemen to help us against an enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, saying, "The hand of our God **is** on all who seek Him for good, and His strength and His anger **are** against all who forsake Him." And we fasted and sought from our God concerning this, and He was entreated by us.*

"I proclaimed a fast there at the river Ahava, to humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him a straight way for us and for our little ones and for all our property." To fast is to go without food for a time in order to give oneself to prayer. In the Bible, fasting is a way of humbling ourselves before God and showing that we need Him more than food (Joel 2:12; Matthew 6:16-18). A "straight way" means a safe and smooth journey.

Why did they need it? Because the road was dangerous. They were carrying tons of silver and gold through open country full of bandits. A normal leader would ask for an army escort. But Ezra says, "I was ashamed to ask from the king a force and horsemen to help us against an enemy on the way." Why? "Because we had said to the king," and here is what they had said: "The hand of

our God is on all who seek Him for good, and His strength and His anger are against all who forsake Him."

Ezra had told the king that God takes care of His people. Now he had to live by it. To ask for soldiers right after that would have looked as if he did not really believe it.

Was it wrong to want protection? No. Nehemiah, a godly man, accepted a royal escort (Nehemiah 2:9). Ezra's choice was a matter of his testimony before the king. Both men trusted God. One showed it by refusing an escort, the other by accepting the king's help as God's provision. The question is not whether we use means, but whether our trust is in God.

"We fasted and sought from our God concerning this, and He was entreated by us." "Entreated" means He listened and answered. Ezra wrote this after the journey. He knew how it turned out.

8:24-30 *And I set apart twelve of the leaders of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers. And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the contribution for the house of our God, which the king and his counselors and his leaders and all Israel who were present had offered. And I weighed out into their hand approximately 49,000 pounds (six hundred fifty talents) of silver, and vessels of silver of approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents), **and** gold, approximately 7,500 pounds (one hundred talents), and twenty bowls of gold of a thousand darics, and two vessels of fine gleaming bronze, precious as gold. And I said to them, "You **are** holy to the LORD, and the vessels **are** holy, and the silver and the gold **are** a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. Watch and keep **them** until you weigh **them** out before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and the leaders of the fathers of Israel in Jerusalem, **in** the chambers of the house of the LORD." And the priests and the Levites received the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring **them** to Jerusalem to the house of our God.*

Before they set out, Ezra chose "twelve of the leaders of the priests," along with Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers, and "weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels." Verse 26 gives the amounts: about 49,000 pounds of silver, 7,500 pounds of silver vessels, and 7,500 pounds of gold, along with gold bowls and two vessels of fine bronze "precious as gold." That is over 30 tons of precious metal. It was a fortune.

Then Ezra said, "You are holy to the LORD, and the vessels are holy." Both the men and the things they carried were set apart for God. "Watch and keep them until you weigh them out before the leaders of the priests and the Levites and the leaders of the fathers of Israel in Jerusalem." Ezra weighed everything before the trip so it could be weighed again after. Everyone would know nothing was lost and nothing was stolen.

That is wisdom in handling money for God's work. Ezra trusted these men, but he still kept careful records. Paul did the same when he carried the gift to Jerusalem, so that no one could find fault in how it was handled (2 Corinthians 8:20-21). A church that keeps clear records protects its people and its witness.

8:31-32 *And we set out from the river Ahava on the twelfth **day** of the first month to go **to** Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of an enemy and an ambusher on the way. And we came **to** Jerusalem, and we remained there three days.*

"We set out from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month." The fasting, the waiting for Levites, and the weighing had taken twelve days (7:9).

"The hand of our God was on us, and He delivered us from the hand of an enemy and an ambusher on the way." This does not mean nothing threatening happened. It may mean that enemies did lie in wait, and God kept them from striking. Either way, they arrived without harm. God answered the prayer at Ahava.

"We came to Jerusalem, and we remained there three days." After four months on the road, they rested.

8:33-34 *And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him **was** Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them **were** Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui, the Levites, by number **and** by weight for everything; and all the weight was written down at that time.*

"On the fourth day the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest." Meremoth will appear again repairing two sections of the wall (Nehemiah 3:4, 21). With him were other priests and Levites.

"By number and by weight for everything; and all the weight was written down at that time." Every ounce was counted and recorded. Nothing was missing. The faithful men had kept their trust.

God cares about faithfulness in small and practical things. Jesus said that whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much (Luke 16:10).

8:35-36 *Those who had come from the captivity, the sons of the exile, brought near burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, twelve male goats **for** a sin offering; all **was** a burnt offering to the LORD. And they gave the decrees of the king to the satraps of the king and the governors beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.*

"Those who had come from the captivity, the sons of the exile, brought near burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, twelve male goats for a sin offering." Again we see the number twelve. Twelve bulls and twelve goats, one for each tribe. Ninety-six rams is eight times twelve. Like the people at the temple dedication (6:17), they worshiped as part of all Israel, believing God still had a purpose for the whole nation.

Their first act in Jerusalem was not to settle into houses but to offer sacrifices, to give thanks and to seek forgiveness. "All was a burnt offering to the LORD."

"They gave the decrees of the king to the satraps of the king and the governors beyond the River." Satraps were the highest Persian officials, each ruling a large region of the empire. The king's letter was now in force, "and they supported the people and the house of God." The same kind of officials who had once stopped the work were now required to help it.

Summary

Ezra lists the family heads who went up with him from Babylon, priests, a descendant of David named Hattush, and men of twelve families, about 1,500 men in all. At the river Ahava he found no Levites, so he sent leaders to Iddo at Casiphia, and by God's good hand they brought Sherebiah, Hashabiah and others, about forty Levites, and 220 temple servants. Ezra proclaimed a fast to humble themselves and seek a safe journey, because he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers after telling him that God's hand is on all who seek Him, and God heard them. He weighed out the silver, gold and vessels to twelve leading priests and Levites, told them they and the vessels were holy, and charged them to guard them until they were weighed again in Jerusalem. The group left on the twelfth day of the first month, God protected them from enemies and ambush, and they reached Jerusalem. On the fourth day everything was weighed and recorded in the house of God. The returned exiles offered burnt offerings and a sin offering for all Israel, and the king's orders were delivered to the satraps and governors, who supported the people and the house of God.

Study Questions

1. Which priest families and which royal descendant are named among those who went with Ezra? (8:2)

2. What did Ezra discover at the river Ahava, and what did he do about it? (8:15-17)

3. Whom did God provide, and how does Ezra explain it? (8:18-20)

4. Why did Ezra proclaim a fast? (8:21)

5. Why was Ezra ashamed to ask the king for soldiers? (8:22)

6. How did Ezra handle the gold and silver before and after the journey? (8:24-34)

7. What did the returned exiles do first when they arrived? (8:35)

8. Ezra had to find workers who were willing to serve in humble roles. Are you more drawn to leading or to serving? What is God asking of you?

9. Ezra's words to the king meant he had to trust God in a costly way. Have your words about faith ever put you in a place where you had to live them out?

10. Ezra kept careful records of God's money. How can you and your church show the same faithfulness in handling what belongs to God?

Ezra 9: Ezra's Prayer of Confession

Scripture

9:1-7 And when these ***things*** were finished, the leaders approached me, saying, "The people Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands; and the hand of the leaders and the officials has been first in this unfaithfulness." And when I heard this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and I pulled out ***some*** of the hair of my head and my beard, and I sat appalled. And to me gathered everyone trembling at the words of the God of Israel because of the unfaithfulness of the exiles, and I ***was*** sitting appalled until the grain offering of the evening. And at the grain offering of the evening I arose from my humiliation, and in the tearing of my garment and my robe, I bowed down on my knees, and I spread out my palms to the LORD my God. And I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and disgraced to lift up, O my God, my face to You, for our iniquities have increased above ***our*** head, and our guilt has grown great to the heavens. From the days of our fathers we ***have been*** in great guilt until this day; and for our iniquities we have been given, we, our kings, our priests, into the hand of the kings of the lands, with the sword, with captivity, and with plunder, and with shame of face, as ***it is*** this day.

9:8-15 And now, for a little moment favor has come from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a tent peg in His holy place, that our God may light up our eyes and give us a little reviving in our servitude. For we ***are*** slaves; and in our servitude our God has not forsaken us, and He has extended steadfast love to us before the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to raise up the house of our God and to set up its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem. And now, what shall we say, O our God, after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, which You commanded by the hand of Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess ***is*** a land of impurity, by the impurity of the peoples of the lands, by their abominations, with which they have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. And now, do not give your daughters to their sons, and do not take their daughters for your sons, and you shall not seek their peace and their good forever, so that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and cause your sons to inherit ***it*** forever.' And after all that has come on us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, for You, O our God, have held back ***punishment*** below our iniquity, and have given us an escaped remnant like this, shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples of these abominations? Will You not be angry with us until ***You*** have made an end, so that ***there is*** no remnant or escaped remnant? O LORD, the God of Israel, You ***are*** righteous, for we are left an escaped remnant, as ***it is*** this day. Look, we ***are*** before You in our guilt, for ***there is*** no standing before You because of this."

Preview

Some months after Ezra arrives, the leaders bring him bad news. Many of the people, including priests, Levites and leaders, have married women from the peoples around them, peoples who

worship other gods. The leaders themselves were the first to do it. Ezra is crushed. He tears his clothes, pulls out his hair, and sits stunned until the evening sacrifice, while everyone who trembles at God's Word gathers around him.

Then he falls on his knees and prays one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible. He does not say "they." He says "we." He confesses the long history of Israel's sin that led to the exile, and he thanks God for the little bit of mercy that brought a remnant home. And he asks, after all that, how could we break God's commands again? He ends with no excuses at all: "we are before You in our guilt."

This chapter and the next are among the hardest in the book. Before we read them, we need to be clear about what the problem was. It was not race. It was faith.

Study

9:1 *And when these **things** were finished, the leaders approached me, saying, "The people Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.*

"When these things were finished." This was some four and a half months after Ezra arrived (compare 7:9 and 10:9). He had delivered the gifts and the king's orders. Now "the leaders approached me."

Their report: "The people Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations." Then comes a list: "the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites." Most of these are the same peoples named in the Law when God warned Israel before they entered the land (Deuteronomy 7:1; 23:3; Exodus 34:11-16).

Notice the word "abominations." In the Bible, an abomination is something God hates, and the word is used again and again for idol worship and the practices that went with it, including the worst ones, like child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9-12). The problem with these peoples was not the color of their skin or their blood. It was their gods.

9:2 *For they have taken some of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands; and the hand of the leaders and the officials has been first in this unfaithfulness."*

"For they have taken some of their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands."

"The holy seed" means the people God had set apart for Himself (Isaiah 6:13). Israel was holy, not because they were better than others, but because God had chosen them for a purpose: to keep His Word, to be the people through whom the Messiah would come, and to be a light to the nations. Mixing with peoples who served other gods put all of that at risk.

Why did God forbid these marriages? The Law tells us plainly: "for he will turn your son away from after Me, and they will serve other gods" (Deuteronomy 7:4). That is exactly what happened to Solomon. "His wives turned aside his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). And idolatry was the sin that sent Israel into exile.

We know it was about faith, not race, because the Bible welcomes people from other nations who turned to the LORD. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite both married into Israel and are named in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Moses married a Cushite woman, and God rebuked those who spoke against him (Numbers 12:1-10). And just a few pages back, at the Passover, the returned exiles welcomed "everyone who had separated himself to them from the uncleanness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD" (6:21). The door was open to anyone who came to God. What was forbidden was marrying someone who still served other gods.

"And the hand of the leaders and the officials has been first in this unfaithfulness." The leaders had led the way into sin. When leaders fall, many follow.

9:3-4 *And when I heard this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and I pulled out **some** of the hair of my head and my beard, and I sat appalled. And to me gathered everyone trembling at the words of the God of Israel because of the unfaithfulness of the exiles, and I **was** sitting appalled until the grain offering of the evening.*

"When I heard this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and I pulled out some of the hair of my head and my beard, and I sat appalled." Tearing one's clothes was a sign of grief and horror (Genesis 37:34; Joshua 7:6). Pulling out one's own hair was a sign of deep shame and distress. "Appalled" means stunned, shocked into silence.

Why such a strong reaction? Ezra knew Israel's history. He knew this was the very sin that had brought the exile. The people had only been home a few decades, and they were already sliding back into it. It was like a man who had nearly died from a disease, been healed, and then gone right back to the habit that made him sick.

"To me gathered everyone trembling at the words of the God of Israel." Not everyone had compromised. There were people who took God's Word seriously, and they gathered around Ezra. God says He looks to the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at His word (Isaiah 66:2).

Ezra sat there "until the grain offering of the evening," about three in the afternoon, the time of the evening sacrifice.

9:5 *And at the grain offering of the evening I arose from my humiliation, and in the tearing of my garment and my robe, I bowed down on my knees, and I spread out my palms to the LORD my God.*

"At the grain offering of the evening I arose from my humiliation." Ezra rose from his place of shame at the hour of sacrifice, the time when Israel prayed (Daniel 9:21; Acts 3:1). "I bowed down on my knees, and I spread out my palms to the LORD my God." This was the posture of humble, pleading prayer, the way Solomon prayed at the dedication of the first temple (1 Kings 8:54).

9:6-7 *And I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and disgraced to lift up, O my God, my face to You, for our iniquities have increased above **our** head, and our guilt has grown great to the heavens. From the days of our fathers we **have been** in great guilt until this day; and for our iniquities we have been given, we, our kings, our priests, into the hand of the kings of the lands, with the sword, with captivity, and with plunder, and with shame of face, as **it is** this day.*

"O my God, I am ashamed and disgraced to lift up, O my God, my face to You." Ezra himself had not married a foreign wife. But he did not stand apart from the people and point at them. He said "our iniquities" and "our guilt." He took his place among the guilty. That is what true intercession looks like. Daniel prayed the same way (Daniel 9:5-11), and so did Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:6-7).

"Our iniquities have increased above our head, and our guilt has grown great to the heavens." Ezra pictured sin like a flood rising above their heads, piling up to the sky.

"From the days of our fathers we have been in great guilt until this day." He traced it all the way back. "For our iniquities we have been given, we, our kings, our priests, into the hand of the kings of the lands." The exile was not bad luck. It was God's judgment for sin, just as He had warned (Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 28:36). And Ezra admitted that the shame had not ended: "as it is this day." They were still under foreign kings.

9:8-9 *And now, for a little moment favor has come from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a tent peg in His holy place, that our God may light up our eyes and give us a little reviving in our servitude. For we **are** slaves; and in our servitude our God has not forsaken us, and He has extended steadfast love to us before the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to raise up the house of our God and to set up its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.*

Then Ezra turned to God's mercy. "For a little moment favor has come from the LORD our God." After centuries of sin, God had given a short season of grace.

Look at what that grace had done. First, "to leave us an escaped remnant." A remnant is a small part left over after a disaster, the people God kept for Himself. Second, "to give us a tent peg in His holy place." A tent peg holds a tent firmly in the ground. God had given them a small but secure hold in Jerusalem, at His temple. Third, "that our God may light up our eyes," to give new life and hope, "and give us a little reviving in our servitude."

"For we are slaves." They were still under Persia. "And in our servitude our God has not forsaken us." God had not left them. He had "extended steadfast love to us before the kings of Persia," moving kings to help them "raise up the house of our God and to set up its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem." The "wall" here is most likely a picture of God's protection, a safe enclosure, since the actual city wall was not yet rebuilt (Nehemiah 1:3).

Notice how Ezra describes the grace: "a little moment," "a little reviving." It was small, and it was fragile. And that made the sin all the worse. How could they throw away such mercy?

9:10-12 *And now, what shall we say, O our God, after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, which You commanded by the hand of Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess **is** a land of impurity, by the impurity of the peoples of the lands, by their abominations, with which they have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. And now, do not give your daughters to their sons, and do not take their daughters for your sons, and you shall not seek their peace and their good forever, so that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and cause your sons to inherit **it** forever.'*

"And now, what shall we say, O our God, after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments." Ezra had no defense.

He quoted the command, gathering phrases from several places in the Law and the prophets (Leviticus 18:24-30; Deuteronomy 7:1-3; 23:6). The land was "a land of impurity" because of the abominations of its peoples. So: "do not give your daughters to their sons, and do not take their daughters for your sons."

Ezra said God gave these commands "by the hand of Your servants the prophets." Moses was the first and greatest of the prophets (Deuteronomy 18:15), and later prophets repeated his warnings.

The command came with a promise. Keep it, "so that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and cause your sons to inherit it forever." God's commands are not meant to rob us. They are meant to protect what He has given us.

9:13-14 *And after all that has come on us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, for You, O our God, have held back **punishment** below our iniquity, and have given us an escaped remnant like this, shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples of these abominations? Will You not be angry with us until **You** have made an end, so that **there is** no remnant or escaped remnant?*

"After all that has come on us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, for You, O our God, have held back punishment below our iniquity." This is an amazing confession. Ezra said the exile, as terrible as it was, was less than they deserved. God had been merciful even in judgment.

"Shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples of these abominations?" After a mercy like that, how could they? Ezra feared that God would be angry "until You have made an end, so that there is no remnant or escaped remnant."

Paul asks a similar question in Romans 6:1-2: shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? Of course not. Grace is never a license to sin. It is the reason to stop.

9:15 *O LORD, the God of Israel, You **are** righteous, for we are left an escaped remnant, as **it is** this day. Look, we **are** before You in our guilt, for **there is** no standing before You because of this."*

"O LORD, the God of Israel, You are righteous." God was right in all He had done. "For we are left an escaped remnant, as it is this day." That they were alive at all was proof of His mercy.

"Look, we are before You in our guilt, for there is no standing before You because of this."

Notice how Ezra's prayer ends. He did not ask for anything. He did not promise to do better. He did not give a plan. He simply laid the guilt before God and left it there. Sometimes that is where true repentance has to start, with no excuse at all.

For us who know Christ, the good news is that guilt brought before God is not the end. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous so that He may forgive us the sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Ezra could only lay the guilt down. We know the One who took it away on the cross.

How does this apply to believers today? We will look at that in the next chapter, where the people decide what to do. But here is the heart of it. God's people are not to marry those who do not share their faith (2 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 7:39). That is still true for Christians. But if you are already married to someone who does not believe, the New Testament speaks plainly: do not send them away (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). We will come back to that.

Summary

After Ezra had delivered the king's orders, the leaders told him that the people, the priests and the Levites had not kept themselves apart from the peoples of the land and their abominations, but had married their daughters, so that the holy seed had mixed with them, and the leaders had been first in this unfaithfulness. Ezra tore his clothes, pulled out hair from his head and beard, and sat stunned until the evening offering, while all who trembled at God's words gathered to him. Then he knelt and spread out his hands to the LORD. He confessed that he was ashamed to lift his face, because the people's iniquities had risen over their heads and their guilt to the heavens, and that from their fathers' days their sins had brought them into the hands of foreign kings. He thanked God for the brief season of grace that left a remnant, gave them a secure hold in His holy place, and moved the kings of Persia to help them rebuild. He confessed that they had forsaken God's commands not to intermarry with the peoples of the land, acknowledged that God had punished them less than their sins deserved, and asked how they could break His commands again. He ended by declaring that the LORD is righteous and that they stood before Him in their guilt, with no excuse.

Study Questions

1. What did the leaders report to Ezra, and who had led the way in this sin? (9:1-2)

2. What does the word "abominations" tell us about why these marriages were forbidden? (9:1; Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

3. How do Rahab, Ruth and Ezra 6:21 show that the problem was faith, not race?

4. What did Ezra do when he heard the news, and who gathered around him? (9:3-4)

5. Ezra had not committed this sin himself. Why did he pray "our iniquities" and "our guilt"? (9:6-7)

6. What signs of God's grace did Ezra name in verses 8 and 9?

7. What did Ezra say about the punishment God had given compared with what they deserved? (9:13)

8. Ezra was heartbroken over sin that others might have shrugged off. What sin in your life or in the church have you grown used to that should break your heart?

9. Ezra stood with the guilty instead of pointing at them. How can you pray for your church, family or nation in the same way?

10. Ezra's prayer ends with no excuses. Is there something you need to bring to God today without excuses, trusting the promise of 1 John 1:9?

Ezra 10: The People Put Away Foreign Wives

Scripture

10:1-17 And as Ezra was praying and as he was confessing, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very great assembly from Israel, men and women and children, gathered to him; for the people wept ***with*** much weeping. And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, "We have acted unfaithfully against our God, and we have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; and now there is hope for Israel concerning this. And now let us make a covenant to our God to send out all the wives and those born from them, according to the counsel of the Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise, for the matter ***is*** on you, and we ***are*** with you. Be strong and act." And Ezra arose and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear to do according to this word. And they swore. And Ezra arose from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and he went there. He did not eat bread and he did not drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. And they caused a proclamation to pass through Judah and Jerusalem to all the sons of the exile, to be gathered ***to*** Jerusalem, and ***that*** everyone who would not come within the three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his property would be devoted, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of the exiles. And all the men of Judah and Benjamin were gathered ***to*** Jerusalem within the three days; it ***was*** the ninth month, on the twentieth ***day*** of the month. And all the people sat in the open place of the house of God, trembling because of the matter and because of the rains. And Ezra the priest arose and said to them, "You have acted unfaithfully, and you have married foreign women, to add to the guilt of Israel. And now give confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women." And all the assembly answered and said ***with*** a great voice, "So ***it is***; according to your word ***it is*** on us to do. But the people ***are*** many, and the time ***is one of*** rains, and ***there is*** no strength to stand outside; and the work ***is*** not for one day, and not for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. Let our leaders, please, stand for all the assembly; and let everyone who ***is*** in our cities who has married foreign women come at appointed times, and with them the elders of each city and its judges, until the turning back of the burning of the anger of our God from us, concerning this matter." Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood against this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them. And the sons of the exile did so. And Ezra the priest ***and*** men, heads of the fathers, according to the house of their fathers, and all of them by names, separated themselves; and they sat down on day one of the tenth month to investigate the matter. And they finished with all, the men who had married foreign women, by day one of the first month.

10:18-44 And from the sons of the priests ***some*** were found who had married foreign women: from the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers, Maaseiah and Eliezer and Jarib and Gedaliah. And they gave their hand to send out their wives; and, being guilty, ***they offered*** a ram of the flock for their guilt. And from the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. And from the sons of Harim: Maaseiah and Elijah and Shemaiah and Jehiel and Uzziah. And from the sons of

Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah. And from the Levites: Jozabad and Shimei and Kelaiah—he ***is*** Kelita—Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. And from the singers: Eliashib. And from the gatekeepers: Shallum and Telem and Uri. And from Israel: from the sons of Parosh, Ramiah and Izziah and Malchijah and Mijamin and Eleazar and Malchijah and Benaiah. And from the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel and Abdi and Jeremoth and Elijah. And from the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth and Zabad and Aziza. And from the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, Athlai. And from the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal and Ramoth. And from the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, and Binnui and Manasseh. And the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malluch, Shemariah. From the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, Shimei. From the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, and Uel, Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu, and Bani and Binnui, Shimei, and Shelemiah and Nathan and Adaiah, Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, Azarel and Shelemiah, Shemariah, Shallum, Amariah, Joseph. From the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, and Joel, Benaiah. All these had taken foreign women, and there were among them wives, and they had set ***forth*** children.

Preview

While Ezra is praying and weeping in front of the temple, a great crowd of men, women and children gathers and weeps with him. A man named Shecaniah speaks up: we have been unfaithful, but there is still hope. Let us make a covenant to send away the foreign wives and their children, as the Law requires. Ezra has the leaders swear to do it, and a call goes out for all the men to come to Jerusalem within three days.

They gather in the cold winter rain and agree, but ask for time to do it properly. A court of leaders spends three months looking at every case. The chapter ends with a list of the men who had married foreign women, starting with the priests, about 110 names in all, and a last sad line: some of them had wives by whom they had children.

This is one of the hardest chapters in the Bible to read. It involved real wives and real children, and we should not read it lightly. We will look carefully at what was done, why it was done, what it cost, and what God tells believers today, which is not the same thing.

Study

10:1 *And as Ezra was praying and as he was confessing, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very great assembly from Israel, men and women and children, gathered to him; for the people wept* ***with*** *much weeping.*

"As Ezra was praying and as he was confessing, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God." Ezra was lying face down before the temple in front of everyone. His grief was public.

"A very great assembly from Israel, men and women and children, gathered to him; for the people wept with much weeping." Ezra did not give a sermon or an order. He prayed and wept, and the Spirit of God moved the people. Real repentance spread from one broken heart to many.

10:2-4 *And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, "We have acted unfaithfully against our God, and we have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; and now there is hope for Israel concerning this. And now let us make a covenant to our God to send out all the wives and those born from them, according to the counsel of the Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise, for the matter **is** on you, and we **are** with you. Be strong and act."*

"Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, We have acted unfaithfully against our God, and we have married foreign women from the peoples of the land." Shecaniah's own family was involved. A Jehiel of the sons of Elam is listed among the guilty in verse 26, likely his father or a close relative. He spoke as one of the guilty.

"And now there is hope for Israel concerning this." Ezra's prayer had ended without hope. Shecaniah said there was hope, if they would turn.

His plan: "let us make a covenant to our God to send out all the wives and those born from them, according to the counsel of the Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law." A covenant is a solemn agreement made before God. "The Lord" here likely means "my lord," Ezra, as a title of respect; the word can be read either way.

"Arise, for the matter is on you, and we are with you. Be strong and act." Shecaniah urged Ezra to lead, and promised the people would follow.

10:5 *And Ezra arose and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear to do according to this word. And they swore.*

"Ezra arose and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear to do according to this word. And they swore." The leaders had led the people into this sin (9:2). Now they had to lead them out.

10:6 *And Ezra arose from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and he went there. He did not eat bread and he did not drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.*

Ezra went to "the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib," a room at the temple. "He did not eat bread and he did not drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles." Ezra fasted completely, without even water, as Moses had done when Israel sinned with the golden calf (Deuteronomy 9:18). He did not treat this as a small matter to be fixed with a few rules. He grieved before God.

10:7-8 *And they caused a proclamation to pass through Judah and Jerusalem to all the sons of the exile, to be gathered **to** Jerusalem, and **that** everyone who would not come within the three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his property would be devoted, and he himself would be separated from the assembly of the exiles.*

A proclamation went out to all the returned exiles: come to Jerusalem within three days. Anyone who did not come would have "all his property" be "devoted," that is, taken and given to the temple, "and he himself would be separated from the assembly of the exiles." This was the authority Artaxerxes had given Ezra (7:26). Judah was small, so three days was enough for anyone to reach Jerusalem.

10:9 *And all the men of Judah and Benjamin were gathered **to** Jerusalem within the three days; it **was** the ninth month, on the twentieth **day** of the month. And all the people sat in the open place of the house of God, trembling because of the matter and because of the rains.*

"All the men of Judah and Benjamin were gathered to Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month." The ninth month, Kislev, is November to December, the rainy season. "All the people sat in the open place of the house of God, trembling because of the matter and because of the rains." They shook with fear before God and shivered in the cold winter rain. It is a vivid, honest picture.

10:10-11 *And Ezra the priest arose and said to them, "You have acted unfaithfully, and you have married foreign women, to add to the guilt of Israel. And now give confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women."*

"Ezra the priest arose and said to them, You have acted unfaithfully, and you have married foreign women, to add to the guilt of Israel." Ezra spoke plainly. He called it what it was.

"Now give confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women." The first step was confession, admitting sin to God. Then came obedience. Repentance always moves in that order: we agree with God about our sin, and then we turn from it.

10:12-15 *And all the assembly answered and said **with** a great voice, "So **it is**; according to your word **it is** on us to do. But the people **are** many, and the time **is one of** rains, and **there is** no strength to stand outside; and the work **is** not for one day, and not for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. Let our leaders, please, stand for all the assembly; and let everyone who **is** in our cities who has married foreign women come at appointed times, and with them the elders of each city and its judges, until the turning back of the burning of the anger of our God from us, concerning this matter." Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood against this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.*

"All the assembly answered and said with a great voice, So it is; according to your word it is on us to do." They agreed.

"But the people are many, and the time is one of rains, and there is no strength to stand outside; and the work is not for one day, and not for two." They asked for a careful process. Each town would send its men "at appointed times, and with them the elders of each city and its judges." The local elders and judges knew the families and could judge each case fairly. This was wise. Every marriage and every family was different, and they would not be dealt with all at once in a crowd.

"Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood against this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them." The Hebrew can be read two ways. Most read it as these four men opposing the plan. Others read it as these men being the ones put in charge of it, or opposing only the delay. Scripture does not say what their reasons were.

10:16-17 *And the sons of the exile did so. And Ezra the priest **and** men, heads of the fathers, according to the house of their fathers, and all of them by names, separated themselves; and they sat down on day one of the tenth month to investigate the matter. And they finished with all, the men who had married foreign women, by day one of the first month.*

Ezra the priest and the heads of the fathers "separated themselves; and they sat down on day one of the tenth month to investigate the matter." They looked at each case. "They finished with all, the men who had married foreign women, by day one of the first month." It took three months, from late December to late March. That is not the work of a mob. It was a slow, careful look at each family.

What were they looking for? Scripture does not tell us their rules. But since the problem was idolatry, it is very likely they asked whether each wife had turned to the LORD. Ezra 6:21 shows that people from the nations who separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations to seek the LORD were welcomed. Ruth is the great example. A wife who had truly turned to the God of Israel was no longer one of "the peoples of these abominations" (9:14). Many Bible teachers think that is one reason the list is so short.

10:18-19 *And from the sons of the priests **some** were found who had married foreign women: from the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers, Maaseiah and Eliezer and Jarib and Gedaliah. And they gave their hand to send out their wives; and, being guilty, **they offered** a ram of the flock for their guilt.*

"From the sons of the priests some were found who had married foreign women: from the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak." Jeshua was the high priest who had led the first return with Zerubbabel. Even his own family had fallen into this sin. The list starts at the top.

"They gave their hand to send out their wives; and, being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their guilt." To give their hand meant to make a firm promise. The ram was a guilt offering, the sacrifice the Law required when someone had been unfaithful toward what belonged to the LORD (Leviticus 5:14-19; 6:1-7). They admitted their guilt and sought God's forgiveness through sacrifice.

10:20-44 *And from the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. And from the sons of Harim: Maaseiah and Elijah and Shemaiah and Jehiel and Uzziah. And from the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah. And from the Levites: Jozabad and Shimei and Kelaiah—he **is** Kelita—Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. And from the singers: Eliashib. And from the gatekeepers: Shallum and Telem and Uri. And from Israel: from the sons of Parosh, Ramiah and Izziah and Malchijah and Mijamin and Eleazar and Malchijah and Benaiah. And from the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel and Abdi and Jeremoth and Elijah. And from the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth and Zabad and Aziza. And from the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, Athlai. And from the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal and Ramoth. And from the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, and Binnui and Manasseh. And the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malluch, Shemariah. From the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, Shimei. From the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, and Uel, Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu, and Bani and Binnui, Shimei, and Shelemiah and Nathan and Adaiah, Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, Azarel and Shelemiah, Shemariah, Shallum, Amariah, Joseph. From the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, and Joel, Benaiah. All these had taken foreign women, and there were among them wives, and they had set **forth** children.*

The list goes on: more priests (verses 20 to 22), Levites (23), a singer and gatekeepers (24), and then men from the families of Israel (25 to 43), many of them from the same families listed in chapter 2. In all, about 110 men are named. Out of a community of perhaps thirty or forty thousand, that is a small number, but it included leaders at every level.

Then the last verse: "All these had taken foreign women, and there were among them wives, and they had set forth children." The SLB is very literal here. It means that some of these wives had borne children. The book ends on that sad note. It does not end with a celebration. It ends with broken families.

How should we think about this?

First, we must not soften it. Sending away a wife and children was a painful thing, and the Bible does not pretend otherwise. These were real women, many of whom may have loved their husbands, and real children who would grow up apart from their fathers. Scripture does not tell us how they were provided for. Many Bible teachers believe the men would have been expected to provide for them, as the Law required a husband who sent his wife away to give her a written certificate so she could remarry (Deuteronomy 24:1-2), and the children likely went with their mothers. But we are not told, and we should not pretend to know more than we do.

Second, the reason was not race. It was the danger of idolatry, the very sin that had destroyed the nation once before. The returned community was tiny and weak. If it was swallowed up by the worship of other gods, there would be no people left to keep God's Word, no temple worship, and no line for the promised Messiah. Malachi, who preached around this time, said Judah "has married the daughter of a foreign god" (Malachi 2:11). That was the heart of the problem: whose god the wife served.

Third, this was a special case for a special time, under the Law of Moses, which was given to the nation of Israel. It was not a pattern for all time. Malachi, in the same chapter, also says God hates the sending away of a wife (Malachi 2:14-16). Both truths stood side by side. The marriages should never have been made, and ending them brought real grief.

Fourth, God speaks differently to believers today. The New Testament does tell Christians not to marry unbelievers. Paul says a widow is free to marry "only in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39), and "do not become unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). But for a believer who is already married to an unbeliever, Paul's word is plain:

1 Corinthians 7:12-14 (SLB)

"But to the rest I say, not the Lord: if any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she consents to dwell with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to dwell with her, let her not send him away. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified in the wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified in the husband; otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy."

Notice the difference. In Ezra's day, the fear was that the unbelieving wife would pull the family away from God. In Christ, Paul says the believing spouse has a holy influence on the home, and the children are set apart. The believer is to stay, love, and pray, and Peter adds that a husband may be won "without a word" by his wife's godly life (1 Peter 3:1-2). No Christian should ever use Ezra 10 as a reason to leave a husband or wife. That would be to take an Old Testament command given to Israel at one moment in history and set it against the clear teaching of the New Testament.

If you are married to someone who does not share your faith, this chapter is not God's word to you to leave. First Corinthians 7 is. If you are single, Ezra 9 and 10 show how much heartache comes from marrying outside the faith, and why God tells us not to do it. And if you came from a home that broke apart, know that God sees the women and children in this list who are not named, and He sees you.

Summary

While Ezra prayed and wept before the house of God, a great crowd of men, women and children gathered and wept bitterly. Shecaniah confessed that they had been unfaithful by marrying foreign women, but said there was still hope for Israel, and urged Ezra to lead them in a covenant to send away the wives and their children according to the Law. Ezra had the leaders and all Israel swear to do it, and then fasted and mourned in a temple chamber. A proclamation called all the exiles to Jerusalem within three days on pain of losing their property and their place in the assembly. On the twentieth of the ninth month, the men of Judah and Benjamin sat trembling in the rain before the temple as Ezra charged them to confess to the LORD and separate from the peoples of the land and the foreign women. They agreed, but asked that the matter be handled town by town with their elders and judges, because it was the rainy season and the matter was large. Only a few men opposed this. Ezra and the family heads examined the cases from the first of the tenth month to the first of the first month. The chapter lists the men who had married foreign

women, beginning with priests of the high priest's family, who pledged to send away their wives and offered a ram for their guilt, then Levites, singers, gatekeepers and other Israelites, and ends by noting that some of these wives had borne children.

Study Questions

1. What was Ezra doing when the people gathered, and how did they respond? (10:1)

2. What did Shecaniah confess, and why did he say there was still hope? (10:2-4)

3. Why did the people ask for more time, and how did they plan to handle the cases? (10:12-14)

4. How long did the leaders take to look into the matter? What does that suggest about how carefully it was done? (10:16-17)

5. Whose family is named first among the priests, and what offering did they bring? (10:18-19)

6. What does the last verse of the book tell us, and why is it a sad ending? (10:44)

7. According to Malachi 2:11 and Deuteronomy 7:3-4, what was the real danger in these marriages?

8. What does 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 tell a believer who is married to an unbeliever? How is that different from Ezra 10, and why?

9. Ezra 9 and 10 show the heartache that comes from ignoring God's warnings about whom we marry. What would you say to a young believer thinking about marrying someone who does not share their faith?

10. Real repentance in this chapter was costly. Is there something God is asking you to turn from that will cost you? How can His grace help you obey?

Overview of Nehemiah

Nehemiah is the sixteenth book of the Bible. It comes right after Ezra and right before Esther. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book, and Nehemiah picks up the story about thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. It is the last of the history books of the Old Testament in time order. After Nehemiah, the Old Testament story falls silent until the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus, about four hundred years later.

Much of the book is Nehemiah's own record, written in the first person. Nehemiah was not a priest or a prophet. He was a layman, the cupbearer of the king of Persia, a trusted servant at the royal court. When he heard that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned, he wept, fasted and prayed for months. Then God opened the door. King Artaxerxes sent him to Jerusalem as governor, with letters and timber, in 445 B.C. Nehemiah inspected the walls by night, rallied the people, and organized the work section by section. In spite of mockery, threats, plots and trouble among the Jews themselves, the wall was finished in fifty-two days.

But Nehemiah knew that walls alone do not make a people of God. In the second half of the book, Ezra reads the Law to the people, they weep and then rejoice, they keep the Feast of Booths, confess their sins in a long prayer, and sign a written covenant to obey God. Jerusalem is filled with people, the wall is dedicated with great joy, and the book ends with Nehemiah back in Jerusalem after a time away, fighting the same old sins all over again.

The theme of Nehemiah is rebuilding God's city and God's people by prayer, hard work and the Word of God. Nehemiah prays and works, and he never treats them as opposites. The key verse comes at the reading of the Law:

Nehemiah 8:10 (SLB)

"Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold."

Nehemiah has 13 chapters and 406 verses. Here is its structure:

Part One: Rebuilding the Wall (chapters 1 to 7)

- Nehemiah 1: Nehemiah's Burden and Prayer
- Nehemiah 2: The King Sends Nehemiah
- Nehemiah 3: The Builders of the Wall
- Nehemiah 4: Building With a Sword in Hand
- Nehemiah 5: Justice for the Poor
- Nehemiah 6: The Wall Finished Despite Plots
- Nehemiah 7: Guarding the City and the Record of the Returned

Part Two: Renewing the People (chapters 8 to 10)

- Nehemiah 8: Ezra Reads the Law

- Nehemiah 9: The Great Prayer of Confession
- Nehemiah 10: The People Sign the Covenant

Part Three: Settling the City and the Last Reforms (chapters 11 to 13)

- Nehemiah 11: Filling Jerusalem With People
- Nehemiah 12: Priests, Levites, and the Wall Dedicated
- Nehemiah 13: Nehemiah's Last Reforms

Where this book points to Christ: the New Testament does not quote Nehemiah directly, but the book points to Jesus in at least two ways. First, the king's permission to Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem in Artaxerxes' twentieth year (2:1-8) is one of the decrees Bible teachers see as the starting point of Daniel's seventy weeks, the prophecy that counted the time "from the going forth of the word to restore and to build Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince" (Daniel 9:25). We will look at that in chapter 2. Second, Nehemiah himself is a picture of Christ. He left a place of comfort and honor in the king's palace, came to a broken city, wept over it, gave up his own rights for the sake of the people (5:14-18), and refused to come down from the great work he was given (6:3). Jesus left far greater glory, wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), emptied Himself (Philippians 2:7), and finished the work the Father gave Him (John 17:4). The New Testament does not name Nehemiah as a type of Christ, so I hold this as a picture, but it is a fitting one.

Background of Nehemiah

Author: Nehemiah wrote most of the book himself. It opens, "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah" (1:1), and most of chapters 1 to 7 and 12:31 to 13:31 are in the first person. These parts are often called Nehemiah's memoirs. Other parts, such as the lists in chapters 7, 10, 11 and 12 and the account of Ezra's reading in chapters 8 and 9, use official records and speak of Nehemiah in the third person. Jewish tradition held that Ezra and Nehemiah together were one book, put together by Ezra, with Nehemiah's memoirs as a main source. Many modern scholars think a later editor joined the sources. I take Nehemiah's own words at face value: he wrote his record, and it was joined with the other records into the book we have.

When it was written: Most likely soon after the last events in the book, about 430 B.C. or shortly after.

When the events happened: Nehemiah heard the news from Jerusalem in the month of Kislev (November to December) in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, and the king sent him in the month of Nisan (March to April), 445 B.C. (1:1; 2:1). He served as governor for twelve years, to 433 B.C. (5:14; 13:6), went back to the king for a time, and then returned to Jerusalem for a second term, about 430 B.C. or a little later (13:6-7). The prophet Malachi most likely preached in these same years, about 430 B.C., and he names many of the same sins Nehemiah fought: careless priests, unpaid tithes, marriage to those who served other gods, and broken marriages (Malachi 1 to 2; 3:8-10).

Who Nehemiah was: A Jew born in exile, the son of Hacaliah. His brother Hanani lived in Judah or traveled there (1:2; 7:2). He was "cupbearer to the king" (1:11). A cupbearer served the king his wine and tasted it first to be sure it was not poisoned. He stood close to the king every day and often became one of his most trusted advisers. Nehemiah was a man of prayer (there are more than a dozen short prayers in the book), a skilled leader and organizer, a man of courage, and a man who would not bend on matters of God's Law.

Setting: Jerusalem was still a small, poor, half-empty city about ninety years after the first return. The temple had been standing for about seventy years, but the walls lay in ruins and the gates had been burned. A city without walls in that day was open to anyone who wanted to rob it or attack it, and it was a disgrace in the eyes of its neighbors. Around Judah were hostile leaders: Sanballat, the governor of Samaria to the north; Tobiah, an Ammonite official to the east; and Geshem, an Arab leader to the south. Each of them had reasons to want Jerusalem to stay weak.

Who it was written to: The people of Judah and Jerusalem after the wall was built, and their children. It reminded them that God had done this work (6:16), that their city and their worship stood on God's Word, and that they had promised before God to keep His covenant.

Purpose: Nehemiah was written to show how God restored His city and His people after the exile, to show how prayer and hard work go together in God's service, to show how God's Word renews a people, and to warn honestly how quickly God's people can slide back into sin. Nehemiah's last prayer sums up his heart: "Remember me, my God, for good" (13:31).

Nehemiah 1: Nehemiah's Burden and Prayer

Scripture

1:1-11 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. And it was in the month of Kislev, ***in the*** twentieth year, and I was in Susa the citadel, and Hanani, one of my brothers, came, he and men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews, the escaped remnant who were left from the captivity, and about Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The ones left who were left from the captivity there in the province ***are*** in great evil and in reproach; and the wall of Jerusalem ***is*** broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." And it was, when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned ***for*** days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens. And I said, "Please, LORD, God of the heavens, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and steadfast love for those who love Him and for those who keep His commandments, let Your ear be attentive, please, and Your eyes open, to listen to the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You today, by day and night, for the sons of Israel Your servants, and confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You. And I and the house of my father have sinned. We have surely acted corruptly against You, and we have not kept the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which You commanded Moses Your servant. Remember, please, the word which You commanded Moses Your servant, saying, 'You will act unfaithfully; I will scatter you among the peoples. And you will return to Me and keep My commandments and do them; if your banished ones are at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them, and I will bring them to the place which I have chosen to cause My name to dwell there.' And they ***are*** Your servants and Your people, whom You ransomed by Your great strength and by Your mighty hand. Please, Lord, let Your ear be attentive, please, to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name; and give success, please, to Your servant today, and give him compassion before this man." And I was cupbearer to the king.

Preview

Nehemiah, a Jew serving in the Persian palace at Susa, asks some men just back from Judah how things are in Jerusalem. The news is terrible. The people who returned are in great trouble and disgrace, the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are burned.

Nehemiah sits down and weeps. For days he mourns, fasts and prays. The chapter gives us his prayer. He praises the great God who keeps His covenant, confesses his own sins and his people's, reminds God of His promise through Moses to gather His scattered people when they turn back to Him, and asks for success when he goes before the king. Only at the very end do we learn who Nehemiah is: the king's cupbearer.

Study

1:1 *The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. And it was in the month of Kislev, **in the** twentieth year, and I was in Susa the citadel,*

"The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah." The book opens like the books of the prophets, but Nehemiah was not a prophet. He was a government servant. His name means the LORD comforts, a fitting name for a man God would use to comfort Jerusalem.

"It was in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year." Kislev is the ninth month, November to December. The twentieth year is that of King Artaxerxes (2:1), about 446 B.C. going into 445 B.C.

"I was in Susa the citadel." Susa was one of the royal cities of Persia, where the kings spent the winter. It is the same city where Esther had been queen about thirty years before (Esther 1:2). The citadel was the fortified palace area. Nehemiah lived at the very center of the most powerful empire on earth.

1:2-3 *and Hanani, one of my brothers, came, he and men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews, the escaped remnant who were left from the captivity, and about Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The ones left who were left from the captivity there in the province **are** in great evil and in reproach; and the wall of Jerusalem **is** broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

"Hanani, one of my brothers, came, he and men from Judah." Hanani may have been his real brother (7:2 calls him "my brother") or a close relative. Nehemiah "asked them about the Jews, the escaped remnant who were left from the captivity, and about Jerusalem."

Notice that Nehemiah asked. He had a comfortable job in the palace. He did not have to care. But his heart was with God's people and God's city. Do we ask about the needs of God's people, or would we rather not know?

The answer: "The ones left who were left from the captivity there in the province are in great evil and in reproach." "Evil" here means trouble or distress. "Reproach" means disgrace, being mocked and looked down on. "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

The walls had been broken down by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:10). But that was 140 years earlier, and Nehemiah would have known it. His shock suggests this was fresh news. Many Bible teachers connect it with Ezra 4:23, where the enemies of the Jews forced a stop to the rebuilding of the walls under this same king, Artaxerxes. Some recent attempt to rebuild had been torn down and burned.

1:4 *And it was, when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned **for** days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens.*

"When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of the heavens."

Nehemiah did four things. He wept. He mourned "for days." He fasted. And he prayed. This was not a passing feeling. From Kislev to Nisan (2:1) is about four months. Nehemiah carried this burden before God for months before he did anything else.

That is where godly action begins: with a broken heart over what breaks God's heart, carried to God in prayer. Nehemiah did not rush to a plan. He went to God first. Jesus also wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

"The God of the heavens" was a common way for Jews in the Persian Empire to speak of the LORD (Ezra 1:2; 5:11). He is not a god of one land. He rules over all.

1:5 *And I said, "Please, LORD, God of the heavens, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and steadfast love for those who love Him and for those who keep His commandments,*

"Please, LORD, God of the heavens, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and steadfast love for those who love Him and for those who keep His commandments."

Nehemiah began with who God is, not with what he wanted. He called Him by His covenant name, the LORD. He called Him "great and awesome," worthy of fear and wonder. And he said God "keeps the covenant and steadfast love." A covenant is a binding agreement. God had bound Himself by promise to His people, and His hesed, His steadfast love, never quits. These words echo Moses (Deuteronomy 7:9) and Daniel's prayer (Daniel 9:4).

When we pray, it helps to start where Nehemiah did. Before we ask, we remember who we are talking to. A great God is able. A covenant-keeping God is faithful.

1:6-7 *let Your ear be attentive, please, and Your eyes open, to listen to the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You today, by day and night, for the sons of Israel Your servants, and confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You. And I and the house of my father have sinned. We have surely acted corruptly against You, and we have not kept the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which You commanded Moses Your servant.*

"Let Your ear be attentive, please, and Your eyes open, to listen to the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You today, by day and night." Nehemiah had been praying "day and night" for these months.

Then he confessed: "confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You. And I and the house of my father have sinned." Like Ezra (Ezra 9:6), he did not stand apart from the people. He said "we," and he named himself and his own family.

"We have surely acted corruptly against You, and we have not kept the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which You commanded Moses Your servant." These three words cover the whole Law: commandments (what God told them to do), statutes (fixed rules), and judgments (rulings on how to apply them). Nehemiah did not make excuses. Israel had broken God's Law, and that was why they were scattered.

1:8-9 *Remember, please, the word which You commanded Moses Your servant, saying, 'You will act unfaithfully; I will scatter you among the peoples. And you will return to Me and keep My commandments and do them; if your banished ones are at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them, and I will bring them to the place which I have chosen to cause My name to dwell there.'*

"Remember, please, the word which You commanded Moses Your servant." Nehemiah now prayed God's own promise back to Him. This is not reminding God of something He forgot. It is taking hold of what He has said and asking Him to do it.

He summed up two parts of Moses' teaching. The warning: "You will act unfaithfully; I will scatter you among the peoples" (see Leviticus 26:33; Deuteronomy 28:64). That had come true. And the promise: "you will return to Me and keep My commandments and do them; if your banished ones are at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them, and I will bring them to the place which I have chosen to cause My name to dwell there." These words come from Deuteronomy 30:1-5 and 12:5.

Nehemiah reasoned this way. God kept the warning. He will surely keep the promise. The first part of God's word had come true in the exile. The return had begun. Now he asked God to finish what He had started.

This is still a good way to pray. Find what God has promised in His Word, and ask Him to do it. And God's promise to gather Israel is not finished yet. The prophets speak of a day when God will gather His people Israel from all the nations to their land and give them a new heart (Ezekiel 36:24-28; Jeremiah 31:10). The return from Babylon was a partial fulfillment. I believe the full gathering is still ahead, when Christ returns and sets up His kingdom (Romans 11:25-27).

1:10 *And they **are** Your servants and Your people, whom You ransomed by Your great strength and by Your mighty hand.*

"And they are Your servants and Your people, whom You ransomed by Your great strength and by Your mighty hand." To ransom means to set free by paying a price or by power. These are the words used of the exodus from Egypt (Deuteronomy 9:29). Nehemiah reminded God that these broken, disgraced people still belonged to Him. He had bought them. They were His.

Every believer can pray this way too. We were redeemed, not with silver or gold, "but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). When we feel weak and ashamed, we can tell God that we are His, because He bought us.

1:11 *Please, Lord, let Your ear be attentive, please, to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name; and give success, please, to Your servant today, and give him compassion before this man." And I was cupbearer to the king.*

"Please, Lord, let Your ear be attentive, please, to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name." Nehemiah was not the only one praying. Others were praying too.

Then, at last, his request: "give success, please, to Your servant today, and give him compassion before this man." After four months, Nehemiah knew what he would do. He would ask the king. He asked God for "compassion," or mercy, in the king's eyes.

Notice what he called the king of Persia: "this man." To the world, Artaxerxes was the king of kings. To Nehemiah, praying before the God of the heavens, he was just a man, and his heart was in God's hand.

"And I was cupbearer to the king." Only now do we learn Nehemiah's job. The cupbearer served the king's wine and tasted it first, to make sure no one had poisoned it. He had to be completely trusted. He was near the king every day, and in many courts the cupbearer became a close adviser. God had placed Nehemiah right where he needed to be, years before Nehemiah knew why.

Where has God placed you? Your job, your neighborhood, your family may be the very place God means to use you, like Nehemiah, "for good."

Summary

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, Nehemiah was in the citadel of Susa when his brother Hanani and some men came from Judah. When he asked about the remnant and about Jerusalem, they told him the survivors were in great trouble and disgrace, the wall was broken down and the gates burned. Nehemiah sat down and wept, mourned for days, and fasted and prayed before the God of the heavens. He praised the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him, asked Him to hear his prayer day and night, and confessed the sins of Israel, his own and his father's house included. He reminded God of His word through Moses that He would scatter His people if they were unfaithful, but would gather them from the ends of the heavens to the place where He chose to put His name if they returned to Him. He called them God's servants and people, ransomed by His great power, and asked God to give him success and compassion before "this man." Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer.

Study Questions

1. Where was Nehemiah, and what did he ask the men from Judah? (1:1-2)

2. What news did they bring about the people and about Jerusalem? (1:3)

3. What four things did Nehemiah do when he heard the news? (1:4)

4. How did Nehemiah describe God at the start of his prayer? (1:5)

5. Whose sins did Nehemiah confess? Why do you think he included himself? (1:6-7)

6. What promise of God did Nehemiah pray back to Him? (1:8-9; Deuteronomy 30:1-5)

7. What was Nehemiah's job, and what did he ask God to give him before the king? (1:11)

8. Nehemiah asked about the needs of God's people when he could have ignored them. What need around you have you been avoiding hearing about?

9. Nehemiah prayed for about four months before acting. How do you usually respond to bad news: with prayer first, or with action first?

10. God had placed Nehemiah in the palace long before he knew why. Where has God placed you, and how might He want to use you there?

Nehemiah 2: The King Sends Nehemiah

Scripture

2:1-10 And it was in the month of Nisan, ***in the*** twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, ***that*** wine ***was*** before him, and I took up the wine and gave ***it*** to the king. And I had not been sad before him. And the king said to me, "Why ***is*** your face sad, and you are not sick? This ***is*** nothing but sadness of heart." And I was very greatly afraid. And I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the house of the tombs of my fathers, ***is*** desolate, and its gates have been consumed by fire?" And the king said to me, "For what are you requesting?" And I prayed to the God of the heavens. And I said to the king, "If ***it is*** good to the king, and if your servant is good before you, that you would send me to Judah, to the city of the tombs of my fathers, and I will build it." And the king said to me, and the queen was sitting beside him, "Until when will your journey be, and when will you return?" And it was good before the king, and he sent me; and I gave him a time. And I said to the king, "If ***it is*** good to the king, let them give me letters to the governors beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the forest which ***belongs*** to the king, that he may give me wood to make beams ***for*** the gates of the citadel which ***belongs*** to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house which I will enter." And the king gave ***them*** to me, according to the good hand of my God on me. And I came to the governors beyond the River and gave them the letters of the king. And the king had sent with me commanders of the army and horsemen. And Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard ***it***, and it was displeasing to them, a great displeasure, that a man had come to seek good for the sons of Israel.

2:11-20 And I came to Jerusalem, and I was there three days. And I arose ***at*** night, I and a few men with me; and I had not told anyone what my God was putting into my heart to do for Jerusalem; and ***there was*** no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. And I went out by the Valley Gate ***by*** night, and toward the face of Dragon Well and to the Dung Gate; and I was examining the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and its gates had been consumed by fire. And I passed on to the Spring Gate and to the King's Pool, and ***there was*** no place for the animal under me to pass through. And I was going up in the ravine ***by*** night, and I was examining the wall; and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone and what I was doing; and to the Jews and to the priests and to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest who did the work, until then I had not told ***it***. And I said to them, "You see the evil which we ***are*** in, that Jerusalem ***is*** desolate and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be a reproach." And I told them of the hand of my God, that it ***was*** good on me, and also the words of the king which he had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us arise and build." And they strengthened their hands for the good. And Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab heard ***it***, and they mocked us and despised us, and said, "What ***is*** this thing which you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" And I brought back word to them and said to them, "The God of the heavens, He will give us success; and we His servants will arise and build. And to you ***there is*** no portion, and ***no*** right, and ***no*** memorial in Jerusalem."

Preview

Four months after hearing the news, Nehemiah is serving wine to King Artaxerxes when the king notices his sad face. Being sad in the king's presence was dangerous, and Nehemiah is afraid. But when the king asks what he wants, Nehemiah sends up a quick prayer to the God of the heavens and asks to be sent to Jerusalem to rebuild it. The king agrees, sets a time, and gives him letters for safe passage and for timber from the royal forest. God's good hand is on him.

Nehemiah travels with an army escort. Sanballat and Tobiah hear of it and are deeply upset. In Jerusalem, Nehemiah tells no one his plan at first. He rides out at night to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. Then he gathers the leaders, tells them how God's hand has been on him and what the king has said, and calls them to build. "Let us arise and build," they answer. When Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem mock them and accuse them of rebellion, Nehemiah answers that the God of the heavens will give them success.

Study

2:1 *And it was in the month of Nisan, **in the** twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king, **that** wine **was** before him, and I took up the wine and gave **it** to the king. And I had not been sad before him.*

"It was in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king." Nisan is the first month, March to April, in 445 B.C. Four months had passed since Kislev (1:1). Nehemiah had been praying all that time.

"Wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. And I had not been sad before him." Servants of a Persian king were expected to look cheerful in his presence. A sad face could be taken as a sign of displeasure with the king, or even of a plot. For four months Nehemiah had hidden his grief. On this day he could not.

Why this day? Scripture does not say. But God's timing is perfect. The prayers of four months were about to be answered in one conversation.

2:2-3 *And the king said to me, "Why **is** your face sad, and you are not sick? This **is** nothing but sadness of heart." And I was very greatly afraid. And I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the house of the tombs of my fathers, **is** desolate, and its gates have been consumed by fire?"*

"The king said to me, Why is your face sad, and you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." The king knew his servant well. He could tell this was not illness but grief.

"And I was very greatly afraid." Why? Because a king could have a servant put to death for far less. Nehemiah was also about to ask the king to undo his own order. It was Artaxerxes who had stopped the building of Jerusalem's walls (Ezra 4:21). Courage is not the absence of fear. It is doing what is right while afraid.

"Let the king live forever!" was the polite way to speak to a king. Then Nehemiah told him the truth: "Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the house of the tombs of my fathers, is

desolate, and its gates have been consumed by fire?" Notice that he did not name Jerusalem yet, and he spoke of "the tombs of my fathers." Every Persian honored the graves of his ancestors. The king could understand a man grieving for that. Nehemiah spoke wisely.

2:4 *And the king said to me, "For what are you requesting?" And I prayed to the God of the heavens.*

"The king said to me, For what are you requesting?" The door was open.

"And I prayed to the God of the heavens." Between the king's question and his own answer, Nehemiah prayed. He could not kneel or speak aloud. It was a silent, quick prayer, perhaps only a few words, sent up to God in a moment. But it was backed by four months of praying day and night.

This is one of the most helpful verses in the book for daily life. We can pray anywhere, any time, in a moment, in the middle of a meeting, a hard talk or a crisis. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Nehemiah's quick prayer worked because he already lived close to God.

2:5-6 *And I said to the king, "If **it is** good to the king, and if your servant is good before you, that you would send me to Judah, to the city of the tombs of my fathers, and I will build it." And the king said to me, and the queen was sitting beside him, "Until when will your journey be, and when will you return?" And it was good before the king, and he sent me; and I gave him a time.*

"If it is good to the king, and if your servant is good before you, that you would send me to Judah, to the city of the tombs of my fathers, and I will build it." Nehemiah was polite and humble, but he was clear. He did not just ask for money. He asked to go himself.

"The king said to me, and the queen was sitting beside him, Until when will your journey be, and when will you return?" The mention of the queen is a small detail, but it shows Nehemiah was remembering a real scene. Some think her presence helped him. We are not told.

"And it was good before the king, and he sent me; and I gave him a time." The king's question about when he would return shows he had already said yes. We do not know what time Nehemiah gave. Later we learn he stayed twelve years as governor (5:14), so either he asked for a long time, or the king extended it.

2:7-8 *And I said to the king, "If **it is** good to the king, let them give me letters to the governors beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the forest which **belongs** to the king, that he may give me wood to make beams **for** the gates of the citadel which **belongs** to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house which I will enter." And the king gave **them** to me, according to the good hand of my God on me.*

Nehemiah had a plan ready. Four months of prayer had not been idle. He asked for "letters to the governors beyond the River, that they may let me pass through," a royal passport. And he asked for "a letter to Asaph the keeper of the forest which belongs to the king, that he may give me wood to make beams for the gates of the citadel which belongs to the house, and for the wall of the city,

and for the house which I will enter." He knew exactly what he needed: timber for the gates of the fortress by the temple, for the city wall, and for his own house.

Prayer and planning are not enemies. Nehemiah prayed as if everything depended on God, and he planned as if he had to be ready for God's answer.

"And the king gave them to me, according to the good hand of my God on me." Nehemiah did not credit his good timing or careful words. He credited God. These are almost the same words Ezra used (Ezra 7:6, 9).

This permission from the king is one of the decrees connected with Bible prophecy. In Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel told Daniel that seventy "sevens," periods of seven years, had been set for his people and his city. He said, "from the going forth of the word to restore and to build Jerusalem until an anointed one, a prince, shall be seven sevens and sixty-two sevens" (Daniel 9:25). That is 69 sevens, or 483 years, until the Messiah. After that, "an anointed one will be cut off" (Daniel 9:26).

Which "word" starts the count? Cyrus' decree in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1) was mainly about the temple. Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra in his seventh year, about 458 B.C. (Ezra 7), gave Ezra broad authority over the people. And Artaxerxes' word to Nehemiah here, in his twentieth year, 445 B.C., is the first to speak plainly of rebuilding the city and its walls and gates. Many Bible teachers start the count here. They count in years of 360 days, the prophetic year used in Daniel and Revelation (Daniel 7:25; Revelation 12:6; 13:5), and that brings them to about A.D. 32 or 33, the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and His death. Other Bible teachers start with Ezra's decree in 458 or 457 B.C. and count regular years to about A.D. 26 or 27, when Jesus began His ministry. Either way, the count brings us to the time of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, who was cut off for our sins. Daniel, writing in the 500s B.C., pointed to the very years when Jesus would come. Daniel's seventieth seven, the last seven years, has not yet come. I believe it is the Tribulation still ahead, after Christ takes His church to be with Him (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

2:9-10 *And I came to the governors beyond the River and gave them the letters of the king. And the king had sent with me commanders of the army and horsemen. And Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard* ***it****, and it was displeasing to them, a great displeasure, that a man had come to seek good for the sons of Israel.*

"I came to the governors beyond the River and gave them the letters of the king. And the king had sent with me commanders of the army and horsemen." Nehemiah traveled with an armed escort. Ezra had chosen not to ask for one (Ezra 8:22). Both trusted God. Ezra's choice fit what he had told the king; Nehemiah, as a royal governor, received what the king sent. God's provision can come either way.

"Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard it, and it was displeasing to them, a great displeasure, that a man had come to seek good for the sons of Israel." Here we meet Nehemiah's two main enemies. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, to the north (4:2). "The Horonite" probably means he came from Beth-horon, a town northwest of Jerusalem. Tobiah was

an Ammonite official, called "the servant," likely meaning a servant of the king, a title for an official. Both had power in the region and liked Jerusalem weak.

Notice what upset them: "that a man had come to seek good for the sons of Israel." Some people are angered by the good of God's people. Expect it.

2:11-12 *And I came to Jerusalem, and I was there three days. And I arose **at** night, I and a few men with me; and I had not told anyone what my God was putting into my heart to do for Jerusalem; and **there was** no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.*

"I came to Jerusalem, and I was there three days." Like Ezra (Ezra 8:32), he rested after the long journey of about 900 miles.

"I arose at night, I and a few men with me; and I had not told anyone what my God was putting into my heart to do for Jerusalem." Nehemiah kept quiet. He wanted to see things for himself before he spoke. He knew there were enemies watching and people in Jerusalem who were in contact with them (6:17-19). Wise leaders do not announce a plan before they know the facts.

Notice the words "what my God was putting into my heart." The plan was from God. Nehemiah was carrying it out.

2:13-15 *And I went out by the Valley Gate **by** night, and toward the face of Dragon Well and to the Dung Gate; and I was examining the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and its gates had been consumed by fire. And I passed on to the Spring Gate and to the King's Pool, and **there was** no place for the animal under me to pass through. And I was going up in the ravine **by** night, and I was examining the wall; and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and returned.*

"I went out by the Valley Gate by night." The Valley Gate was on the west side of the city, facing the Hinnom Valley. From there he went south "toward the face of Dragon Well and to the Dung Gate;" the gate at the south end where the city's rubbish was carried out, and then up the east side to "the Spring Gate and to the King's Pool." There, "there was no place for the animal under me to pass through." The rubble of the old walls had tumbled down the steep slope of the Kidron Valley so badly that his donkey or horse could not get through. So he went up "in the ravine," the Kidron Valley, looking up at the wall, and then turned back the way he came.

Nehemiah saw the damage with his own eyes. He did not rely only on reports. Before we try to fix what is broken, it helps to look honestly at how bad it is.

2:16 *And the officials did not know where I had gone and what I was doing; and to the Jews and to the priests and to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest who did the work, until then I had not told **it**.*

"The officials did not know where I had gone and what I was doing." He had not yet told "the Jews," "the priests," "the nobles," "the officials," or "the rest who did the work." Every group is named, because every group would soon be needed.

2:17-18 *And I said to them, "You see the evil which we **are** in, that Jerusalem **is** desolate and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be a reproach." And I told them of the hand of my God, that it **was** good on me, and also the words of the king which he had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us arise and build." And they strengthened their hands for the good.*

Then he spoke. "You see the evil which we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates have been burned with fire." He said "we," not "you." He had just arrived from the palace, but he stood with them. "Come, and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be a reproach." The deepest reason was not safety. It was the honor of God's name and God's people. A broken city told the nations that Israel's God could not care for His own.

Then he gave two reasons for hope. "I told them of the hand of my God, that it was good on me, and also the words of the king which he had spoken to me." God was behind it, and the king had approved it. Nehemiah shared his own story of answered prayer, and it gave them faith.

"And they said, Let us arise and build. And they strengthened their hands for the good." A people who had been discouraged for years found new courage. One person with a God-given vision, who shares how God has worked, can stir a whole church to action.

2:19 *And Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab heard **it**, and they mocked us and despised us, and said, "What **is** this thing which you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"*

"Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab heard it." Now there are three. Geshem was an Arab leader to the south and east. "They mocked us and despised us." Mockery is often the first weapon of those who oppose God's work. Then came an accusation: "What is this thing which you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" It was the same charge that had worked before (Ezra 4:12-16). But this time Nehemiah had the king's own letters.

2:20 *And I brought back word to them and said to them, "The God of the heavens, He will give us success; and we His servants will arise and build. And to you **there is** no portion, and **no** right, and **no** memorial in Jerusalem."*

Nehemiah's answer is short and strong. "The God of the heavens, He will give us success; and we His servants will arise and build." He did not wave the king's letters at them. He pointed to God. Notice the balance: God gives success, and we His servants build. Faith and work together.

"And to you there is no portion, and no right, and no memorial in Jerusalem." These men had no share in the land, no legal right in the city, and no place in its worship or history. Nehemiah was not being rude. He was drawing a clear line, as Zerubbabel had done (Ezra 4:3). The work of God belonged to the people of God.

Summary

In the month of Nisan in Artaxerxes' twentieth year, Nehemiah served the king wine with a sad face for the first time. When the king asked why, Nehemiah, though very afraid, explained that the city of his fathers' tombs lay desolate with its gates burned. The king asked what he wanted, and after a quick prayer to the God of the heavens, Nehemiah asked to be sent to Judah to rebuild it. With the queen beside him, the king agreed and set a time, and gave him letters for safe passage and for timber from the royal forest for the citadel gates, the city wall and his house, because the good hand of God was on him. Nehemiah traveled with army officers and horsemen, and Sanballat and Tobiah were greatly displeased that someone had come to help Israel. After three days in Jerusalem, Nehemiah inspected the broken walls and burned gates by night with a few men, telling no one his plan. Then he told the leaders and people of their disgrace, of God's good hand on him and the king's words, and called them to build, and they answered, "Let us arise and build." When Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Arab mocked them and accused them of rebellion, Nehemiah said the God of the heavens would give them success, and that the enemies had no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem.

Study Questions

1. How long after hearing the news did Nehemiah stand before the king with a sad face? (1:1; 2:1)

2. Why was Nehemiah afraid when the king noticed his sadness? (2:2; Ezra 4:21)

3. What did Nehemiah do between the king's question and his answer? (2:4)

4. What did Nehemiah ask the king for, and to whom did he give the credit? (2:5-8)

5. Who were the first enemies to hear about Nehemiah, and what upset them? (2:10)

6. Why did Nehemiah inspect the walls at night and tell no one at first? (2:12-16)

7. What two reasons for hope did Nehemiah give the people, and how did they respond? (2:17-18)

8. Nehemiah prayed a quick, silent prayer in a tense moment. When could you use a prayer like that this week?

9. Nehemiah prayed for months and also planned carefully. Do you lean more toward praying without planning, or planning without praying?

10. The people found courage when Nehemiah shared how God's hand had been on him. Whose faith might grow if you shared what God has done for you?

Nehemiah 3: The Builders of the Wall

Scripture

3:1-14 And Eliashib the high priest arose, and his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and set up its doors; and as far as the Tower of the Hundred they consecrated it, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And beside him the men of Jericho built. And beside him Zaccur the son of Imri built. And the Fish Gate the sons of Hassenaah built; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars. And beside them Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired. And beside them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, repaired. And beside them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And beside them the Tekoites repaired; and their nobles did not bring their neck into the service of their lords. And the Old Gate Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired; they laid its beams and set up its doors and its bolts and its bars. And beside them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, repaired for the seat of the governor beyond the River. Beside him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, repaired. And beside him Hananiah, a son of the perfumers, repaired. And they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. And beside them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. And beside them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph repaired, and opposite his house. And beside him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah repaired. Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahath-moab repaired a second section, and the Tower of the Ovens. And beside him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters. The Valley Gate Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired; they built it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars, and approximately 1,500 feet (a thousand cubits) of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate. And the Dung Gate Malchijah the son of Rechab, the leader of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired; he built it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars.

3:15-32 And the Spring Gate Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the leader of the district of Mizpah, repaired; he built it and covered it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah by the king's garden, and as far as the steps that go down from the city of David. After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, the leader of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired as far as opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the pool that was made, and as far as the house of the mighty men. After him the Levites repaired: Rehum the son of Bani. Beside him Hashabiah, the leader of half the district of Keilah, repaired for his district. After him their brothers repaired: Bavvai the son of Henadad, the leader of half the district of Keilah. And beside him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the leader of Mizpah, repaired a second section, from opposite the ascent of the armory ***at*** the angle. After him Baruch the son of Zaccai zealously repaired a second section, from the angle as far as the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest. After him Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired a second section, from the entrance of the house of Eliashib and as far as the end of the house of Eliashib. And after him the priests, the men of the plain, repaired. After him Benjamin and Hasshub repaired opposite their house. After him Azariah the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, repaired beside his house. After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired a second section, from the house of Azariah as far as the angle and as far as the corner. Palal the son of Uzai ***repaired*** opposite the angle and the tower that projects from the

upper house of the king, which ***belongs*** to the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh ***repaired***. And the temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel, as far as opposite the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower. After him the Tekoites repaired a second section, from opposite the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of the Ophel. Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each opposite his house. After him Zadok the son of Immer repaired opposite his house. And after him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, repaired. After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph repaired a second section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber. After him Malchijah, a son of the goldsmiths, repaired as far as the house of the temple servants and of the traders, opposite the Muster Gate, and as far as the upper room of the corner. And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the traders repaired.

Preview

This chapter is a list of who built which part of the wall. It starts at the Sheep Gate in the northeast corner, near the temple, and goes around the city counterclockwise: west along the north wall, down the west side to the Valley Gate and the Dung Gate at the south end, then up the east side past the City of David and the temple area, and back to the Sheep Gate. Ten gates are named along the way.

The builders were priests and Levites, rulers of districts, goldsmiths and perfume makers, men from towns all over Judah, a father with his daughters, and families working right in front of their own houses. One group of nobles would not work. The list may look dry, but it is a picture of God's people doing God's work together, each one in his place.

Study

3:1-2 *And Eliashib the high priest arose, and his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and set up its doors; and as far as the Tower of the Hundred they consecrated it, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And beside him the men of Jericho built. And beside him Zaccur the son of Imri built.*

"Eliashib the high priest arose, and his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate." The high priest went first. The Sheep Gate was in the north wall, near the temple, where sheep were brought in for the sacrifices. That fits the priests. "They consecrated it," set it apart to God, from the Sheep Gate as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and "as far as the Tower of Hananel," two towers that guarded the north side of the city, its weakest side.

Starting with the priests at the Sheep Gate says something. The work began with worship. Sad to say, this same Eliashib would later give Tobiah, the enemy of the work, a room in the temple (13:4-7). Starting well does not guarantee finishing well.

Next to them came "the men of Jericho" and "Zaccur the son of Imri." The phrase "beside him" or "beside them" runs through the whole chapter. No one built alone.

3:3-5 *And the Fish Gate the sons of Hassenaah built; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars. And beside them Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired. And beside them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, repaired. And beside them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And beside them the Tekoites repaired; and their nobles did not bring their neck into the service of their lords.*

"The Fish Gate the sons of Hassenaah built." The Fish Gate, also in the north wall, was likely where fish from Galilee and the coast were brought in to market. They "laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars." A gate was the hardest and most important part of a wall. It had to open and close, and lock.

Then "Meremoth the son of Uriah," the priest who had received the treasure Ezra brought (Ezra 8:33), and "Meshullam the son of Berechiah," and others.

"And beside them the Tekoites repaired; and their nobles did not bring their neck into the service of their lords." Tekoa was a town about ten miles south of Jerusalem, the hometown of the prophet Amos. The ordinary men of Tekoa worked hard, so hard that they did a second section later (verse 27). But their nobles would not "bring their neck" under the work, like an ox refusing the yoke. They thought it was beneath them. The phrase "their lords" may mean their human leaders, Nehemiah and the others, or it may point to the Lord Himself.

God records both the faithful and the unwilling. The common people of Tekoa are honored here forever. Their proud nobles are remembered for one thing: they would not help.

3:6-12 *And the Old Gate Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired; they laid its beams and set up its doors and its bolts and its bars. And beside them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, repaired for the seat of the governor beyond the River. Beside him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths, repaired. And beside him Hananiah, a son of the perfumers, repaired. And they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. And beside them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired. And beside them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph repaired, and opposite his house. And beside him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah repaired. Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahath-moab repaired a second section, and the Tower of the Ovens. And beside him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters.*

"The Old Gate" was repaired by Joiada and Meshullam. Then came "the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah," towns north of Jerusalem. They repaired "for the seat of the governor beyond the River," perhaps the section near an official residence of the Persian governor.

Look at who worked here. "Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, goldsmiths," and "Hananiah, a son of the perfumers," men who worked with fine, delicate things, were now hauling stones. "Rephaiah the son of Hur, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem," a ruler, worked with his own hands. "Jedaiah the son of Harumaph repaired, and opposite his house." He fixed the wall in front of his own home. "Malchijah" and "Hasshub" repaired "a second section" and "the Tower of the Ovens," probably near where bakers worked.

Then a lovely detail: "Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the leader of half the district of Jerusalem, repaired, he and his daughters." His daughters worked beside him. This is the only place in the list where women are named as builders. God's work is not only for men.

"They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall." The Broad Wall was a thick part of the old city wall on the northwest side.

3:13-14 *The Valley Gate Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired; they built it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars, and approximately 1,500 feet (a thousand cubits) of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate. And the Dung Gate Malchijah the son of Rechab, the leader of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired; he built it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars.*

"The Valley Gate Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired." This is the gate Nehemiah rode out of on his night inspection (2:13). Zanoah was a town about thirteen miles west of Jerusalem. These men built the gate and "approximately 1,500 feet (a thousand cubits) of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate." That is a long stretch. Perhaps the wall there was less damaged, or perhaps this was a big crew.

"The Dung Gate Malchijah the son of Rechab, the leader of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired." The Dung Gate was where the city's trash went out to the valley below. It was the least honored job on the wall, and a district ruler took it. In God's work no job is too low for a leader.

3:15-16 *And the Spring Gate Shallun the son of Col-hozeh, the leader of the district of Mizpah, repaired; he built it and covered it and set up its doors, its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah by the king's garden, and as far as the steps that go down from the city of David. After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, the leader of half the district of Beth-zur, repaired as far as opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the pool that was made, and as far as the house of the mighty men.*

"The Spring Gate" was repaired by Shallun, the leader of the district of Mizpah. This gate stood near the Gihon spring and the pools at the south end of the City of David. He also repaired "the wall of the Pool of Shelah by the king's garden," most likely the Pool of Siloam, "as far as the steps that go down from the City of David." The City of David was the oldest part of Jerusalem, the hill David captured from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:7).

Then "Nehemiah the son of Azbuk," a different Nehemiah, "repaired as far as opposite the tombs of David," the burial place of the kings. Nehemiah the governor had spoken to the king of "the tombs of my fathers" (2:3). Here the builders reached them.

3:17-21 *After him the Levites repaired: Rehum the son of Bani. Beside him Hashabiah, the leader of half the district of Keilah, repaired for his district. After him their brothers repaired: Bavvai the son of Henadad, the leader of half the district of Keilah. And beside him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the leader of Mizpah, repaired a second section, from opposite the ascent of the armory* ***at*** *the angle. After him Baruch the son of Zaccai zealously repaired a second section, from the angle as far as the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest. After him Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired a second section, from the entrance of the house of Eliashib and as far as the end of the house of Eliashib.*

Now come the Levites, then more district leaders: "Hashabiah, the leader of half the district of Keilah," and "Bavvai the son of Henadad," leader of the other half. The two halves of Keilah worked side by side.

"Baruch the son of Zaccai zealously repaired a second section." He is the only builder described this way, working with zeal, with burning eagerness. Each man in this list did his part, but God noticed the one who threw himself into it.

"Meremoth" appears again, repairing "a second section" from the door of the high priest's house to its end. He had already done one section (verse 4). Some workers did more than their share.

3:22-27 *And after him the priests, the men of the plain, repaired. After him Benjamin and Hasshub repaired opposite their house. After him Azariah the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, repaired beside his house. After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired a second section, from the house of Azariah as far as the angle and as far as the corner. Palal the son of Uzai* ***repaired*** *opposite the angle and the tower that projects from the upper house of the king, which* ***belongs*** *to the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh* ***repaired****. And the temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel, as far as opposite the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower. After him the Tekoites repaired a second section, from opposite the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of the Ophel.*

"The priests, the men of the plain," that is, from the Jordan Valley near Jerusalem, repaired the next part. Then "Benjamin and Hasshub repaired opposite their house," and Azariah "repaired beside his house." Again and again people worked where they lived.

This was Nehemiah's wisdom. A man repairing the wall in front of his own home would do it well, because his own family's safety depended on it. And it meant everyone could work close to home. Where is your section of wall? Often the place God wants us to start is right in front of our own house, with our own family and neighbors.

The wall then passed the "tower that projects from the upper house of the king," part of the old royal palace, near "the court of the guard," where Jeremiah had been held (Jeremiah 32:2). "The temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel," the hill between the City of David and the temple, "as far as opposite the Water Gate toward the east." The Water Gate led down toward the spring. It was in the open square before this gate that Ezra would later read the Law to all the people (8:1).

"After him the Tekoites repaired a second section." The working men of Tekoa did double, while their nobles did nothing (verse 5).

3:28-32 *Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each opposite his house. After him Zadok the son of Immer repaired opposite his house. And after him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, repaired. After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph repaired a second section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber. After him Malchijah, a son of the goldsmiths, repaired as far as the house of the temple servants and of the traders, opposite the Muster Gate, and as far as the upper room of the corner. And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the traders repaired.*

"Above the Horse Gate the priests repaired, each opposite his house." The Horse Gate was on the east side, near the temple. Then "Zadok the son of Immer repaired opposite his house," and "Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate." The East Gate faced the Mount of Olives. "Meshullam the son of Berechiah repaired opposite his chamber," perhaps a room where he lived, not even a whole house. Even a man with one room did his part.

"Malchijah, a son of the goldsmiths, repaired as far as the house of the temple servants and of the traders, opposite the Muster Gate." The Muster Gate, also called the Inspection Gate, may have been where people or troops were gathered and counted.

"Between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the traders repaired." The circle is complete. We are back at the Sheep Gate where the priests began.

What does this whole chapter teach us? It shows that God's work is done by ordinary people, each doing a part. Priests and perfume makers, rulers and goldsmiths, men from the towns, fathers and daughters, all worked "beside" one another. No one built the whole wall. Everyone built some of it. Paul says the church is like that: one body with many parts, each one needed (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), "fitted together," growing into "a holy temple" in the Lord (Ephesians 2:21). And God remembers every name. He knew who worked, who worked hard, and who refused. He still does. Our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Summary

Nehemiah 3 records who rebuilt each part of Jerusalem's wall and gates, moving counterclockwise around the city. Eliashib the high priest and the priests built and consecrated the Sheep Gate and the north wall to the Towers of the Hundred and Hananel. Others built the Fish Gate and the Old Gate, and men of Jericho, Gibeon, Mizpah and Tekoa joined in, though the nobles of Tekoa refused to work. Goldsmiths, perfumers, and district leaders repaired the wall to the Broad Wall, and Shallum worked with his daughters. Hanun and the people of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate and a long stretch of wall to the Dung Gate, which Malchijah, a district leader, repaired. The Spring Gate, the wall by the Pool of Shelah and the king's garden, and the section near the tombs of David followed, then sections built by Levites and leaders of Keilah, Beth-zur and Mizpah, Baruch who worked zealously, and many who repaired opposite their own houses. The temple servants on the Ophel, the men of Tekoa with a second section, the priests

above the Horse Gate, the keeper of the East Gate, and the goldsmiths and traders near the Muster Gate brought the work back around to the Sheep Gate.

Study Questions

1. Who began the work, and which gate did they build? (3:1)

2. What did the nobles of Tekoa refuse to do, and what did the other men of Tekoa do? (3:5, 27)

3. What different kinds of people worked on the wall? Name a few from verses 8 to 12.

4. Who worked with his daughters? (3:12)

5. Which builder is described as working "zealously"? (3:20)

6. Where did many of the builders repair the wall, and why was that wise? (3:10, 23, 28-30)

7. What does the phrase "beside him" or "beside them," used again and again, teach about God's work?

8. The nobles of Tekoa thought the work was beneath them. Is there a kind of service in the church you think is beneath you?

9. Many repaired the wall in front of their own houses. What is the section of wall in front of your house: your family, your neighbors, your work?

10. God recorded every name in this list. How does it encourage you to know that He sees the work you do for Him, even when no one else notices?

Nehemiah 4: Building With a Sword in Hand

Scripture

4:1-9 And it was, when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, ***that*** he burned ***with anger*** and was greatly vexed, and he mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brothers and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are the feeble Jews doing? Will they restore ***it*** for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble, when they ***are*** burned?" And Tobiah the Ammonite ***was*** beside him, and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox goes up ***on it***, it will break down their wall of stones." Hear, O our God, for we have become contempt; and return their reproach on their ***own*** head, and give them for plunder in a land of captivity. And do not cover over their iniquity, and let their sin not be wiped out from before You; for they have provoked ***You*** to anger in front of the builders. And we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together up to its half; and ***there*** was a heart in the people to work. And it was, when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem had gone up, that the breaches had begun to be closed, ***that*** they burned ***with anger*** very ***much***. And they all conspired together to come ***and*** fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion for it. And we prayed to our God, and we stationed a guard against them by day and night because of them.

4:10-23 And Judah said, "The strength of the burden bearer has faltered, and the rubble ***is*** much, and we will not be able to build the wall." And our adversaries said, "They will not know and they will not see until we come into their midst and kill them, and put an end to the work." And it was, when the Jews who were dwelling beside them came, ***that*** they said to us ten times, "From all the places where you turn, ***they are*** against us." And I stationed ***men*** in the lowest parts of the place behind the wall, in the open places; and I stationed the people by families with their swords, their spears and their bows. And I saw, and I arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses." And it was, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and God had frustrated their counsel, ***that*** we all returned to the wall, each to his work. And it was, from that day, half of my young men were doing the work, and half of them were holding both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the body armor; and the leaders ***were*** behind all the house of Judah, who were building the wall. And those carrying the burden were loading ***it***, with one of his hands doing the work, and one holding the weapon. And the builders, each ***had*** his sword girded on his hips, and ***they were*** building. And the one who blew on the ram's horn ***was*** beside me. And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work ***is*** much and wide, and we ***are*** separated on the wall, far each from his brother. In the place where you hear the sound of the ram's horn, there you shall gather to us. Our God will fight for us." And we were doing the work, and half of them were holding the spears from the going up of the dawn until the coming out of the stars. Also at that time I said to the people, "Let each ***man*** with his young man spend the night in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be for us a guard ***by*** night and work ***by*** day." And neither I nor my brothers nor my young men nor the men of the guard who ***were*** behind me, none of us were taking off our clothes; each ***had*** his weapon ***at*** the water.

Preview

When Sanballat hears that the wall is going up, he is furious. He and Tobiah mock the "feeble Jews" in front of the army of Samaria: a fox could knock their wall down. Nehemiah answers with prayer, and the people keep working, because they have a heart to work. By the time the wall reaches half its height, the enemies plan an attack. The Jews pray and set a guard.

Then the trouble comes from inside. The workers are worn out, the rubble seems endless, and the Jews who live near the enemy keep bringing frightening reports. Nehemiah stations families with swords and spears at the low places in the wall and tells the people to remember the great and awesome Lord and fight for their families. From then on, half the men work and half stand guard, the builders work with swords at their sides, a trumpeter stays by Nehemiah, and no one even takes off his clothes at night. "Our God will fight for us."

Study

4:1-3 *And it was, when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, **that** he burned **with anger** and was greatly vexed, and he mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brothers and the army of Samaria, and said, "What are the feeble Jews doing? Will they restore **it** for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble, when they **are** burned?" And Tobiah the Ammonite **was** beside him, and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox goes up **on it**, it will break down their wall of stones."*

"When Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, that he burned with anger and was greatly vexed, and he mocked the Jews." Anger and mockery go together. When people cannot stop God's work, they often try to laugh it down.

Sanballat spoke "before his brothers and the army of Samaria." This was a public show, with soldiers present. It was a threat dressed up as a joke. "What are the feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble, when they are burned?" Five mocking questions. You are weak. You cannot do it alone. Do you think prayer and sacrifice will build a wall? Do you think this will be quick? Those stones are burned and crumbling.

Some of those questions had a sting of truth. The Jews were weak, and many of the stones were damaged by fire. That is why mockery hurts. It takes a real weakness and makes it look hopeless.

"Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, Even what they are building, if a fox goes up on it, it will break down their wall of stones." A fox weighs a few pounds. Tobiah said the wall was so weak a fox could knock it over.

How do you answer mockery? Look at the next verse.

4:4-5 *Hear, O our God, for we have become contempt; and return their reproach on their **own** head, and give them for plunder in a land of captivity. And do not cover over their iniquity, and let their sin not be wiped out from before You; for they have provoked **You** to anger in front of the builders.*

Nehemiah did not answer Sanballat. He turned to God. "Hear, O our God, for we have become contempt; and return their reproach on their own head, and give them for plunder in a land of captivity. And do not cover over their iniquity, and let their sin not be wiped out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger in front of the builders."

This is a hard prayer for many Christians to read. It asks God to judge these men. Prayers like this are called imprecations, prayers calling down God's justice on enemies. Several psalms have them too (Psalm 35; 69; 109).

How should we understand it? First, Nehemiah did not take revenge himself. He handed the matter to God. Paul says the same: "not avenging yourselves, beloved, but give place to the wrath" (Romans 12:19). Second, Nehemiah saw these men as enemies of God's work and God's name, not just his own personal enemies: "they have provoked You to anger in front of the builders." Third, he asked for justice, not cruelty. "Return their reproach on their own head" means let what they planned for others fall on them. Captivity was what they wanted for Jerusalem.

Jesus gave us a further word. "Love your enemies, bless those cursing you, do good to those hating you, and pray for those mistreating you and persecuting you" (Matthew 5:44). On the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). As believers today, our first prayer for those who oppose us is that God would save them, as He saved Paul, who once tried to destroy the church. At the same time, we can still ask God to stop evil and to bring justice where people refuse to turn. The book of Revelation shows God's people in heaven asking Him to judge those who shed innocent blood (Revelation 6:10). Nehemiah's prayer shows us an honest heart bringing its hurt and anger to God, rather than taking matters into its own hands.

4:6 *And we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together up to its half; and **there** was a heart in the people to work.*

"And we built the wall, and all the wall was joined together up to its half." Despite the mocking, they kept building. The whole circuit of the wall was now joined together, with no gaps, though only to half its height.

Why? "There was a heart in the people to work." The people had a mind to work. They wanted to do it. That is the secret of every great work of God: not big budgets or big talent, but willing hearts. Paul tells us, "Whatever you do, work from the soul, as to the Lord" (Colossians 3:23).

4:7-9 *And it was, when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem had gone up, that the breaches had begun to be closed,* ***that*** *they burned* ***with anger*** *very* ***much****. And they all conspired together to come* ***and*** *fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion for it. And we prayed to our God, and we stationed a guard against them by day and night because of them.*

The enemies were now on all sides. "Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites." Samaria was to the north, the Ammonites to the east, the Arabs to the south, and the Ashdodites, from the old Philistine city of Ashdod, to the west. Jerusalem was surrounded.

They heard "that the breaches had begun to be closed," and they "burned with anger very much." The mockery had not worked. So "they all conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion for it." Now it was a plan to attack.

Nehemiah's response is one of the best verses in the book: "And we prayed to our God, and we stationed a guard against them by day and night because of them." Prayer and a guard. Not one or the other. Both.

Some people think that if we really trust God, we do not need to take practical steps. Others take practical steps and forget to pray. Nehemiah did both. He trusted God completely, and he posted guards. Faith is not laziness.

4:10-12 *And Judah said, "The strength of the burden bearer has faltered, and the rubble* ***is*** *much, and we will not be able to build the wall." And our adversaries said, "They will not know and they will not see until we come into their midst and kill them, and put an end to the work." And it was, when the Jews who were dwelling beside them came,* ***that*** *they said to us ten times, "From all the places where you turn,* ***they are*** *against us."*

Now the danger came from inside. "Judah said, The strength of the burden bearer has faltered, and the rubble is much, and we will not be able to build the wall." In Hebrew this has the sound of a sad song, a little rhyme the workers may have been repeating. They were tired. The rubble seemed endless. They were halfway done, and halfway is often where people quit. The excitement of the start is gone, and the end is not yet in sight.

At the same time, the enemies were spreading rumors: "They will not know and they will not see until we come into their midst and kill them, and put an end to the work." A surprise attack.

And "the Jews who were dwelling beside them," Jews living in towns near the enemy, came and "said to us ten times," over and over, "From all the places where you turn, they are against us." Some read it as a warning that the enemy was coming from every side. Others read it as these Jews begging their relatives to come home from the wall to protect their own towns. Either way, the reports kept coming, and fear kept spreading.

So in a few verses we see three things that stop God's work: tiredness, threats, and fearful talk among God's own people. The third is often the worst.

4:13-14 *And I stationed **men** in the lowest parts of the place behind the wall, in the open places; and I stationed the people by families with their swords, their spears and their bows. And I saw, and I arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses."*

Nehemiah acted. "I stationed men in the lowest parts of the place behind the wall, in the open places." These were the weak spots, where the wall was lowest. "I stationed the people by families with their swords, their spears and their bows." He put families together. A man fights harder when his own wife and children are behind him.

"I saw, and I arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, Do not be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses."

This is the answer to fear: "Remember the great and awesome Lord." Fear grows when we look at the enemy. It shrinks when we look at God. The enemies were many, but God was greater. The same words "great and awesome" begin Nehemiah's prayer in 1:5.

Then: fight for your families. Nehemiah gave them a reason to stand. Their homes and children were at stake. When we are tired and afraid, it helps to remember who God is and who we are standing for.

4:15 *And it was, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and God had frustrated their counsel, **that** we all returned to the wall, each to his work.*

"When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and God had frustrated their counsel." The surprise attack depended on surprise. Once the plan was known and the people were ready, it fell apart. Notice who Nehemiah says did it: "God had frustrated their counsel." The guards were posted, but God gets the credit.

"We all returned to the wall, each to his work." The danger had passed for the moment, and they went straight back to building. They did not stop to celebrate or rest. The work was not done.

4:16-18 *And it was, from that day, half of my young men were doing the work, and half of them were holding both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the body armor; and the leaders **were** behind all the house of Judah, who were building the wall. And those carrying the burden were loading **it**, with one of his hands doing the work, and one holding the weapon. And the builders, each **had** his sword girded on his hips, and **they were** building. And the one who blew on the ram's horn **was** beside me.*

"From that day, half of my young men were doing the work, and half of them were holding both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the body armor." Nehemiah split his own servants into two shifts: half built, half stood guard.

"Those carrying the burden were loading it, with one of his hands doing the work, and one holding the weapon." Those who carried loads could do it with one hand, so they kept a weapon in

the other. "The builders, each had his sword girded on his hips, and they were building." Builders needed both hands, so they wore their swords at their sides.

"The one who blew on the ram's horn was beside me." The ram's horn, the shofar, was a trumpet made from a ram's horn, used to sound alarms and call people together.

This picture of a worker with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other has become a picture of the Christian life. We build up, and we stand guard. We work at God's mission, and we also guard against the enemy. Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God, and to take "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). We need both: building and battling.

4:19-20 *And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work **is** much and wide, and we **are** separated on the wall, far each from his brother. In the place where you hear the sound of the ram's horn, there you shall gather to us. Our God will fight for us."*

"The work is much and wide, and we are separated on the wall, far each from his brother." The wall was over two miles around. Workers were spread out thinly. One section could be attacked without the others knowing.

So Nehemiah gave a plan: "In the place where you hear the sound of the ram's horn, there you shall gather to us." Wherever the trumpet sounded, everyone would run to that spot.

"Our God will fight for us." Here is the faith behind the plan. They would fight, but God would fight for them. Moses had told Israel at the Red Sea, "The LORD will fight for you" (Exodus 14:14). That promise still stood.

The church today is also spread out, each of us on our own section of the wall. We need to come running when a brother or sister is under attack.

4:21-23 *And we were doing the work, and half of them were holding the spears from the going up of the dawn until the coming out of the stars. Also at that time I said to the people, "Let each **man** with his young man spend the night in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be for us a guard **by** night and work **by** day." And neither I nor my brothers nor my young men nor the men of the guard who **were** behind me, none of us were taking off our clothes; each **had** his weapon **at** the water.*

"We were doing the work, and half of them were holding the spears from the going up of the dawn until the coming out of the stars." From first light to the first stars, they worked.

Nehemiah also had the men from the towns stay in Jerusalem overnight: "Let each man with his young man spend the night in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be for us a guard by night and work by day." No one went home at night. That saved travel time and gave the city guards all night long.

"Neither I nor my brothers nor my young men nor the men of the guard who were behind me, none of us were taking off our clothes; each had his weapon at the water." The last phrase is hard in the Hebrew. It likely means each man kept his weapon with him even when he went for water, or that they took off their clothes only to wash. Either way, they were always ready.

Nehemiah did not ask the people to do anything he would not do himself. He and his men slept in their clothes too. That is leadership.

Summary

When Sanballat heard that the wall was being built, he was furious and mocked the feeble Jews before the army of Samaria, and Tobiah said even a fox could break down their wall. Nehemiah prayed that God would hear their contempt and turn the enemies' reproach back on their own heads. The people kept working with all their heart until the whole wall was joined to half its height. When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard the gaps were closing, they plotted to attack, but the Jews prayed and set a guard day and night. The workers of Judah grew weary of the rubble, the enemies threatened a surprise attack, and Jews living nearby kept bringing frightening reports. Nehemiah stationed families with weapons at the low, open places and told the people not to fear but to remember the great and awesome Lord and fight for their families. God frustrated the enemies' plan, and everyone returned to work. From then on half of Nehemiah's men worked and half stood guard, the burden bearers worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other, the builders wore swords, and a trumpeter stayed beside Nehemiah to call everyone together, because "our God will fight for us." They worked from dawn until the stars came out, everyone stayed in Jerusalem at night as guards, and Nehemiah and his men did not even take off their clothes.

Study Questions

1. How did Sanballat and Tobiah try to discourage the builders? (4:1-3)

2. What did Nehemiah do instead of answering their mockery? (4:4-5)

3. Why was the wall joined together to half its height? (4:6)

4. When the enemies plotted to attack, what two things did the people do? (4:9)

5. What three things discouraged the people in verses 10 to 12?

6. What did Nehemiah tell the people to remember, and whom to fight for? (4:14)

7. How did the builders work after the threat, and what was the trumpet for? (4:16-20)

8. Nehemiah handed his anger over to God in prayer instead of getting even. How do you handle people who mock or oppose your faith? How does Matthew 5:44 shape your prayers for them?

9. "We prayed to our God, and we stationed a guard." Where do you need to both pray and take practical action right now?

10. The people grew tired halfway through. Where are you tired halfway through something God gave you to do, and what from this chapter can help you keep going?

Nehemiah 5: Justice for the Poor

Scripture

5:1-13 And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their brothers the Jews. And there were ***those*** who were saying, "Our sons and our daughters, we ***are*** many; and let us get grain, that we may eat and live." And there were ***those*** who were saying, "Our fields and our vineyards and our houses we are pledging, and let us get grain in the famine." And there were ***those*** who were saying, "We have borrowed money for the tribute of the king ***on*** our fields and our vineyards. And now, our flesh ***is*** like the flesh of our brothers, our sons like their sons; and look, we are bringing our sons and our daughters into bondage to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into bondage, and ***it is*** not in the power of our hands; and our fields and our vineyards ***belong*** to others." And I burned ***with anger*** very ***much*** when I heard their outcry and these words. And my heart took counsel within me, and I contended with the nobles and with the officials, and I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I set a great assembly against them. And I said to them, "We, according to what ***was*** in us, have bought back our brothers the Jews who had sold themselves to the nations; and will you also sell your brothers, and they be sold to us?" And they were silent and did not find a word. And I said, "The thing which you are doing ***is*** not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? And also I, my brothers, and my young men are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon, please, this interest. Return to them, please, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, and the hundredth ***part*** of the money and the grain, the new wine and the fresh oil, which you are lending to them." And they said, "We will return ***it***, and from them we will not require ***anything***; so we will do, as you are saying." And I called the priests and made them swear to do according to this word. Also I shook out my bosom and said, "So may God shake out every man who does not carry out this word, from his house and from his labor; and so may he be shaken out and empty." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and they praised the LORD. And the people did according to this word.

5:14-19 Also from the day that he appointed me to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year and until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, I and my brothers did not eat the bread of the governor. And the former governors who ***were*** before me laid heavy ***burdens*** on the people and took from them for bread and wine, besides approximately 1 pound (forty shekels) of silver; also their young men domineered over the people. And I did not do so because of the fear of God. And also I held fast to the work of this wall, and we did not buy a field; and all my young men ***were*** gathered there for the work. And the Jews and the officials, a hundred and fifty men, and those who came to us from the nations which ***were*** around us, ***were*** at my table. And what was made for one day ***was*** one ox ***and*** six choice sheep, and birds were made for me; and once in ten days all ***kinds of*** wine in abundance. And with this I did not seek the bread of the governor, because the service was heavy on this people. Remember for me, O my God, for good, all that I have done for this people.

Preview

In the middle of building the wall, a new crisis breaks out, and this one is not from outside enemies. Poor Jewish families cry out against their own richer brothers. Some have no food. Some have mortgaged their fields and houses to buy grain in a famine. Some have borrowed to pay the king's tax, and now they are forced to sell their own sons and daughters as slaves to their fellow Jews.

Nehemiah is angry. He calls a great assembly and tells the nobles and officials that what they are doing is not good. He orders them to stop charging interest and to give back the fields, vineyards, houses and money they have taken. They agree, and he makes them swear to it. Then Nehemiah tells how he himself, as governor for twelve years, refused the food allowance owed to him, bought no land, fed 150 people at his own table, and worked on the wall, all because he feared God and saw how heavy the burden was on the people.

Study

5:1-5 *And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their brothers the Jews. And there were **those** who were saying, "Our sons and our daughters, we **are** many; and let us get grain, that we may eat and live." And there were **those** who were saying, "Our fields and our vineyards and our houses we are pledging, and let us get grain in the famine." And there were **those** who were saying, "We have borrowed money for the tribute of the king **on** our fields and our vineyards. And now, our flesh **is** like the flesh of our brothers, our sons like their sons; and look, we are bringing our sons and our daughters into bondage to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into bondage, and **it is** not in the power of our hands; and our fields and our vineyards **belong** to others."*

"There was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their brothers the Jews." Notice who is crying out against whom. Not against Sanballat. Against "their brothers." The wives joined in, which tells us the trouble had reached the home and the children.

Three groups spoke. Some said, "Our sons and our daughters, we are many; and let us get grain, that we may eat and live." Large families had no food. The men were working on the wall and not in their fields.

Others said, "Our fields and our vineyards and our houses we are pledging, and let us get grain in the famine." They had to mortgage their land to buy food. There was a famine on top of everything else.

Others said, "We have borrowed money for the tribute of the king on our fields and our vineyards." The Persian taxes were heavy, and they had borrowed against their land to pay them.

Then the cry that breaks the heart: "our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our sons like their sons; and look, we are bringing our sons and our daughters into bondage to be slaves." They were saying, we are the same people as the rich. Our children are just as precious as theirs. Yet we are forced to sell our children into servitude to pay our debts, "and some of our daughters have been

brought into bondage, and it is not in the power of our hands; and our fields and our vineyards belong to others." They had nothing left to pay with.

Under the Law, an Israelite could sell himself or his children into service to pay a debt, but only for a limited time, and he was to be treated as a hired worker, not a slave, and set free in the seventh year or the year of jubilee (Exodus 21:2-11; Leviticus 25:39-43). This was very different from the race-based slavery of later history. Even so, it was never meant to be a tool for the rich to grow richer from their brothers' misery.

5:6-7 *And I burned **with anger** very **much** when I heard their outcry and these words. And my heart took counsel within me, and I contended with the nobles and with the officials, and I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I set a great assembly against them.*

"I burned with anger very much when I heard their outcry and these words." Nehemiah was angry, and it was a right anger. This was injustice against God's people by God's people. Is all anger sin? No. Anger at injustice can be righteous. Jesus was angry at the hardness of people's hearts (Mark 3:5). Paul says, "be angry, and do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26).

But notice what Nehemiah did next: "My heart took counsel within me." He thought it through before he spoke. He did not lash out. Godly anger is under control.

"I contended with the nobles and with the officials, and I said to them, You are exacting interest, each from his brother." The Law forbade charging interest to a poor fellow Israelite (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37). The rich were lending to their hungry brothers and charging interest on it, then taking their land and their children when they could not pay.

"And I set a great assembly against them." Nehemiah brought it out into the open, in front of everyone.

5:8-9 *And I said to them, "We, according to what **was** in us, have bought back our brothers the Jews who had sold themselves to the nations; and will you also sell your brothers, and they be sold to us?" And they were silent and did not find a word. And I said, "The thing which you are doing **is** not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?*

"We, according to what was in us, have bought back our brothers the Jews who had sold themselves to the nations; and will you also sell your brothers, and they be sold to us?" Nehemiah and others had been spending their own money to buy Jews out of slavery to foreigners. Meanwhile, these nobles were selling their own people into slavery, sometimes perhaps to the very foreigners others would then have to buy them back from. It made no sense.

"They were silent and did not find a word." They had no answer.

"The thing which you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?" Here is the deeper problem. The enemies outside were watching. How could Jerusalem claim to serve a holy God while its rich were selling its poor? The

way God's people treat one another is a witness to the world, good or bad. Jesus said all people would know we are His disciples if we have love for one another (John 13:35).

5:10-11 *And also I, my brothers, and my young men are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon, please, this interest. Return to them, please, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, and the hundredth* ***part*** *of the money and the grain, the new wine and the fresh oil, which you are lending to them."*

"And also I, my brothers, and my young men are lending them money and grain." Nehemiah was honest that he had been lending too. Whether he had been charging interest is not clear, but he included himself in the call to change. "Let us abandon, please, this interest."

"Return to them, please, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, and the hundredth part of the money and the grain, the new wine and the fresh oil, which you are lending to them." "The hundredth part" was the interest, most likely one percent a month, twelve percent a year. Nehemiah asked them to give it all back, "this very day." Not next month. Today.

5:12-13 *And they said, "We will return* ***it****, and from them we will not require* ***anything****; so we will do, as you are saying." And I called the priests and made them swear to do according to this word. Also I shook out my bosom and said, "So may God shake out every man who does not carry out this word, from his house and from his labor; and so may he be shaken out and empty." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and they praised the LORD. And the people did according to this word.*

"They said, We will return it, and from them we will not require anything; so we will do, as you are saying." To their credit, the nobles agreed.

But Nehemiah wanted more than a promise in a crowd. "I called the priests and made them swear to do according to this word." He had them take an oath before God.

Then he acted out a warning. "I shook out my bosom," the fold of his robe where people carried things, like a pocket, "and said, So may God shake out every man who does not carry out this word, from his house and from his labor; and so may he be shaken out and empty." Just as he emptied his robe, God would empty the house of anyone who broke this promise.

"All the assembly said, Amen, and they praised the LORD. And the people did according to this word." "Amen" means so be it, truly. They agreed and praised God, and then they did it. That is real repentance: not just words, but changed behavior.

5:14-15 *Also from the day that he appointed me to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year and until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, I and my brothers did not eat the bread of the governor. And the former governors who **were** before me laid heavy **burdens** on the people and took from them for bread and wine, besides approximately 1 pound (forty shekels) of silver; also their young men domineered over the people. And I did not do so because of the fear of God.*

Now Nehemiah tells about his own example. "From the day that he appointed me to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year and until the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, I and my brothers did not eat the bread of the governor." "The bread of the governor" was the food allowance paid to the governor by the people through taxes. He had every right to it. He did not take it.

"The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for bread and wine, besides approximately 1 pound (forty shekels) of silver." The governors before him had taken food, wine and money from the people, "also their young men domineered over the people," their servants pushed the people around.

"And I did not do so because of the fear of God." There it is again: the fear of God. The fear of God is not terror. It is a deep respect for God that shapes how we live, knowing we answer to Him. Nehemiah knew he would answer to God for how he treated these people.

5:16 *And also I held fast to the work of this wall, and we did not buy a field; and all my young men **were** gathered there for the work.*

"And also I held fast to the work of this wall, and we did not buy a field." Nehemiah did not use his position to get rich. A governor in hard times could easily have bought up the land of poor families cheaply. Nehemiah refused. Instead "all my young men were gathered there for the work." His servants worked on the wall like everyone else.

5:17-18 *And the Jews and the officials, a hundred and fifty men, and those who came to us from the nations which **were** around us, **were** at my table. And what was made for one day **was** one ox **and** six choice sheep, and birds were made for me; and once in ten days all **kinds of** wine in abundance. And with this I did not seek the bread of the governor, because the service was heavy on this people.*

"The Jews and the officials, a hundred and fifty men, and those who came to us from the nations which were around us, were at my table." Nehemiah fed 150 leaders every day, plus visitors from other lands, at his own cost.

The daily menu: "one ox and six choice sheep, and birds were made for me; and once in ten days all kinds of wine in abundance." That is a great deal of food, and he paid for it himself.

"And with this I did not seek the bread of the governor, because the service was heavy on this people." Nehemiah knew how hard life was for the people. He would not add to their load.

This is a picture of what a godly leader does. He does not use his people. He serves them. Jesus said that the rulers of the nations lord it over people, but it shall not be so among you; whoever wants

to be great must be your servant (Mark 10:42-45). Paul also gave up his right to be paid by the Corinthians so he would not be a burden (1 Corinthians 9:12-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9). And our Lord Jesus, though He was rich, became poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9).

5:19 *Remember for me, O my God, for good, all that I have done for this people.*

"Remember for me, O my God, for good, all that I have done for this people." This is the first of several short prayers in the book where Nehemiah asks God to remember him (13:14, 22, 31).

Is this pride, as if he were asking for credit? I do not think so. Nehemiah had given up his rights and spent his own money, and no one had paid him back. He was not asking people to notice. He asked God to notice. He trusted that God sees what is done in secret and will reward it (Matthew 6:4; Hebrews 6:10). Nehemiah knew that the God who keeps covenant also remembers those who serve Him.

Summary

During the building of the wall, the poor people and their wives cried out against their fellow Jews. Some large families lacked grain, some had mortgaged their fields, vineyards and houses to buy food in a famine, and some had borrowed to pay the king's tax and were forced to sell their sons and daughters into bondage, with no power to redeem them because their land belonged to others. Nehemiah was very angry, and after thinking it over he rebuked the nobles and officials for charging interest to their brothers and called a great assembly against them. He reminded them that he and others had bought back Jews sold to foreigners while they were selling their own brothers, and they had no answer. He told them that what they were doing was not good and brought reproach from their enemies, and urged them to stop the interest and return the fields, vineyards, olive groves, houses and interest that very day. They agreed, he made them swear before the priests, and he shook out his robe as a sign that God would shake out anyone who broke the oath. The assembly said "Amen," praised the LORD, and did it. Nehemiah then recalled that in his twelve years as governor he and his brothers never took the governor's food allowance, unlike earlier governors who burdened the people, because he feared God. He worked on the wall, bought no land, and fed 150 Jews and officials and visitors from other nations at his own table, and he asked God to remember him for good for all he had done for the people.

Study Questions

1. Who cried out, and against whom? (5:1)

2. What three hardships did the people describe? (5:2-5)

3. How did Nehemiah respond when he heard, and what did he do before speaking? (5:6-7)

4. What did the Law say about charging interest to a poor brother? (5:7; Exodus 22:25)

5. Why did Nehemiah say the nobles should walk in the fear of God? (5:9)

6. What did Nehemiah ask the nobles to return, and when? (5:11)

7. What right did Nehemiah give up as governor, and why? (5:14-18)

8. Nehemiah was angry but took counsel with his heart first. How do you handle anger at wrong? What does Ephesians 4:26 say to you?

9. The way the rich treated the poor brought reproach from the nations. How does the way believers treat one another, especially in money matters, affect our witness today?

10. Nehemiah gave up his rights for the sake of others. Is there a right you could lay down this week to lighten someone else's load?

Nehemiah 6: The Wall Finished Despite Plots

Scripture

6:1-9 And it was, when it was heard by Sanballat and Tobiah and by Geshem the Arab and by the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and ***that*** no breach was left in it—although until that time I had not set up doors in the gates— ***that*** Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come, and let us meet together in Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." And they were planning to do evil to me. And I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down. Why should the work cease while I let it drop and come down to you?" And they sent to me according to this word four times, and I answered them according to this word. And Sanballat sent his young man to me according to this word a fifth time, and an open letter ***was*** in his hand. In it ***was*** written, "Among the nations it has been heard, and Geshem is saying, ***that*** you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are building the wall; and you are to become their king, according to these words. And also you have appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, saying, 'A king ***is*** in Judah!' And now it will be heard by the king according to these words. And now come, and let us take counsel together." And I sent to him, saying, "It has not happened according to these words which you are saying, for from your ***own*** heart you are inventing them." For all of them were making us afraid, saying, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." And now, strengthen my hands.

6:10-19 And I went ***to*** the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, and he ***was*** shut in. And he said, "Let us meet at the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple; for they are coming to kill you, and ***by*** night they are coming to kill you." And I said, "Should a man like me flee? And who ***is there*** like me who would go into the temple and live? I will not go in." And I recognized, and look, God had not sent him; for he had spoken the prophecy against me, and Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this ***reason*** he ***was*** hired, so that I would be afraid and act so and sin, and it would become for them a bad name, so that they might reproach me. Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of his, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were making me afraid. And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth ***day*** of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it was, when all our enemies heard, ***that*** all the nations which ***were*** around us were afraid, and they fell greatly in their own eyes; and they knew that this work had been done from our God. Also in those days the nobles of Judah were multiplying their letters going to Tobiah, and those of Tobiah were coming to them. For many in Judah ***were*** masters of an oath to him, for he ***was*** a son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah; and Jehohanan his son had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Also they were speaking of his good deeds before me, and they were bringing out my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Preview

The wall is almost done. Only the doors are not yet hung in the gates. So the enemies change tactics. They stop threatening the people and aim at Nehemiah himself. Four times Sanballat and Geshem invite him to a meeting in the plain of Ono, planning to harm him, and four times he answers: I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down. The fifth time, Sanballat sends an

open letter spreading the rumor that Nehemiah plans to make himself king. Nehemiah calls it a lie and prays for strength.

Then a man named Shemaiah, posing as a prophet, warns Nehemiah that assassins are coming and urges him to hide in the temple. Nehemiah sees through it: a man like him will not run, and he will not sin by going where only priests may go. Shemaiah had been hired by Tobiah and Sanballat. And on the twenty-fifth of Elul, after only fifty-two days, the wall is finished. The nations around are afraid, because they know this work was done by God. Still, some of the nobles of Judah keep writing letters to Tobiah, who is tied to them by marriage, and he keeps trying to frighten Nehemiah.

Study

6:1 *And it was, when it was heard by Sanballat and Tobiah and by Geshem the Arab and by the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and* ***that*** *no breach was left in it—although until that time I had not set up doors in the gates—*

"When it was heard by Sanballat and Tobiah and by Geshem the Arab and by the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that no breach was left in it." There were no more gaps. "Although until that time I had not set up doors in the gates." The gates were the last step.

When the work is nearly finished, the enemy often tries hardest. Mocking had failed (4:1-3). The threat of attack had failed (4:7-15). So now the enemies went after the leader. If they could remove Nehemiah, the work might still stop.

6:2-4 ***that*** *Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come, and let us meet together in Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." And they were planning to do evil to me. And I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down. Why should the work cease while I let it drop and come down to you?" And they sent to me according to this word four times, and I answered them according to this word.*

"Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, Come, and let us meet together in Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." Ono was about twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem, near the edge of Judah's territory and close to Samaria's. It looked like a friendly offer of talks on neutral ground. "And they were planning to do evil to me." Nehemiah saw through it. Away from his people, he could be kidnapped or killed.

His answer is one every believer should remember: "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down. Why should the work cease while I let it drop and come down to you?"

Nehemiah did not accuse them of trying to kill him. He did not argue. He simply said, I have something more important to do. He would not let the enemy set his schedule.

"They sent to me according to this word four times, and I answered them according to this word." Four times the same request, four times the same answer. Persistence on one side was met by persistence on the other.

Many distractions in our lives are not evil in themselves. A meeting, a friendly talk, a chance to clear things up. But if they pull us off the work God gave us, they can be the enemy's tool. Sometimes the right answer is simply: I cannot come down.

6:5-7 *And Sanballat sent his young man to me according to this word a fifth time, and an open letter **was** in his hand. In it **was** written, "Among the nations it has been heard, and Geshem is saying, **that** you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are building the wall; and you are to become their king, according to these words. And also you have appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, saying, 'A king **is** in Judah!' And now it will be heard by the king according to these words. And now come, and let us take counsel together."*

"Sanballat sent his young man to me according to this word a fifth time, and an open letter was in his hand." Letters were normally rolled and sealed. An open letter meant anyone could read it on the way. It was meant to spread a rumor.

The letter said: "Among the nations it has been heard, and Geshem is saying, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are building the wall; and you are to become their king." It also said, "you have appointed prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem," and that they were saying, "A king is in Judah!" This was a serious charge. If Artaxerxes believed it, Nehemiah would be finished. The same kind of charge had stopped the work before (Ezra 4:12-16).

"And now come, and let us take counsel together." The letter was blackmail: come and meet us, or we will report this to the king.

Notice where the rumor came from: "it has been heard," and "Geshem is saying." The source was vague, and the one named was one of the enemies himself. Rumors and gossip often work this way. People are saying it, we are told. Which people? Usually the one telling you.

6:8-9 *And I sent to him, saying, "It has not happened according to these words which you are saying, for from your **own** heart you are inventing them." For all of them were making us afraid, saying, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." And now, strengthen my hands.*

Nehemiah's answer was short and plain. "It has not happened according to these words which you are saying, for from your own heart you are inventing them." He denied it flatly and named it as a lie. He did not go to the meeting to defend himself. He did not panic. He told the truth and moved on.

"For all of them were making us afraid, saying, Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." That was the real goal: fear, so that the people would quit.

"And now, strengthen my hands." Another short prayer. Nehemiah was under great pressure, and he did not pretend otherwise. He asked God for strength. The enemies wanted his hands to drop. He asked God to make them strong.

When we are falsely accused, we can do what Nehemiah did. Tell the truth plainly, refuse to be pulled off course, and ask God for strength. Peter tells us to keep a good conscience, so that those who speak against us may be ashamed (1 Peter 3:16).

6:10-11 *And I went **to** the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, and he **was** shut in. And he said, "Let us meet at the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple; for they are coming to kill you, and **by** night they are coming to kill you." And I said, "Should a man like me flee? And who **is there** like me who would go into the temple and live? I will not go in."*

Now came a more clever trap. "I went to the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, and he was shut in." We are not told why he was shut in. Perhaps he pretended to be afraid, or to be under some special word from God, to make his message seem urgent.

Shemaiah spoke like a prophet: "Let us meet at the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple; for they are coming to kill you, and by night they are coming to kill you." It sounded like a friend's warning. Hide in the temple, behind locked doors.

Nehemiah gave two answers. First, "Should a man like me flee?" The leader of the people could not run and hide. If he did, everyone would lose heart. Second, "who is there like me who would go into the temple and live? I will not go in." Nehemiah was not a priest. Only priests could enter the holy place of the temple. A layman who went in would be breaking God's Law, and the Law warned that an outsider who came near would be put to death (Numbers 18:7). King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for going into the temple to burn incense (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

Nehemiah would not save his life by sinning. Fear can push us to do what God has forbidden, and it can even sound spiritual when it comes from someone who talks like a prophet.

6:12-13 *And I recognized, and look, God had not sent him; for he had spoken the prophecy against me, and Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this **reason** he **was** hired, so that I would be afraid and act so and sin, and it would become for them a bad name, so that they might reproach me.*

"I recognized, and look, God had not sent him; for he had spoken the prophecy against me, and Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him." How did Nehemiah know? Because the message told him to break God's Law. A true word from God will never tell us to disobey God's Word. That is how we test every voice that claims to speak for God (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 1 John 4:1).

"For this reason he was hired, so that I would be afraid and act so and sin, and it would become for them a bad name, so that they might reproach me." The plan was not just to scare Nehemiah, but to ruin his name. If he hid in the temple, everyone would say he was a coward and a lawbreaker, and no one would follow him.

The enemy's goal is often not to kill us but to get us to sin, so that we lose our witness. Guard your name, not out of pride, but for the sake of God's work.

6:14 *Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of his, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were making me afraid.*

"Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of his, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were making me afraid." Once again Nehemiah gave his enemies to God rather than taking revenge himself (compare 4:4-5).

We learn here that Shemaiah was not alone. A woman named Noadiah, who claimed to be a prophetess, and other prophets were also trying to frighten him. False prophets had always been a danger in Israel (Jeremiah 23:16-17), and they still are (Matthew 7:15; 2 Peter 2:1).

6:15 *And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth **day** of Elul, in fifty-two days.*

"And the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days." Elul is the sixth month, August to September. Counting back fifty-two days, the work began in early Av, the fifth month. From Nehemiah's arrival in the spring or summer of 445 B.C. to the finished wall was only a few months.

Fifty-two days. A wall that had lain in ruins for 140 years, rebuilt in less than two months, by a weak and poor people, under constant threat. How? The next verse tells us.

6:16 *And it was, when all our enemies heard, **that** all the nations which **were** around us were afraid, and they fell greatly in their own eyes; and they knew that this work had been done from our God.*

"When all our enemies heard, that all the nations which were around us were afraid, and they fell greatly in their own eyes; and they knew that this work had been done from our God."

This is the real victory of the chapter. Not just a wall, but a testimony. The enemies who had mocked the "feeble Jews" (4:2) now saw the finished wall and knew that no feeble people could have done it alone. God had done it. They "fell greatly in their own eyes," that is, they lost their confidence and were humbled.

When God's people do God's work God's way, the world can see that God is in it. Jesus said, "let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and may glorify your Father who is in the heavens" (Matthew 5:16).

6:17-19 *Also in those days the nobles of Judah were multiplying their letters going to Tobiah, and those of Tobiah were coming to them. For many in Judah **were** masters of an oath to him, for he **was** a son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah; and Jehohanan his son had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. Also they were speaking of his good deeds before me, and they were bringing out my words to him. Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.*

But the chapter does not end on a high note. "In those days the nobles of Judah were multiplying their letters going to Tobiah, and those of Tobiah were coming to them." Some of Judah's own leaders were in close touch with the enemy.

Why? "For many in Judah were masters of an oath to him." They were bound to him by oath, likely by business deals or alliances. "He was a son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah; and Jehohanan his son had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah." Tobiah had married into a leading Jewish family, and his son had married the daughter of Meshullam, one of the wall builders (3:4, 30). Tobiah had a Jewish name (it means the LORD is good) and Jewish family ties, but he was an enemy of the work. This is the same danger Ezra had faced: marriage ties with those who opposed God pulled God's people into divided loyalties.

"They were speaking of his good deeds before me, and they were bringing out my words to him." They told Nehemiah what a good man Tobiah was, and then carried Nehemiah's words back to Tobiah. They were spies and go-betweens.

"Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid." The wall was done, but the war of words went on. Later, while Nehemiah was away, Tobiah would even be given a room in the temple (13:4-9).

Finishing a work for God does not end the battle. We have to keep watching, especially for compromise from the inside.

Summary

When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and the other enemies heard the wall had no more gaps, though the gate doors were not yet hung, Sanballat and Geshem invited Nehemiah four times to meet them in the plain of Ono, intending to harm him. Each time he answered that he was doing a great work and could not come down. The fifth time Sanballat sent an open letter claiming that Nehemiah and the Jews were planning to rebel and that he had appointed prophets to proclaim him king, and urged him to meet. Nehemiah answered that none of it was true and that Sanballat had invented it, and he prayed for God to strengthen his hands. Shemaiah son of Delaiah, who was shut in at home, urged him to hide inside the temple because men were coming to kill him by night, but Nehemiah refused to flee or to enter the temple, and he realized that Tobiah and Sanballat had hired Shemaiah to make him sin and ruin his name. Nehemiah asked God to remember Tobiah, Sanballat, the prophetess Noadiah and the other prophets who tried to frighten him. The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days, and the surrounding nations were afraid and humbled, knowing the work had been done by God. Still, many nobles of Judah, bound by oath and marriage to Tobiah, kept exchanging letters with him, praised him to Nehemiah, and reported Nehemiah's words to him, while Tobiah kept sending letters to frighten Nehemiah.

Study Questions

1. What was left to do on the wall when the enemies made their new plans? (6:1)

2. What did Sanballat and Geshem really intend by asking Nehemiah to meet them, and what did he answer? (6:2-3)

3. What did the open letter accuse Nehemiah of? (6:6-7)

4. How did Nehemiah answer the letter, and what did he pray? (6:8-9)

5. What did Shemaiah urge Nehemiah to do, and what two reasons did Nehemiah give for refusing? (6:10-11)

6. How did Nehemiah know Shemaiah was not sent by God? (6:12-13)

7. How long did the wall take, and what did the nations around conclude? (6:15-16)

8. "I am doing a great work, and I am not able to come down." What distractions are pulling you away from what God has given you to do?

9. Shemaiah's advice sounded spiritual but would have led Nehemiah to sin. How can you test the advice you get, even from people who speak in God's name?

10. The enemies knew "this work had been done from our God." What in your life or your church could only be explained by God's work?

Nehemiah 7: Guarding the City and the Record of the Returned

Scripture

7:1-5 And it was, when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites had been appointed, and I gave charge to Hanani my brother and Hananiah the commander of the citadel over Jerusalem, for he ***was*** like a man of faithfulness and feared God more than many. And I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem shall not be opened until the sun is hot; and while they are standing ***guard***, let them shut the doors, and bolt ***them***. And appoint guards of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his guard post and each in front of his house." And the city ***was*** wide on both hands and large, and the people ***were*** few in its midst, and there were no houses built. And my God put ***it*** into my heart, and I gathered the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it:

7:6-38 These ***are*** the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had taken into exile, and they returned to Jerusalem and to Judah, each to his city, who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: the sons of Parosh, two thousand one hundred seventy-two; the sons of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; the sons of Arah, six hundred fifty-two; the sons of Pahath-moab, of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred eighteen; the sons of Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Zattu, eight hundred forty-five; the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty; the sons of Binnui, six hundred forty-eight; the sons of Bebai, six hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Azgad, two thousand three hundred twenty-two; the sons of Adonikam, six hundred sixty-seven; the sons of Bigvai, two thousand sixty-seven; the sons of Adin, six hundred fifty-five; the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; the sons of Hashum, three hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Bezai, three hundred twenty-four; the sons of Hariph, one hundred twelve; the sons of Gibeon, ninety-five; the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, one hundred eighty-eight; the men of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight; the men of Beth-azmaveth, forty-two; the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-three; the men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty-one; the men of Michmash, one hundred twenty-two; the men of Bethel and Ai, one hundred twenty-three; the men of ***the*** other Nebo, fifty-two; the sons of ***the*** other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Harim, three hundred twenty; the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five; the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-one; the sons of Senaah, three thousand nine hundred thirty.

7:39-60 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three; the sons of Immer, one thousand fifty-two; the sons of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred forty-seven; the sons of Harim, one thousand seventeen. The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, seventy-four. The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred forty-eight. The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, one hundred thirty-eight. The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the

sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephishesim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. The sons of the servants of Solomon: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida, the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon. All the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon ***were*** three hundred ninety-two.

7:61-73 And these ***are*** those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer, and they were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they ***were*** from Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred forty-two. And from the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. These sought their record ***among*** those enrolled by genealogy, and it was not found, and they were defiled ***and removed*** from the priesthood. And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until the priest stood up for Urim and Thummim. All the assembly together ***was*** forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male servants and their female servants; these ***were*** seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven. And to them ***belonged*** two hundred forty-five male singers and female singers. Their horses ***were*** seven hundred thirty-six; their mules, two hundred forty-five; camels, four hundred thirty-five; donkeys, six thousand seven hundred twenty. And some of the heads of the fathers gave for the work. The governor gave to the treasury: gold, one thousand drachmas; fifty bowls; five hundred thirty tunics of priests. And some of the heads of the fathers gave to the treasury of the work: gold, twenty thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 2,750 pounds (two thousand two hundred minas). And what the rest of the people gave ***was*** gold, twenty thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 2,500 pounds (two thousand minas), and sixty-seven tunics of priests. And the priests and the Levites and the gatekeepers and the singers and some of the people and the temple servants and all Israel dwelt in their cities. And the seventh month arrived, and the sons of Israel ***were*** in their cities.

Preview

The wall is finished and the doors are hung. Now Nehemiah sets guards over the city. He puts his brother Hanani and a faithful man named Hananiah in charge, and he gives orders about when the gates may be opened. But there is another problem. Jerusalem is large, and very few people live in it. The houses have not been rebuilt.

God puts it into Nehemiah's heart to gather the people and enroll them by their families. He finds the old record of those who came back from Babylon with Zerubbabel almost a hundred years before, and the rest of the chapter copies that list. It is nearly the same list as Ezra 2. The chapter ends in the seventh month, with the people settled in their towns, ready for what happens next in chapter 8.

Study

7:1-3 *And it was, when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites had been appointed, and I gave charge to Hanani my brother and Hananiah the commander of the citadel over Jerusalem, for he **was** like a man of faithfulness and feared God more than many. And I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem shall not be opened until the sun is hot; and while they are standing **guard**, let them shut the doors, and bolt **them**. And appoint guards of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his guard post and each in front of his house."*

"When the wall had been built and I had set up the doors." The work of chapters 3 to 6 was done. "The gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites had been appointed." Gatekeepers normally watched the temple gates. Here Nehemiah seems to have used them, and even the singers and Levites, to help watch the city while it had so few people.

He put two men in charge: "Hanani my brother," the same brother who had brought the bad news in 1:2, and "Hananiah the commander of the citadel." Why Hananiah? "For he was like a man of faithfulness and feared God more than many." Nehemiah did not pick leaders for their family name or their skill alone. He picked men who were faithful and who feared God. That is still the first thing to look for in a leader (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Acts 6:3).

His orders were careful. "The gates of Jerusalem shall not be opened until the sun is hot." The gates would stay shut until well into the morning, when everyone was awake and alert, and be shut and barred again while the guards were still on duty. The people would guard "each in front of his house." Each family guarded its own part of the city, the same way they had built the wall (3:10, 23, 28). The enemies had not gone away (6:17-19). A finished wall still had to be watched.

7:4-5 *And the city **was** wide on both hands and large, and the people **were** few in its midst, and there were no houses built. And my God put **it** into my heart, and I gathered the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it:*

"And the city was wide on both hands and large, and the people were few in its midst, and there were no houses built." Jerusalem had walls again, but most of it was empty ground and rubble. A city needs people, not just stones. Nehemiah will solve this problem in chapter 11.

"And my God put it into my heart." Nehemiah gave God the credit for the idea, just as he had in 2:12. God guides His people through ordinary thoughts and plans as well as through miracles. When a good and godly plan comes to us, we should thank the One who put it there.

He "gathered the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy." A genealogy is a family record. Before he could move people into the city, he needed to know who the true families of Israel were. "And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first." This was the list of the first return under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C., the same record Ezra used in Ezra 2.

7:6-38 *These **are** the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had taken into exile, and they returned to Jerusalem and to Judah, each to his city, who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: the sons of Parosh, two thousand one hundred seventy-two; the sons of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two; the sons of Arah, six hundred fifty-two; the sons of Pahath-moab, of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred eighteen; the sons of Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Zattu, eight hundred forty-five; the sons of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty; the sons of Binnui, six hundred forty-eight; the sons of Bebai, six hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Azgad, two thousand three hundred twenty-two; the sons of Adonikam, six hundred sixty-seven; the sons of Bigvai, two thousand sixty-seven; the sons of Adin, six hundred fifty-five; the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, ninety-eight; the sons of Hashum, three hundred twenty-eight; the sons of Bezai, three hundred twenty-four; the sons of Hariph, one hundred twelve; the sons of Gibeon, ninety-five; the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, one hundred eighty-eight; the men of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight; the men of Beth-azmaveth, forty-two; the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-three; the men of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty-one; the men of Michmash, one hundred twenty-two; the men of Bethel and Ai, one hundred twenty-three; the men of **the** other Nebo, fifty-two; the sons of **the** other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four; the sons of Harim, three hundred twenty; the sons of Jericho, three hundred forty-five; the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-one; the sons of Senaah, three thousand nine hundred thirty.*

The list begins with the same words as Ezra 2:1: "These are the sons of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile." Then come the leaders, "Zerubbabel, Jeshua," and ten others, twelve names in all. Ezra 2:2 lists eleven; Nehemiah 7:7 adds one more, Nahamani. Many think the twelve leaders stood for the twelve tribes of Israel. The Nehemiah and Mordecai named here are not the Nehemiah of this book or the Mordecai of Esther. They lived a hundred years earlier.

Then come the families (verses 8 to 25) and the towns (verses 26 to 38). We looked at these names in Ezra 2. Bethlehem, Anathoth, Ramah, Michmash, Bethel and Ai, Jericho, Lod and Ono: these are the towns of Judah and Benjamin, and many of them bring back memories of Israel's history.

If you lay this list beside Ezra 2, you will see that some numbers differ. The sons of Arah are 775 in Ezra 2:5 and 652 here. The sons of Senaah are 3,630 in Ezra and 3,930 here. Why? The two most common explanations are that numbers were easy to miscopy over many centuries, and that one list may have been made when the people signed up in Babylon and the other when they arrived, after some had dropped out and others had joined. Neither takes anything away from the truth of the account. Scripture is honest enough to give us both records side by side.

7:39-60 *The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three; the sons of Immer, one thousand fifty-two; the sons of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred forty-seven; the sons of Harim, one thousand seventeen. The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, seventy-four. The singers: the sons of Asaph, one hundred forty-eight. The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, one hundred thirty-eight. The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon, the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Shalmai, the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephishesim, the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. The sons of the servants of Solomon: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida, the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon. All the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon* ***were*** *three hundred ninety-two.*

Next come those who served at God's house. "The priests" were from four families, over four thousand men. "The Levites" were only seventy-four, the same small number as in Ezra 2:40. The singers, "the sons of Asaph," were 148 here and 128 in Ezra. The gatekeepers, the temple servants and "the sons of the servants of Solomon" follow, 392 temple servants and sons of Solomon's servants in all.

Why copy this whole list again? Because Nehemiah was building on the work of those who came before him. The people now living in Judah were the children and grandchildren of these families. Before they moved into Jerusalem, they needed to know who belonged and who could serve at the temple. This list was their family tree.

It also reminds us that God's work is passed from one generation to the next. Zerubbabel's people built the temple. Ezra taught the Law. Nehemiah built the wall. None of them did it all. Paul said it this way: one plants, another waters, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

7:61-65 *And these* ***are*** *those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer, and they were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they* ***were*** *from Israel: the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred forty-two. And from the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. These sought their record* ***among*** *those enrolled by genealogy, and it was not found, and they were defiled* ***and removed*** *from the priesthood. And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until the priest stood up for Urim and Thummim.*

Some "were not able to declare the house of their fathers and their seed, whether they were from Israel." They could not prove their family line. Among the priests, the sons of Barzillai had the same trouble. "These sought their record among those enrolled by genealogy, and it was not found." So they were kept from serving as priests, and "the governor said to them that they should

not eat from the most holy things until the priest stood up for Urim and Thummim." The Urim and Thummim were the objects the high priest used to learn God's will (Exodus 28:30). As in Ezra 2:63, the matter was left for God to settle.

These verses matter for the next chapters. In Nehemiah 10 the people will sign a covenant, and in Nehemiah 13 the priesthood will need to be cleansed. Knowing who truly belonged to God's people, and who could serve at His house, was not a small thing to them.

7:66-69 *All the assembly together **was** forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male servants and their female servants; these **were** seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven. And to them **belonged** two hundred forty-five male singers and female singers. Their horses **were** seven hundred thirty-six; their mules, two hundred forty-five; camels, four hundred thirty-five; donkeys, six thousand seven hundred twenty.*

"All the assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty," the same total as Ezra 2:64. Besides them were 7,337 servants and 245 male and female singers (Ezra 2:65 has 200), along with horses, mules, camels and donkeys. As we saw in Ezra 2, the listed family numbers add up to less than the total, most likely because the total included people not listed by family.

7:70-73 *And some of the heads of the fathers gave for the work. The governor gave to the treasury: gold, one thousand drachmas; fifty bowls; five hundred thirty tunics of priests. And some of the heads of the fathers gave to the treasury of the work: gold, twenty thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 2,750 pounds (two thousand two hundred minas). And what the rest of the people gave **was** gold, twenty thousand drachmas, and silver, approximately 2,500 pounds (two thousand minas), and sixty-seven tunics of priests. And the priests and the Levites and the gatekeepers and the singers and some of the people and the temple servants and all Israel dwelt in their cities. And the seventh month arrived, and the sons of Israel **were** in their cities.*

"And some of the heads of the fathers gave for the work." Here Nehemiah's copy gives more detail than Ezra 2:68-69. The governor gave gold, bowls, and "five hundred thirty tunics of priests." The heads of the fathers gave gold and silver, and the rest of the people gave gold, silver, and "sixty-seven tunics of priests." The governor, the leaders and the ordinary people all gave. Everyone had a part.

A drachma was a Persian gold coin, called a daric, about a quarter ounce of gold. A mina was about a pound and a quarter of silver.

"And the seventh month arrived, and the sons of Israel were in their cities." This last line ties the list to what comes next. The same words open the story in Ezra 3:1, when the first returned exiles gathered in the seventh month to rebuild the altar. Now, almost a hundred years later, another seventh month has come. The wall is done, and God's people are about to gather again, this time to hear His Word.

Summary

After the wall was built and the doors set up, Nehemiah appointed gatekeepers, singers and Levites, and put his brother Hanani and Hananiah, the commander of the citadel, a faithful man who feared God, in charge of Jerusalem. He ordered that the gates stay shut until the sun was hot and that the people of Jerusalem stand guard, each near his own house. The city was large, but few people lived in it and the houses were not rebuilt, so God put it in Nehemiah's heart to gather the people and enroll them by family. He found the record of those who first came up from exile with Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the other leaders, and he copied it: the families, the men of each town, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants, and those who could not prove their family line, including priests who were kept from the priesthood until a priest could ask God with the Urim and Thummim. The assembly totaled 42,360, besides 7,337 servants and 245 singers, with their animals. The governor, the heads of the families and the rest of the people gave gold, silver and priestly garments for the work. When the seventh month came, the people of Israel were settled in their towns.

Study Questions

1. What kind of man did Nehemiah put in charge of Jerusalem, and why? (7:2)

2. What orders did Nehemiah give about the gates and the guards? (7:3)

3. What problem did Jerusalem still have after the wall was finished? (7:4)

4. Who put the plan to enroll the people into Nehemiah's heart, and what record did he find? (7:5)

5. Why do you think this list appears twice in the Bible, in Ezra 2 and here?

6. Who gave toward the work, and what did they give? (7:70-72)

7. What does the last verse of the chapter tell us about the timing of what comes next? (7:73; Ezra 3:1)

8. Nehemiah chose Hananiah because he was faithful and feared God. What qualities do you look for in the people you follow or trust?

9. A finished wall still needed guards. What good things God has done in your life need guarding so you do not lose them?

10. Nehemiah said, "my God put it into my heart." When has God put a good plan in your heart, and how did you respond?

Nehemiah 8: Ezra Reads the Law

Scripture

8:1-8 And all the people gathered as one man to the open square which ***was*** before the Water Gate. And they said to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, from man to woman, and everyone who understood to hear, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read in it before the open square which ***was*** before the Water Gate, from the light until the middle of the day, in front of the men and the women and those who understood; and the ears of all the people ***were*** to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a tower of wood which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah and Shema and Anaiah and Uriah and Hilkiah and Maaseiah, on his right; and on his left, Pedaiah and Mishael and Malchijah and Hashum and Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book before the eyes of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed low and bowed down to the LORD ***with their*** faces to the ground. And Jeshua and Bani and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites were causing the people to understand the law, and the people ***were*** in their place. And they read in the book, in the law of God, making ***it*** clear and giving the sense, and they understood the reading.

8:9-12 And Nehemiah—he ***was*** the governor—and Ezra the priest, the scribe, and the Levites who were causing the people to understand, said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn and do not weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. And he said to them, "Go, eat fat things and drink sweet things, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for this day ***is*** holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold." And the Levites were quieting all the people, saying, "Hush, for this day ***is*** holy, and do not be grieved." And all the people went to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great joy, for they had understood the words which they had made known to them.

8:13-18 And on the second day the heads of the fathers of all the people, the priests and the Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, and to gain insight into the words of the law. And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses that the sons of Israel should dwell in booths at the festival in the seventh month, and that they should proclaim and cause a proclamation to pass through all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out ***to*** the hill country, and bring leaves of olive and leaves of oil tree and leaves of myrtle and leaves of palm trees and leaves of leafy trees, to make booths, as ***it is*** written." And the people went out and brought ***them***, and they made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courtyards, and in the courtyards of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate, and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly who had returned from the captivity made booths and dwelt in the booths, for the sons of Israel had not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day. And there was very great joy. And he read in the book of the

law of God day by day, from the first day until the last day. And they kept the festival seven days, and on the eighth day ***there was*** a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

Preview

On the first day of the seventh month, all the people gather in the open square before the Water Gate. They ask Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the Law of Moses. Ezra stands on a wooden platform and reads from early morning until noon, while the people stand and listen. The Levites move among the people and help them understand. They read the Law, make it clear, and give the sense, so that the people understand what they hear.

The people weep when they hear God's Word, because they see how far they have fallen short. But Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites tell them this is a holy day, a day for joy, not grief: "the joy of the LORD is your stronghold." So the people go home to feast and share with those who have nothing. The next day the leaders come back to study more, and they find the command to live in booths during the feast in the seventh month. The whole assembly builds booths and keeps the Feast of Booths with great joy, as Israel had not done since the days of Joshua.

Study

8:1 *And all the people gathered as one man to the open square which* ***was*** *before the Water Gate. And they said to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel.*

"And all the people gathered as one man." This was not a meeting Nehemiah called. The people came together with one heart. The wall was done, and now they wanted something more than a wall. They wanted God's Word.

They gathered "to the open square which was before the Water Gate." The Water Gate was on the east side of the city, near the Gihon spring (3:26). An open square near a gate was the place for public meetings. Notice that they did not meet in the temple courts. This was a gathering for everyone, men, women and children, in a place where all could come.

"And they said to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel." This is the first time Ezra appears in the book of Nehemiah. He had come to Jerusalem about thirteen years earlier, in 458 B.C., having "set his heart to seek the law of the LORD and to do it, and to teach" (Ezra 7:10). Now the people themselves asked him to teach.

"The book of the law of Moses" means the five books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy, or at least the Law within them. The people knew this was not Ezra's book. It was the Law "which the LORD had commanded Israel." It carried God's own authority.

8:2-3 *And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, from man to woman, and everyone who understood to hear, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read in it before the open square which* ***was*** *before the Water Gate, from the light until the middle of the day, in front of the men and the women and those who understood; and the ears of all the people* ***were*** *to the book of the law.*

"And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, from man to woman, and everyone who understood to hear." The whole people were there, and everyone old enough to understand. God's Word was not only for priests and scholars. It was for every man, woman and child who could take it in. Moses had commanded the same thing: gather the people, men, women and little ones, so they may hear and learn to fear the LORD (Deuteronomy 31:10-13).

"On the first day of the seventh month." This was the Feast of Trumpets, a day of holy gathering with the blowing of trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25). The seventh month, Tishri, in September to October, was the most sacred month of Israel's year. It held the Feast of Trumpets on the first day, the Day of Atonement on the tenth, and the Feast of Booths from the fifteenth to the twenty-second (Leviticus 23:23-43).

Ezra "read in it before the open square," and he read "from the light until the middle of the day." From daybreak to noon, about six hours. "And the ears of all the people were to the book of the law." They were not just present. They were listening. How long can we listen to God's Word before our minds wander? These people stood for half a day, and they listened.

8:4 *And Ezra the scribe stood on a tower of wood which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah and Shema and Anaiah and Uriah and Hilkiah and Maaseiah, on his right; and on his left, Pedaiah and Mishael and Malchijah and Hashum and Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, Meshullam.*

"And Ezra the scribe stood on a tower of wood which they had made for the purpose." This was a raised wooden platform, high enough for the crowd to see and hear him. It is the first pulpit we read of in the Bible. Thirteen men stood with him, six on his right and seven on his left. They were most likely leaders of the people or priests, standing with Ezra to show that the whole leadership stood behind the reading of God's Word.

8:5-6 *And Ezra opened the book before the eyes of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed low and bowed down to the LORD* ***with their*** *faces to the ground.*

"And Ezra opened the book before the eyes of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up." The book would have been a scroll. When Ezra unrolled it, the people rose to their feet. They stood out of respect for the Word of God. Many churches still stand for the reading of Scripture for this very reason.

"And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God." Before he read, Ezra praised God. The Word was not just a book to study. It was God speaking, and the right response to God is worship.

"And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with the lifting up of their hands." Amen means it is true, or so be it. To say it twice was to say it with the whole heart. Lifting up their hands was a sign of prayer and praise (Psalm 134:2; 1 Timothy 2:8). "And they bowed low and bowed down to the LORD with their faces to the ground." They stood, they lifted their hands, and then they fell on their faces. All of it showed one thing: they took God and His Word seriously.

8:7 *And Jeshua and Bani and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites were causing the people to understand the law, and the people* ***were*** *in their place.*

Then came a second group of thirteen men, "and the Levites," who "were causing the people to understand the law, and the people were in their place." The Levites were the tribe set apart to serve at God's house and to teach the Law (Deuteronomy 33:10; 2 Chronicles 17:7-9). While Ezra read from the platform, the Levites moved among the crowd, likely in smaller groups, helping the people understand what they had heard.

"The people were in their place." They stayed where they were. They did not drift away. They waited to be taught.

8:8 *And they read in the book, in the law of God, making* ***it*** *clear and giving the sense, and they understood the reading.*

"And they read in the book, in the law of God, making it clear and giving the sense, and they understood the reading."

This verse is one of the clearest pictures in the Bible of what good teaching of God's Word looks like. Look at the three steps.

First, "they read in the book." It starts with the text itself. Not opinions, not stories, not what the teacher wishes it said. They read the Law of God, out loud, as it was written.

Second, "making it clear." The Hebrew word here can mean to make distinct, to read clearly, or to explain. Many Bible teachers believe it also included translating. Most of the people had grown up in Babylon and Persia, where Aramaic was the common language, and some of them may no longer have understood the Hebrew of the Law well. Nehemiah himself later complained that some children could not speak the language of Judah (13:24). So the Levites may have put the Hebrew into Aramaic as they went, so the people could follow.

Third, "giving the sense." They explained what it meant. They showed how one part fit with another, what the words meant, and why it mattered. And the result: "they understood the reading."

This is exactly what we talked about in the Introduction. Exegesis means drawing out what the text says. That is what the Levites did. They did not read their own ideas into the Law. They read the Law, made it plain, and explained its meaning so the people could understand and obey it.

Why does this matter for us? Because God gave His Word to be understood. It is not a magic book to be recited without thought. It is a message from God to people, and it must be read, made plain, and explained. Every pastor, every Sunday school teacher, every parent reading the Bible to a child, every small group leader, has this same job. Read the text. Make it clear. Give the sense. Help people understand.

And every listener has a job too. The people stood, they listened, they stayed in their place, and they worked to understand. Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). Are we listening like that? When we open our Bibles, do we want only a nice feeling, or do we want to understand what God actually said?

8:9 *And Nehemiah—he **was** the governor—and Ezra the priest, the scribe, and the Levites who were causing the people to understand, said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn and do not weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.*

When the people heard the Law, "all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law." Why did they weep? Most likely because the Law showed them their sin. They heard what God required, and they knew they and their fathers had not done it. They heard the curses Moses had warned of, and they knew those curses had fallen on them in the exile. The Law does that. It shows us our sin (Romans 3:20; 7:7).

But Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites said to the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn and do not weep."

Notice that Nehemiah and Ezra stand side by side here. The governor and the priest, the builder of the wall and the teacher of the Law, worked together. Nehemiah had built the wall around the city. Ezra was building God's Word into the hearts of the people. Both were needed.

Why tell them not to weep? Their tears were not wrong. But this was the Feast of Trumpets, a holy day, a day set aside by God for joy and gathering (Numbers 29:1). There is a time to weep over sin, and there will be one later in this same month (9:1-3). But God had called this day a feast, and on His feast day they were to rejoice.

8:10 *And he said to them, "Go, eat fat things and drink sweet things, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for this day **is** holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold."*

"Go, eat fat things and drink sweet things." "Fat things" means rich food, the best cuts of meat. "Sweet things" means sweet drinks, likely wine sweetened or new wine. This was a feast, and God wanted His people to enjoy it.

"And send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared." Joy in God always turns outward. Those who had plenty were to share with those who had nothing. Some in the crowd were poor (remember chapter 5), and no one was to be left out of the feast. The Law had always taught Israel to include the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan in their feasts (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14).

"For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold."

This is the key verse of the book. What does it mean?

"The joy of the LORD" can be read two ways, and both are true. It can mean the joy that comes from the LORD, the gladness He gives His people. Or it can mean the joy we have in the LORD, our delight in who He is and what He has done. Either way, the joy is rooted in God, not in our circumstances.

"Your stronghold" means your fortress, your place of safety and strength. The people had just built a wall around their city to keep them safe. Now Nehemiah tells them that their real protection was not the stones. It was the joy of the LORD.

Think about how this fits. The people had just heard the Law and felt the weight of their sin. They could have stayed crushed under it. But God did not call them to live in grief. He had brought them home, given them the wall, given them His Word, and opened the way for them to come to Him. The right answer to that was not endless sorrow. It was joy in the God who forgives and restores. That joy would be their strength for the hard days ahead.

This is true for every believer. Sorrow over sin is right, and it leads us to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10). But we are not meant to stay there. God's forgiveness is real, and He wants us to rejoice in it. Jesus said He spoke to His followers "so that My joy may remain in you, and your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Paul, writing from prison, said, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). When life is hard, the believer's strength is not in feeling strong. It is in joy in the Lord, who never changes.

Is your joy rooted in your circumstances, or in the LORD? Circumstances change. He does not.

8:11-12 *And the Levites were quieting all the people, saying, "Hush, for this day **is** holy, and do not be grieved." And all the people went to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great joy, for they had understood the words which they had made known to them.*

"And the Levites were quieting all the people, saying, Hush, for this day is holy, and do not be grieved." The Levites who had explained the Law now comforted the people. Good teaching does both. It shows people their sin, and then it points them to God's grace.

"And all the people went to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great joy." They did just what they were told. Why did they rejoice? "For they had understood the words which they had made known to them." Their joy came from understanding. They did not rejoice because they felt good. They rejoiced because they understood God's Word, both its warning and its promise. True joy grows out of truth. The more we understand God's Word, the more reason we have to rejoice.

8:13-15 *And on the second day the heads of the fathers of all the people, the priests and the Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, and to gain insight into the words of the law. And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses that the sons of Israel should dwell in booths at the festival in the seventh month, and that they should proclaim and cause a proclamation to pass through all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out **to** the hill country, and bring leaves of olive and leaves of oil tree and leaves of myrtle and leaves of palm trees and leaves of leafy trees, to make booths, as **it is** written."*

"On the second day the heads of the fathers of all the people, the priests and the Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, and to gain insight into the words of the law." The people heard the Word on the first day. On the second day, the leaders came back for more. The heads of families came to learn so that they could teach their own households. This is how God's Word spreads: leaders and parents who learn it themselves and then pass it on (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

"And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses that the sons of Israel should dwell in booths at the festival in the seventh month." This was the Feast of Booths, also called the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43; Deuteronomy 16:13-15). For seven days, from the fifteenth to the twenty-first of the seventh month, Israel was to live in shelters made of branches. Why? To remember that God made them live in booths when He brought them out of Egypt (Leviticus 23:42-43). It was a feast of thanksgiving for the harvest and a reminder of God's care in the wilderness.

So the leaders sent word through the cities and in Jerusalem: go out to the hills and bring branches "of olive and leaves of oil tree and leaves of myrtle and leaves of palm trees and leaves of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." They read it, and then they did it. That is how the Word is meant to work. We read, we understand, and we obey (James 1:22).

8:16-17 *And the people went out and brought **them**, and they made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courtyards, and in the courtyards of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate, and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly who had returned from the captivity made booths and dwelt in the booths, for the sons of Israel had not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day. And there was very great joy.*

"And the people went out and brought them, and they made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courtyards, and in the courtyards of the house of God." The flat roofs of the houses, the courtyards, the temple courts, and the open squares by the Water Gate and the Gate of Ephraim were all filled with little shelters of branches. The whole city became a camp.

"For the sons of Israel had not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day." What does this mean? The Feast of Booths had been kept since Joshua's day, at least at times (1 Kings 8:2, 65; Ezra 3:4). The point seems to be that it had never been kept like this, by the whole people living in booths with such joy and such careful obedience to what was written. It was the fullest keeping of the feast in a thousand years.

"And there was very great joy." The people who had wept at the reading of the Law now rejoiced as they obeyed it. Obedience to God's Word is not a burden that kills joy. It is the road to joy.

8:18 *And he read in the book of the law of God day by day, from the first day until the last day. And they kept the festival seven days, and on the eighth day* ***there was*** *a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.*

"And he read in the book of the law of God day by day, from the first day until the last day." Ezra read the Law every day of the feast. Moses had commanded that the Law be read to all the people at the Feast of Booths every seventh year (Deuteronomy 31:10-11). Whether or not this was such a year, Ezra did what Moses commanded. The feast was not only a celebration. It was a week of hearing God's Word.

"And they kept the festival seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance." The eighth day was a special day of rest and gathering at the end of the feast (Leviticus 23:36). Everything was done "according to the ordinance," just as God had said.

Centuries later, Jesus stood up in the temple on "the last day, the great day of the feast" of Booths, and cried out that anyone who was thirsty should come to Him and drink (John 7:2, 37-38). The feast that remembered God's care in the wilderness pointed to the One who gives living water. And the prophets speak of a day when the nations will go up to Jerusalem year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths (Zechariah 14:16). I believe that points to the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth, when the joy of this feast will be full.

Summary

On the first day of the seventh month, all the people gathered as one man in the square before the Water Gate and asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses. Ezra read it from daybreak to noon to the men, women and all who could understand, standing on a wooden platform with leaders beside him, and the people listened closely. When he opened the book they stood; when he blessed the LORD they answered "Amen, Amen," lifted their hands and bowed with their faces to the ground. The Levites helped the people understand, reading from the Law of God, making it clear and giving its meaning, so that they understood. The people wept when they heard the Law, but Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites told them the day was holy to the LORD and not a day for mourning. They were to eat and drink, send portions to those who had nothing, and not grieve, because the joy of the LORD was their strength. The people went and celebrated with great joy, because they understood what they had heard. On the second day the family heads, priests and Levites gathered to Ezra to study the Law further, and found the command to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month. The people gathered branches and made booths on their roofs, in their courtyards, in the temple courts and in the city squares. Israel had not kept the feast this way since the days of Joshua, and there was very great joy. Ezra read from the Law every day of the feast, which they kept for seven days, with a solemn assembly on the eighth day as the Law required.

Study Questions

1. Who asked for the Law to be read, and who was there to hear it? (8:1-2)

2. How long did Ezra read, and how did the people listen? (8:3)

3. What did the people do when Ezra opened the book and blessed the LORD? (8:5-6)

4. What three things did the Levites do to help the people understand? (8:8)

5. Why do you think the people wept, and why were they told not to? (8:9)

6. What did Nehemiah tell the people to do, and what reason did he give? (8:10)

7. What did the leaders find in the Law on the second day, and how did the people respond? (8:13-17)

8. The people stood for half a day to hear God's Word. How hungry are you for God's Word, and what keeps you from it?

9. "They understood the reading." What could you do to understand the Bible better, and who could help you?

10. "The joy of the LORD is your stronghold." Where do you look for strength when life is hard, and how can joy in the Lord become your strength?

Nehemiah 9: The Great Prayer of Confession

Scripture

9:1-15 And on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel were gathered with fasting and in sackcloth, and earth ***was*** on them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God a fourth of the day, and ***for*** a fourth they were confessing and bowing down to the LORD their God. And on the ascent of the Levites stood Jeshua and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, Chenani; and they cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. And the Levites, Jeshua and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. And let them bless the name of Your glory, and exalted above all blessing and praise. You are the LORD, You alone. You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens, and all their host, the earth and all that ***is*** on it, the seas and all that ***is*** in them; and You are keeping all of them alive, and the host of the heavens are bowing down to You. You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldeans, and made his name Abraham. And You found his heart faithful before You, and made the covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, to give ***it*** to his seed. And You have fulfilled Your words, for You ***are*** righteous. And You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and You heard their outcry at the Red Sea. And You gave signs and wonders against Pharaoh and against all his servants and against all the people of his land, for You knew that they had acted presumptuously against them. And You made for Yourself a name, as ***it is*** this day. And the sea You split before them, and they passed through the midst of the sea on the dry ground; and their pursuers You threw into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night, to light up for them the way in which they should walk. And on Mount Sinai You came down, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them upright judgments and laws of truth, good statutes and commandments. And the Sabbath of Your holiness You made known to them, and commandments and statutes and a law You commanded them by the hand of Moses Your servant. And bread from heaven You gave them for their hunger, and water from a rock You brought forth for them for their thirst. And You said to them to go in to possess the land which You had raised Your hand to give them.

9:16-25 And they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not listen to Your commandments. And they refused to listen, and they did not remember Your wonders which You had done with them; and they stiffened their neck and appointed a head to return to their slavery in their rebellion. And You ***are*** a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in steadfast love, and You did not abandon them. Even when they had made for themselves a calf of molten metal and had said, 'This ***is*** your god who brought you up from Egypt,' and had done great blasphemies, and You in Your great compassion did not abandon them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from over them by day, to lead them in the way, and the pillar of the fire by night, to light up for them, even the way in which they should walk. And Your good Spirit You gave to instruct them, and Your manna You

did not withhold from their mouth, and water You gave them for their thirst. And forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they did not lack; their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell. And You gave them kingdoms and peoples, and You apportioned them to a corner. And they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og the king of Bashan. And their sons You multiplied like the stars of the heavens, and You brought them into the land which You had said to their fathers to go in to possess. And the sons went in and possessed the land, and You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, and their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them according to their will. And they captured fortified cities and fat ground, and they possessed houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards and olive trees and trees for food in abundance. And they ate and were satisfied and grew fat and luxuriated in Your great goodness.

9:26-38 And they were disobedient and rebelled against You and threw Your law behind their back, and they killed Your prophets, who had warned them to bring them back to You; and they did great blasphemies. And You gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they distressed them. And in the time of their distress they cried out to You, and You heard from heaven; and according to Your great compassion You gave them saviors, and they saved them from the hand of their adversaries. And when they had rest, they returned to do evil before You; and You abandoned them into the hand of their enemies, and they had dominion over them. And they returned and cried out to You, and You heard from heaven, and You rescued them according to Your compassion many times. And You warned them, to bring them back to Your law; and they acted presumptuously and did not listen to Your commandments, and they sinned against Your judgments, which a man shall do, and he shall live by them; and they gave a stubborn shoulder, and stiffened their neck, and did not listen. And You extended ***Your patience*** toward them many years, and warned them by Your Spirit by the hand of Your prophets, and they did not give ear. And You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. And in Your great compassion You did not make a complete end of them and did not abandon them, for You ***are*** a gracious and compassionate God. And now, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps the covenant and the steadfast love, let not all the hardship which has found us be little before You, ***that is,*** to our kings, to our leaders, and to our priests, and to our prophets, and to our fathers, and to all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day. And You ***are*** righteous concerning all that has come upon us, for You have done faithfulness, and we have acted wickedly. And our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers did not do Your law, and did not pay attention to Your commandments and to Your testimonies with which You warned them. And they, in their kingdom and in Your great goodness which You had given them, and in the broad and fat land which You had set before them, did not serve You and did not turn back from their evil deeds. Look, we ***are*** slaves this day; and the land which You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its good things, look, we ***are*** slaves on it. And its produce is increasing for the kings whom You have set over us in our sins; and they are ruling over our bodies and over our livestock according to their will, and we ***are*** in great distress." And in all this we are making a firm agreement and writing ***it***; and on the sealed ***document are*** our leaders, our Levites, ***and*** our priests.

Preview

Two days after the Feast of Booths ends, the people gather again, this time with fasting, sackcloth and dust on their heads. They separate themselves from foreigners, read from the Law for a quarter of the day, and spend another quarter confessing their sins and worshiping. Then the Levites lead the people in one of the longest prayers in the Bible.

The prayer walks through the whole history of Israel. God made the heavens and the earth. He chose Abraham and promised him the land. He saw His people suffering in Egypt and brought them through the sea, led them with the cloud and fire, gave them His Law at Sinai, and fed them in the wilderness. Again and again they rebelled, and again and again He forgave, because He is "a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in steadfast love." He gave them the land, but they threw His Law behind their backs and killed His prophets, and He gave them into the hands of their enemies. Yet even then He did not make an end of them. The prayer ends where the people stood that day: slaves in their own land under Persian kings, in great distress, and ready to make a firm agreement with God in writing.

Study

9:1-3 *And on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel were gathered with fasting and in sackcloth, and earth **was** on them. And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God a fourth of the day, and **for** a fourth they were confessing and bowing down to the LORD their God.*

"And on the twenty-fourth day of this month." The Feast of Booths ran from the fifteenth to the twenty-second (8:18). Two days later the people came back together. The mood was very different. In chapter 8 they had been told not to weep, because it was a feast day. Now the feast was over, and it was time to deal with their sin. They came "with fasting and in sackcloth, and earth was on them." Sackcloth was rough cloth made from goat hair, worn in times of grief. Dust or earth on the head was a sign of mourning and humbling oneself (Joshua 7:6; Job 2:12).

God's Word had done its work. In chapter 8, joy. In chapter 9, confession. Both are right responses to the Word, each at its proper time.

"And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners." This was a gathering of Israel to confess Israel's sins. Those who were not part of the covenant people were not asked to confess the sins of a history that was not theirs. As we saw in Ezra 6:21, foreigners who turned to the LORD were welcome among God's people. This separation was about who would stand before God that day to confess the nation's sin and sign its covenant.

"They stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers." They confessed their own sins and the sins of the generations before them. They did not blame their fathers to excuse themselves. They owned both.

"They stood up in their place and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God a fourth of the day, and for a fourth they were confessing and bowing down." A fourth of the day was about three hours. Three hours of reading God's Word, then three hours of confession and worship. Notice the order. They read first, then they confessed. God's Word showed them what to confess.

9:4-5 *And on the ascent of the Levites stood Jeshua and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, Chenani; and they cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. And the Levites, Jeshua and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. And let them bless the name of Your glory, and exalted above all blessing and praise.*

Eight Levites stood "on the ascent of the Levites," most likely a raised platform or stairs, and "cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God." Then a group of Levites called the people to worship: "Arise, bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting."

"From everlasting to everlasting" means God has always been and always will be. Before there was an Israel, before there was a world, God was. And when every kingdom of man has passed away, He will still be.

"And let them bless the name of Your glory, and exalted above all blessing and praise." No matter how much we praise God, He is greater than all our praise. We can never praise Him too much.

Notice that the prayer begins with praise, not confession. Like Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1, it starts with who God is. Before we confess our sins, it helps to remember the greatness and goodness of the God we have sinned against. That keeps confession from turning into despair.

9:6 *You are the LORD, You alone. You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens, and all their host, the earth and all that **is** on it, the seas and all that **is** in them; and You are keeping all of them alive, and the host of the heavens are bowing down to You.*

"You are the LORD, You alone." This is the heart of Israel's faith. There is one God, and only one (Deuteronomy 6:4). The peoples around them worshiped many gods. Israel's own sin had been chasing after those gods. Now they declared plainly that the LORD alone is God.

"You made the heavens, the heavens of the heavens, and all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them." This takes us back to Genesis 1. God is the Creator of everything. "The heavens of the heavens" means the highest heavens. "Their host" means the stars, and also the angels.

"And You are keeping all of them alive." God did not just make the world and walk away. He keeps it going every moment. The New Testament says the same of Christ: in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:17), and He upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3).

"And the host of the heavens are bowing down to You." Even the angels worship Him. If the angels bow, how much more should we?

9:7-8 *You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldeans, and made his name Abraham. And You found his heart faithful before You, and made the covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, to give* ***it*** *to his seed. And You have fulfilled Your words, for You* ***are*** *righteous.*

"You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldeans, and made his name Abraham." The prayer moves from creation to the call of Abraham, the story of Genesis 11 to 25. God chose Abram. Abram did not choose God. He was living in Ur, a city of idol worship (Joshua 24:2), when God called him out. God changed his name from Abram, "exalted father," to Abraham, "father of a multitude," as a sign of His promise (Genesis 17:5).

"And You found his heart faithful before You, and made the covenant with him to give the land." God tested Abraham's heart and found him faithful. Genesis 15:6 says Abraham believed the LORD, and God counted it to him as righteousness. God made a covenant, a binding promise, to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's seed (Genesis 15:18-21).

"And You have fulfilled Your words, for You are righteous." This is the theme of the whole prayer. God keeps His promises. He is righteous, and a righteous God does what He says. The people praying this prayer were living in the land God had promised Abraham. They were proof that God keeps His word.

9:9-11 *And You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and You heard their outcry at the Red Sea. And You gave signs and wonders against Pharaoh and against all his servants and against all the people of his land, for You knew that they had acted presumptuously against them. And You made for Yourself a name, as* ***it is*** *this day. And the sea You split before them, and they passed through the midst of the sea on the dry ground; and their pursuers You threw into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters.*

Now the prayer moves to the book of Exodus. "And You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and You heard their outcry at the Red Sea." God saw and God heard. Israel's suffering in Egypt was not hidden from Him (Exodus 3:7).

"And You gave signs and wonders against Pharaoh." These were the ten plagues (Exodus 7 to 12). Why? "For You knew that they had acted presumptuously against them." To act presumptuously means to act with pride, as if no one could hold you to account. Pharaoh thought he was a god. The LORD showed him otherwise. "And You made for Yourself a name, as it is this day." Nearly a thousand years later, Israel was still telling of what God did in Egypt.

"And the sea You split before them, and they passed through the midst of the sea on the dry ground; and their pursuers You threw into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters." These words echo the Song of Moses after the crossing (Exodus 15:5, 10). God saved His people and destroyed their enemies in one great act. The exodus is the Old Testament's great picture of salvation, and the New Testament points back to it when it speaks of Christ our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7).

9:12-15 *And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night, to light up for them the way in which they should walk. And on Mount Sinai You came down, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them upright judgments and laws of truth, good statutes and commandments. And the Sabbath of Your holiness You made known to them, and commandments and statutes and a law You commanded them by the hand of Moses Your servant. And bread from heaven You gave them for their hunger, and water from a rock You brought forth for them for their thirst. And You said to them to go in to possess the land which You had raised Your hand to give them.*

"And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night, to light up for them the way in which they should walk" (see Exodus 13:21-22). God did not save His people and leave them to find their own way. He went with them, every day and every night.

"And on Mount Sinai You came down, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them upright judgments and laws of truth, good statutes and commandments" (Exodus 19 to 20). Notice how the prayer describes the Law: upright, true, good. The Law was not a burden God laid on Israel to crush them. It was a gift. Paul says the same: the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good (Romans 7:12). The trouble was never with the Law. It was with the people who did not keep it.

"And the Sabbath of Your holiness You made known to them." The Sabbath, the seventh day of rest, was given to Israel at Sinai as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 20:8-11; 31:13-17). It is named here because the people were about to promise to keep it (10:31), and Nehemiah would later have to fight for it (13:15-22).

"And bread from heaven You gave them for their hunger, and water from a rock You brought forth for them for their thirst" (Exodus 16 to 17). Jesus said He is the true bread from heaven (John 6:32-35), and Paul says the rock that followed Israel was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). Everything God gave Israel in the wilderness pointed to what He would give in His Son.

"And You said to them to go in to possess the land which You had raised Your hand to give them." Raising the hand was the sign of an oath. God had sworn to give them the land.

Look at all God did in verses 6 to 15: He made, He chose, He promised, He saw, He heard, He split the sea, He led, He came down, He spoke, He gave. Every verb belongs to God. That is grace. And it sets up what comes next.

9:16-17 *And they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not listen to Your commandments. And they refused to listen, and they did not remember Your wonders which You had done with them; and they stiffened their neck and appointed a head to return to their slavery in their rebellion. And You **are** a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in steadfast love, and You did not abandon them.*

"And they and our fathers acted presumptuously." The same word used of Pharaoh in verse 10 is now used of Israel. God's own people acted with the same pride as the enemy He had judged. They

"stiffened their neck," like an ox that will not turn when the farmer pulls the rope, "and did not listen to Your commandments."

"They did not remember Your wonders." How could they forget the sea, the cloud, the manna? It took only weeks. We forget God's goodness much faster than we think.

"And appointed a head to return to their slavery in their rebellion." This is from Numbers 14:4, when the people heard the report of the spies and wanted to choose a leader and go back to Egypt. They would rather be slaves in Egypt than trust God in the wilderness.

And then comes one of the great descriptions of God in the Bible: "And You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in steadfast love, and You did not abandon them." These words come from what God said of Himself to Moses on Sinai (Exodus 34:6-7), and they are repeated all through the Old Testament (Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Gracious means He gives what we do not deserve. Compassionate means His heart goes out to those who suffer. Slow to anger means He is patient. Great in steadfast love, hesed, means His covenant love never quits. This is who God is.

9:18-21 *Even when they had made for themselves a calf of molten metal and had said, 'This **is** your god who brought you up from Egypt,' and had done great blasphemies, and You in Your great compassion did not abandon them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from over them by day, to lead them in the way, and the pillar of the fire by night, to light up for them, even the way in which they should walk. And Your good Spirit You gave to instruct them, and Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, and water You gave them for their thirst. And forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they did not lack; their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell.*

"Even when they had made for themselves a calf of molten metal." The golden calf (Exodus 32) was the worst sin of the wilderness, and it happened at the foot of the very mountain where God had just given the Law. They said, "This is your god who brought you up from Egypt." They gave the credit for their salvation to an idol they had made with their own hands.

Even then, "You in Your great compassion did not abandon them in the wilderness." The cloud kept leading by day and the fire by night.

"And Your good Spirit You gave to instruct them." God's Spirit was at work among His people even then. Numbers 11:17, 25 tells of the Spirit coming on the seventy elders. Here the prayer calls Him "Your good Spirit," the One who teaches and guides.

"And forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they did not lack; their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell" (see Deuteronomy 8:4). For forty years God cared for a rebellious people down to their clothes and their feet. That is how far His patience goes.

9:22-25 *And You gave them kingdoms and peoples, and You apportioned them to a corner. And they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og the king of Bashan. And their sons You multiplied like the stars of the heavens, and You brought them into the land which You had said to their fathers to go in to possess. And the sons went in and possessed the land, and You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, and their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them according to their will. And they captured fortified cities and fat ground, and they possessed houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards and olive trees and trees for food in abundance. And they ate and were satisfied and grew fat and luxuriated in Your great goodness.*

Now the prayer moves to the end of Numbers and the book of Joshua. "You gave them kingdoms and peoples." Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan were the first kings Israel defeated, east of the Jordan (Numbers 21:21-35). "And their sons You multiplied like the stars of the heavens," just as God had promised Abraham (Genesis 15:5; 22:17).

"And the sons went in and possessed the land, and You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites." This is the conquest under Joshua. The prayer is clear about who won the land: "You subdued." Israel fought, but God gave the victory.

"And they captured fortified cities and fat ground, and they possessed houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards and olive trees." They moved into houses they did not build and drank from wells they did not dig, just as Moses had said (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). "And they ate and were satisfied and grew fat and luxuriated in Your great goodness."

Here is a warning. Moses had told them that when they ate and were full, they must not forget the LORD (Deuteronomy 6:11-12; 8:10-14). Plenty is often more dangerous to faith than hardship. When life is easy, we forget who gave it.

9:26-28 *And they were disobedient and rebelled against You and threw Your law behind their back, and they killed Your prophets, who had warned them to bring them back to You; and they did great blasphemies. And You gave them into the hand of their adversaries, and they distressed them. And in the time of their distress they cried out to You, and You heard from heaven; and according to Your great compassion You gave them saviors, and they saved them from the hand of their adversaries. And when they had rest, they returned to do evil before You; and You abandoned them into the hand of their enemies, and they had dominion over them. And they returned and cried out to You, and You heard from heaven, and You rescued them according to Your compassion many times.*

And they did forget. "They were disobedient and rebelled against You and threw Your law behind their back." To throw something behind your back is to treat it as worthless and refuse to look at it. "And they killed Your prophets, who had warned them to bring them back to You." Jesus said the same of Jerusalem: it killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it (Matthew 23:37).

Verses 27 and 28 describe the pattern of the book of Judges. Israel sinned. God gave them into the hand of their enemies. In their distress they cried out to Him. He heard from heaven and gave them "saviors," the judges, men like Gideon, Barak and Samson, who rescued them. Then "when

they had rest, they returned to do evil before You." The cycle repeated "many times." The book of Judges tells the story over and over: sin, judgment, crying out, rescue, rest, and sin again.

But notice the phrase that runs through these verses: "according to Your great compassion," "according to Your compassion many times." God's mercy outlasted their rebellion every time.

9:29-31 *And You warned them, to bring them back to Your law; and they acted presumptuously and did not listen to Your commandments, and they sinned against Your judgments, which a man shall do, and he shall live by them; and they gave a stubborn shoulder, and stiffened their neck, and did not listen. And You extended* ***Your patience*** *toward them many years, and warned them by Your Spirit by the hand of Your prophets, and they did not give ear. And You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. And in Your great compassion You did not make a complete end of them and did not abandon them, for You* ***are*** *a gracious and compassionate God.*

Now the prayer covers the long years of the kings, the story of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, and the warnings of the prophets. "You warned them, to bring them back to Your law." God sent prophet after prophet: Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many more.

"They sinned against Your judgments, which a man shall do, and he shall live by them." This quotes Leviticus 18:5. God's Law was the way of life for Israel under the covenant. To turn from it was to turn from life. Paul later quotes this verse to show that the Law, by itself, demands perfect doing, which no one can give, so that righteousness must come by faith (Galatians 3:11-12; Romans 10:5).

"They gave a stubborn shoulder." This is a picture of an ox pulling away from the yoke.

"And You extended Your patience toward them many years." How many years? From the division of the kingdom about 930 B.C. to the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. and the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., hundreds of years. God "warned them by Your Spirit by the hand of Your prophets." The prophets spoke by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21). "And they did not give ear. And You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands," first to Assyria and then to Babylon.

"And in Your great compassion You did not make a complete end of them and did not abandon them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God." Even the exile was not the end. God kept a remnant. The very people praying this prayer were that remnant, home again because God had not abandoned them.

9:32 *And now, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps the covenant and the steadfast love, let not all the hardship which has found us be little before You,* ***that is,*** *to our kings, to our leaders, and to our priests, and to our prophets, and to our fathers, and to all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.*

"And now, our God." The prayer turns from the past to the present. "The great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps the covenant and the steadfast love." These are almost the same words Nehemiah prayed in 1:5 (and Moses in Deuteronomy 10:17).

"Let not all the hardship which has found us be little before You." In other words, please do not think our troubles are small. Look at them. They had suffered "from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day," about three hundred years, since the Assyrians first carried the northern tribes away. They brought their suffering to God and asked Him to take it seriously. We can do the same. God is never bored by our troubles.

9:33-35 *And You **are** righteous concerning all that has come upon us, for You have done faithfulness, and we have acted wickedly. And our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers did not do Your law, and did not pay attention to Your commandments and to Your testimonies with which You warned them. And they, in their kingdom and in Your great goodness which You had given them, and in the broad and fat land which You had set before them, did not serve You and did not turn back from their evil deeds.*

"And You are righteous concerning all that has come upon us, for You have done faithfulness, and we have acted wickedly." This is the turning point of true confession. They did not say, God, You have been unfair to us. They said, You have been right in everything, and we have been wrong. That is what Ezra said in his prayer too (Ezra 9:15), and Daniel (Daniel 9:7, 14).

"Our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers did not do Your law." Every level of society had failed. And they failed "in Your great goodness which You had given them, and in the broad and fat land." They had every blessing, and still "did not serve You and did not turn back from their evil deeds."

Have you ever blamed God for a hard time that came because of your own choices? These people did not. Honest confession takes the blame where it belongs and leaves God's goodness standing.

9:36-37 *Look, we **are** slaves this day; and the land which You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its good things, look, we **are** slaves on it. And its produce is increasing for the kings whom You have set over us in our sins; and they are ruling over our bodies and over our livestock according to their will, and we **are** in great distress."*

"Look, we are slaves this day; and the land which You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its good things, look, we are slaves on it."

This is a painful line. They were back in the Promised Land, the land God gave Abraham. But they did not own it. Persia did. "And its produce is increasing for the kings whom You have set over us in our sins." The harvest went to the Persian king in taxes (remember 5:4). "They are ruling over our bodies and over our livestock according to their will, and we are in great distress."

Notice the words "whom You have set over us in our sins." They saw even the Persian kings as part of God's judgment. They were not bitter at Persia. They knew why it had happened.

The prayer does not end with a request for freedom. It ends with an honest statement of where they were. God's people were home, but not yet free. The full promise was still ahead. It is still ahead for Israel today. The prophets speak of a day when Israel will be gathered and will no longer be under foreign rule, when the Son of David will reign (Jeremiah 23:5-6;

Ezekiel 37:24-25). I believe that will come when Jesus returns and sets up His kingdom on the earth.

9:38 *And in all this we are making a firm agreement and writing **it**; and on the sealed **document are** our leaders, our Levites, **and** our priests.*

"And in all this we are making a firm agreement and writing it; and on the sealed document are our leaders, our Levites, and our priests."

Confession led to commitment. After looking honestly at their history, they did not just feel sorry. They made "a firm agreement," and they put it in writing, sealed with the names of their leaders. The next chapter gives the names and the promises.

In the Hebrew Bible, this verse is the first verse of chapter 10. It belongs with both chapters. It ends the prayer and begins the covenant.

What does this whole prayer teach us? First, that God's faithfulness runs through all of history. From creation to the exile, every chapter of Israel's story shows the same God: gracious, compassionate, patient and righteous. Second, that people, left to themselves, keep turning away. The same pattern of blessing, forgetting and rebellion runs from the wilderness to the exile. Third, that God never gives up on His people. "You did not abandon them" is said again and again (9:17, 19, 31).

The prayer leaves us waiting for something more. Israel had the Law, and they could not keep it. They had the land, and they lost it. They promised to do better, and as chapter 13 will show, they failed again. What they needed was what God promised through Jeremiah: a new covenant, with His Law written on their hearts and their sins remembered no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34). That new covenant came through the blood of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:6-13). God will yet keep that promise fully with Israel as a nation (Romans 11:26-27), and every believer, Jew or Gentile, shares in it today through faith in Christ.

Summary

On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month the people of Israel gathered with fasting, sackcloth and dust on their heads, separated themselves from foreigners, and confessed their sins and the sins of their fathers. They read from the Law for a quarter of the day and spent another quarter confessing and worshiping. The Levites called them to bless the LORD forever and led them in prayer. They praised the LORD alone as Creator and Sustainer of all things, who chose Abram, brought him out of Ur, and kept His covenant to give his descendants the land. They recalled how God saw Israel's suffering in Egypt, struck Pharaoh with signs, split the sea, led them by cloud and fire, gave them good laws and the Sabbath at Sinai, and fed them with bread from heaven and water from the rock. They confessed that their fathers grew proud, refused to listen, and made the golden calf, yet God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and great in steadfast love, did not abandon them, but gave His Spirit, sustained them forty years, and gave them kingdoms and the good land. They confessed that Israel rebelled, cast His Law behind them and killed His prophets, so that He gave them to their enemies, yet rescued them many times

when they cried out. He warned them through His prophets by His Spirit for many years, then gave them into the hands of the nations, yet did not destroy them completely. They asked God not to treat their long hardship lightly, declared Him righteous in all that had happened, and confessed that they were slaves in their own land, with its produce going to foreign kings. Then they made a firm written agreement, sealed by their leaders, Levites and priests.

Study Questions

1. How did the people prepare themselves on the twenty-fourth day, and how did they divide their time? (9:1-3)

2. What does the prayer say about God as Creator? (9:6)

3. What did God do for Abraham, and what does verse 8 say about God's character? (9:7-8)

4. List the things God did for Israel from Egypt to Sinai. (9:9-15)

5. What words describe God in verse 17, and where else in the Bible are they found? (9:17; Exodus 34:6)

6. What pattern do verses 26 to 28 describe? Which book of the Bible shows it most clearly?

7. What did the people admit about God's justice and their own sin? (9:33-35)

8. The people forgot God's wonders in a few weeks. What has God done for you that you are in danger of forgetting?

9. "When they had rest, they returned to do evil." Why do you think ease and comfort can be dangerous to our faith? How can you guard against that?

10. Confession led the people to a written commitment. Is there a commitment God is calling you to make after honest confession?

Nehemiah 10: The People Sign the Covenant

Scripture

10:1-27 And on the sealed ***documents were***: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah, Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah; these ***were*** the priests. And the Levites: even Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; and their brothers: Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Bani, Beninu. The heads of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, and Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

10:28-39 And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and everyone who has separated himself from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who knows ***and*** understands, are holding fast to their brothers, their nobles, and are entering into a curse and into an oath to walk in the law of God, which was given by the hand of Moses the servant of God, and to keep and to do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes; and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, and their daughters we will not take for our sons; and the peoples of the land who bring the wares and any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not take from them on the Sabbath and on a holy day; and we will leave the seventh year and the debt of every hand. And we lay commandments on ourselves, to put on ourselves approximately 1/8 ounce (a third of the shekel) in the year for the service of the house of our God: for the bread of the arrangement, and the continual grain offering, and for the continual burnt offering, ***of*** the Sabbaths, ***of*** the new moons, for the appointed feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and ***for*** all the work of the house of our God. And we cast the lots concerning the offering of the wood, the priests, the Levites, and the people, to bring ***it*** to the house of our God, by the house of our fathers, at appointed times year by year, to burn ***it*** on the altar of the LORD our God, as ***it is*** written in the law; and to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all the fruit of every tree year by year to the house of the LORD; and the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock, as ***it is*** written in the law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; and the first of our dough, and our contributions, and the fruit of every tree, new wine and fresh oil, we will bring to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites; and they, the Levites, ***are*** those who collect the tithes in all the cities of our labor. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites collect tithes; and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithe to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the house of the treasury. For to the storerooms the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil; and there ***are*** the

utensils of the sanctuary, and the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers, and the singers. And we will not neglect the house of our God.

Preview

The prayer of chapter 9 ended with a promise: we are making a firm agreement and writing it down. This chapter gives the names of those who sealed it and what they promised. Nehemiah the governor signs first, then the priests, the Levites and the heads of the people. The rest of the people join them with an oath and a curse, binding themselves to walk in the Law of God.

Then come the specific promises. They will not let their children marry people who serve other gods. They will not buy and sell on the Sabbath. They will let the land rest every seventh year and cancel debts. And they will support the house of God with a yearly tax, wood for the altar, firstfruits, firstborn, and tithes. The chapter ends with a simple vow that sums it all up: "we will not neglect the house of our God."

Study

10:1-27 *And on the sealed **documents were**: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah, Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah; these **were** the priests. And the Levites: even Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; and their brothers: Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Bani, Beninu. The heads of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, and Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, Malluch, Harim, Baanah.*

"And on the sealed documents were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah." Nehemiah put his name first. A leader who asks others to commit must be the first to commit himself. Next to him is Zedekiah, most likely his secretary or an official.

Then come twenty-one priests (verses 2 to 8). Many of these are family names rather than individuals, the names of the priestly houses that went back to the first return (compare 12:1-7). The famous names here, Jeremiah, Daniel and Baruch, are not the prophet, the prophet in Babylon, or Jeremiah's scribe. They were common names, given perhaps in honor of those men.

The Levites follow (verses 9 to 13), seventeen of them, including several who had helped explain the Law and led the prayer (8:7; 9:4-5). Then come forty-four heads of the people (verses 14 to 27). Many of their names appear in the list of those who came home with Zerubbabel (7:8-25) and in the list of the wall builders (chapter 3). The families who had built the wall now signed the covenant.

Why list all these names? Because a covenant with God is personal. Each man put his own name on it before God and before the people. Faith is never just a crowd going along. Each one has to say for himself, I will follow the LORD.

A covenant was a binding agreement. God had made His covenant with Israel at Sinai, and Israel had broken it. This was not a new covenant. It was the people renewing their promise to keep the covenant God had already made.

10:28-29 *And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and everyone who has separated himself from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who knows* ***and*** *understands, are holding fast to their brothers, their nobles, and are entering into a curse and into an oath to walk in the law of God, which was given by the hand of Moses the servant of God, and to keep and to do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes;*

"And the rest of the people," everyone who had not signed, joined in: priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, "and everyone who has separated himself from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who knows and understands."

Look at who is included: "everyone who has separated himself from the peoples of the lands to the law of God." This is not about race. It speaks of people who left the ways of the nations around them and turned to God's Law. Some of them may have been born outside Israel, as in Ezra 6:21. The door was open to anyone who came to the LORD and His Law. And women and children who were old enough to understand were part of the covenant too.

They were "holding fast to their brothers, their nobles." They stood together with their leaders. "And are entering into a curse and into an oath to walk in the law of God." An oath with a curse meant: may God punish me if I break this promise. This was serious. They were calling down God's judgment on themselves if they failed.

What did they promise? "To keep and to do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His judgments and His statutes." Not some of them. All of them. Then they named the specific areas where they had failed before.

10:30 *and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, and their daughters we will not take for our sons;*

"And that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land, and their daughters we will not take for our sons."

The first specific promise was about marriage. This was the very sin Ezra had faced about thirteen years earlier (Ezra 9 and 10). As we saw there, the issue was not race but faith. The Law forbade marrying people who served other gods because "he will turn your son away from after Me" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). The peoples of the land worshiped other gods, and marrying into them had pulled Israel into idolatry again and again.

Sadly, this promise would be broken. By chapter 13, men of Judah would again be married to women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab (13:23-27). It is easy to sign a promise. It is harder to keep it.

For believers today, the same principle stands. A Christian should marry only another believer (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14). Marriage is the closest of all human bonds, and it will either draw us closer to God or pull us away.

10:31 *and the peoples of the land who bring the wares and any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not take from them on the Sabbath and on a holy day; and we will leave the seventh year and the debt of every hand.*

"And the peoples of the land who bring the wares and any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not take from them on the Sabbath and on a holy day."

The second promise was about the Sabbath. The Law forbade Israel to work on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11). Buying and selling was work. But traders from outside Israel did not keep the Sabbath, and they brought their goods to sell on that day. The people promised not to buy. This too would be broken (13:15-22).

"And we will leave the seventh year and the debt of every hand." Every seventh year Israel was to let the land rest, without planting or harvesting (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7), and to cancel debts owed by fellow Israelites (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). This was a hard command. It meant trusting God to provide for a whole year without a crop, and forgiving money owed. It also protected the poor. After the troubles of chapter 5, where the rich were taking the land and children of the poor, this promise mattered.

These laws were given to Israel under the covenant of Moses. Believers today are not under those rules in the same way (Colossians 2:16-17), and Christians differ on how the Sabbath applies now. But the heart of these laws still speaks: trust God enough to rest, and show mercy to those in debt.

10:32-33 *And we lay commandments on ourselves, to put on ourselves approximately 1/8 ounce (a third of the shekel) in the year for the service of the house of our God: for the bread of the arrangement, and the continual grain offering, and for the continual burnt offering,* ***of*** *the Sabbaths,* ***of*** *the new moons, for the appointed feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and* ***for*** *all the work of the house of our God.*

"And we lay commandments on ourselves, to put on ourselves approximately 1/8 ounce (a third of the shekel) in the year for the service of the house of our God."

Now come the promises about God's house, and this is where most of the chapter goes. A third of a shekel each year was a small amount of silver, a temple tax. The Law had commanded half a shekel at the census (Exodus 30:13). The people set a third, perhaps because they were poor. By Jesus' day, the temple tax was half a shekel again (Matthew 17:24).

What was it for? "For the bread of the arrangement," the twelve loaves set out in the holy place each Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5-9). "And the continual grain offering, and for the continual burnt offering," the offerings made every morning and evening (Numbers 28:3-8). A burnt offering was

an animal wholly burned on the altar, given completely to God. Then the Sabbath offerings, the new moon offerings, the feasts, the holy things, and "the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel." Atonement means covering sin so that a guilty people could be made right with God. The sin offering was the sacrifice that dealt with sin.

All of this pointed forward. The Old Testament sacrifices covered sin until Christ came. Hebrews tells us that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins, but Christ offered Himself once for all (Hebrews 10:4, 10-12). The temple tax of Nehemiah's day paid for sacrifices that had to be made again and again. Jesus paid for a sacrifice that never needs to be made again.

10:34 *And we cast the lots concerning the offering of the wood, the priests, the Levites, and the people, to bring **it** to the house of our God, by the house of our fathers, at appointed times year by year, to burn **it** on the altar of the LORD our God, as **it is** written in the law;*

"And we cast the lots concerning the offering of the wood." The altar fire was to burn continually (Leviticus 6:12-13), and that took a lot of wood. Someone had to cut it and haul it. The Law did not say who. So the people cast lots, letting God decide which families would bring wood at which times "year by year." It was a practical, humble job, and they made sure it was shared fairly.

Worship needs practical work. Someone has to bring the wood. In the church today, someone has to set up the chairs, clean the building, run the sound and fix the roof. That work is service to God just as much as preaching is.

10:35-37 *and to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all the fruit of every tree year by year to the house of the LORD; and the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock, as **it is** written in the law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; and the first of our dough, and our contributions, and the fruit of every tree, new wine and fresh oil, we will bring to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites; and they, the Levites, **are** those who collect the tithes in all the cities of our labor.*

"And to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all the fruit of every tree year by year to the house of the LORD." The firstfruits were the first and best of the harvest, given to God before anything else (Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 26:1-11). Giving the first part, not the leftover part, showed trust that God would provide the rest.

"And the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock, as it is written in the law." Every firstborn belonged to God because He spared Israel's firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 13:2, 11-15). Firstborn sons were redeemed, bought back with a payment (Numbers 18:15-16), and clean firstborn animals were offered.

"And the first of our dough, and our contributions," along with new wine and fresh oil, "we will bring to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites." A tithe is a tenth. Israel was to give a tenth of its produce to the Levites, who had no land of their own and served at God's house (Numbers 18:21-24).

Notice how often "first" appears. The first fruit, the firstborn, the first of the dough. God was not asking for leftovers. He was asking to be first.

10:38-39 *And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites collect tithes; and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithe to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the house of the treasury. For to the storerooms the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil; and there* ***are*** *the utensils of the sanctuary, and the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers, and the singers. And we will not neglect the house of our God.*

"And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites collect tithes." A priest went along when the tithes were collected, to keep things honest. "And the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithe to the house of our God." The Levites themselves were to tithe from what they received, giving a tenth of it to the priests (Numbers 18:26-28). No one was above giving.

"For to the storerooms the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil." The storerooms were rooms in the temple courts where the gifts were kept. Remember them. In chapter 13 we will find one of these storerooms emptied of the people's gifts and given to Tobiah, the enemy of the work.

"And we will not neglect the house of our God."

That is the last line of the covenant and the heart of it. The people had neglected God's house before. In Haggai's day, about seventy-five years earlier, the people built their own fine houses and left God's house in ruins (Haggai 1:4-9). Now they promised not to let that happen again.

What does this mean for us? Under the new covenant, God's house is not a building in Jerusalem. The church, the people of God, is His temple, where He lives by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21-22). We do not bring wood for an altar or grain for the priests. But we are still called to give, to serve, and to support the work of God and those who teach His Word (1 Corinthians 9:13-14; Galatians 6:6). And we are still called not to neglect gathering together with God's people (Hebrews 10:25).

Do you give God the first, or the leftovers? Of your money, your time, your strength? The people of Nehemiah's day promised to put God first. We should too.

Summary

The sealed covenant was signed first by Nehemiah the governor and Zedekiah, then by the priests, the Levites and the heads of the people. The rest of the people, priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, and all who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to God's Law, with their wives and children who could understand, joined their leaders and bound themselves with a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law given through Moses and to keep all His commands. They promised not to give their daughters in marriage to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for their sons; not to buy goods or grain from them on the

Sabbath or holy days; and to let the land rest every seventh year and cancel debts. They took on themselves a yearly third of a shekel for the service of God's house: the bread set out before God, the regular grain and burnt offerings, the Sabbath, new moon and feast offerings, the holy things and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel. They cast lots for bringing wood for the altar, and promised to bring the firstfruits of their ground and trees, the firstborn of their sons and animals, the first of their dough and other gifts to the priests, and the tithe of their crops to the Levites, who would give a tenth of the tithe to the priests' storerooms with a priest present. They ended with the promise that they would not neglect the house of their God.

The people in Nehemiah 10 named the exact places they had failed. For me, the clear commitment I need is prayer and study time. It is easy to let both slide when life gets busy. Naming it is the first step to keeping it.

Study Questions

1. Whose name was first on the sealed covenant, and why does that matter? (10:1)

2. Who joined the leaders in the oath, and what did they promise in general? (10:28-29)

3. What did they promise about marriage, and why had this been a problem for Israel? (10:30; Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

4. What did they promise about the Sabbath and the seventh year? (10:31)

5. What was the yearly third of a shekel used for? (10:32-33)

6. What did the people promise to bring to God's house, and what word keeps coming up? (10:35-37)

7. What was the last promise of the covenant? (10:39)

8. The people named the specific areas where they had failed. What specific areas in your life need a clear commitment before God?

9. Giving God the first, not the leftovers, is a theme of this chapter. What would it look like for you to put God first with your time, money and strength?

10. "We will not neglect the house of our God." How are you supporting the work of God and His people in your local church?

Nehemiah 11: Filling Jerusalem With People

Scripture

11:1-9 And the leaders of the people dwelt in Jerusalem; and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one from the ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine parts in the cities. And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to dwell in Jerusalem. And these ***are*** the heads of the province who dwelt in Jerusalem; and in the cities of Judah they dwelt, each on his property in their cities: Israel, the priests and the Levites and the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon. And in Jerusalem dwelt some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin. Of the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite. All the sons of Perez who dwelt in Jerusalem ***were*** four hundred sixty-eight men of valor. And these ***are*** the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiah; and after him Gabbai, Sallai, nine hundred twenty-eight. And Joel the son of Zichri ***was*** overseer over them, and Judah the son of Hassenuah ***was*** second over the city.

11:10-24 Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, Seraiah the son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God, and their brothers who did the work of the house, eight hundred twenty-two; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah, and his brothers, heads of fathers, two hundred forty-two; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, and their brothers, mighty men of valor, one hundred twenty-eight; and the overseer over them ***was*** Zabdiel the son of Haggedolim. And of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; and Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the heads of the Levites, ***were*** over the outside work of the house of God; and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the leader of the beginning, would give thanks in prayer; and Bakbukiah, the second among his brothers; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. All the Levites in the holy city ***were*** two hundred eighty-four. And the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brothers, who kept watch at the gates, ***were*** one hundred seventy-two. And the rest of Israel, the priests, the Levites, ***were*** in all the cities of Judah, each on his inheritance. And the temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel; and Ziha and Gishpa ***were*** over the temple servants. And the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem ***was*** Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, before the work of the house of God. For the commandment of the king ***was*** on them, and a firm agreement ***was*** on the singers, the matter of a day in its day. And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, ***was*** at the hand of the king for every matter of the people.

11:25-36 And as to the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah dwelt in Kiriath-arba and its daughter ***towns***, and in Dibon and its daughter ***towns***, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, and in Jeshua, and in Moladah, and in Beth-pelet, and in Hazar-shual, and in Beersheba and its daughter ***towns***, and in Ziklag, and in Meconah and in its daughter ***towns***, and in En-rimmon,

and in Zorah, and in Jarmuth, Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its daughter ***towns***. And they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom. And the sons of Benjamin ***dwelt*** from Geba: Michmash and Aija and Bethel and its daughter ***towns***, Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, Lod and Ono, the valley of the craftsmen. And some of the Levites, the divisions of Judah, ***belonged*** to Benjamin.

Preview

Back in 7:4 we learned that Jerusalem was large but nearly empty. Now Nehemiah fills it. The leaders already live there. The rest of the people cast lots so that one family in ten will move into the city, while the other nine stay in their towns. Some volunteer to move, and the people bless them.

The rest of the chapter lists who lived in Jerusalem: men of Judah and Benjamin, priests, Levites, gatekeepers and temple servants, with their leaders. Then it lists the towns and villages of Judah and Benjamin where the rest of the people lived, from Beersheba in the south to the valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem, and north into Benjamin. It is another list chapter, but it tells us that the holy city was alive again.

Study

11:1-2 *And the leaders of the people dwelt in Jerusalem; and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one from the ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine parts in the cities. And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to dwell in Jerusalem.*

"And the leaders of the people dwelt in Jerusalem." The leaders went first, as they should. "And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one from the ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine parts in the cities." A tenth of the people would move into the capital. Casting lots was a way of letting God decide (Proverbs 16:33). It was also fair. No one could say the leaders had picked favorites.

Notice what the city is called: "Jerusalem, the holy city." Isaiah had used the same name for it in his prophecies (Isaiah 48:2; 52:1). It was holy because God had chosen it as the place for His name and His temple.

Why would anyone need to be pushed to live in the holy city? Because it was hard. Jerusalem was still mostly rubble. It was the city most likely to be attacked. Farms and family land were out in the towns. Moving into the city meant giving up a settled life to build a new one in a dangerous place.

"And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to dwell in Jerusalem." Some did not wait for the lot. They offered themselves. The people thanked God for them and prayed for them. God loves a willing heart (2 Corinthians 9:7; Isaiah 6:8). Is there a hard place God is asking you to go, where you could volunteer before anyone makes you?

11:3-9 *And these **are** the heads of the province who dwelt in Jerusalem; and in the cities of Judah they dwelt, each on his property in their cities: Israel, the priests and the Levites and the temple servants and the sons of the servants of Solomon. And in Jerusalem dwelt some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin. Of the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite. All the sons of Perez who dwelt in Jerusalem **were** four hundred sixty-eight men of valor. And these **are** the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiah; and after him Gabbai, Sallai, nine hundred twenty-eight. And Joel the son of Zichri **was** overseer over them, and Judah the son of Hassenuah **was** second over the city.*

"And these are the heads of the province who dwelt in Jerusalem." 1 Chronicles 9 gives a similar list, which may be from an earlier time or from the same records.

First come the sons of Judah. Two family lines are traced back, one to Perez, son of Judah (Genesis 38:29), the line of King David and of Jesus (Ruth 4:18-22; Matthew 1:3), and one to "the Shilonite," most likely Shelah, another son of Judah. "All the sons of Perez who dwelt in Jerusalem were four hundred sixty-eight men of valor." "Men of valor" can mean brave fighting men or men of standing and ability. A city on a wall needed both.

Then the sons of Benjamin, 928 of them. Jerusalem stood on the border of Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 18:28), so it was fitting that both tribes lived there. Benjamin had stayed with Judah when the kingdom divided (1 Kings 12:21), and the two tribes came home together. "Joel the son of Zichri was overseer over them, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second over the city." Every group had a leader. Nehemiah's love of order shows again.

11:10-14 *Of the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, Seraiah the son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God, and their brothers who did the work of the house, eight hundred twenty-two; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah, and his brothers, heads of fathers, two hundred forty-two; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, and their brothers, mighty men of valor, one hundred twenty-eight; and the overseer over them **was** Zabdiel the son of Haggedolim.*

"Of the priests." The priests who lived in Jerusalem numbered 822, 242 and 128 in three groups, about 1,190 men. Seraiah is called "the leader of the house of God," likely the chief officer of the temple under the high priest. His line is traced back through Zadok, the high priest of David's and Solomon's time (1 Kings 2:35). The priests of Nehemiah's day stood in that same line.

"Their brothers who did the work of the house." Some priests offered sacrifices. Others handled the many practical tasks of the temple. All of it was "the work of the house." Amashsai's family is called "mighty men of valor," with an overseer, Zabdiel. Even priests could be strong men. The temple needed strong hands as well as holy ones.

11:15-18 *And of the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; and Shabbethai and Jozabad, of the heads of the Levites,* ***were*** *over the outside work of the house of God; and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the leader of the beginning, would give thanks in prayer; and Bakbukiah, the second among his brothers; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. All the Levites in the holy city* ***were*** *two hundred eighty-four.*

"And of the Levites." Shemaiah heads the list. Two Levite leaders, Shabbethai and Jozabad, "were over the outside work of the house of God." Outside work may have meant collecting tithes, caring for the buildings, or other duties outside the temple itself. These two men had also helped explain the Law in 8:7.

"And Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, the leader of the beginning, would give thanks in prayer." Mattaniah led the singing of thanksgiving at the beginning of prayer. He was a descendant of Asaph, the musician David appointed (1 Chronicles 16:4-7), and Abda was of the line of Jeduthun, another of David's musicians (1 Chronicles 25:1). The worship of David's day was being carried on more than five centuries later. "All the Levites in the holy city were two hundred eighty-four."

11:19-21 *And the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brothers, who kept watch at the gates,* ***were*** *one hundred seventy-two. And the rest of Israel, the priests, the Levites,* ***were*** *in all the cities of Judah, each on his inheritance. And the temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel; and Ziha and Gishpa* ***were*** *over the temple servants.*

"And the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brothers, who kept watch at the gates, were one hundred seventy-two." These guarded the temple gates. Akkub and Talmon were family names that went back to the first return (7:45).

"And the rest of Israel, the priests, the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each on his inheritance." Notice the name "Israel." The people living in Judah stood for the whole nation.

"And the temple servants were dwelling on the Ophel." The Ophel was the hill just south of the temple, between the temple and the old City of David. The temple servants lived close to their work.

11:22-24 *And the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem* ***was*** *Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, of the sons of Asaph, the singers, before the work of the house of God. For the commandment of the king* ***was*** *on them, and a firm agreement* ***was*** *on the singers, the matter of a day in its day. And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah,* ***was*** *at the hand of the king for every matter of the people.*

"The overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi," also a descendant of Asaph, one of "the singers, before the work of the house of God." The singers had a special place. "For the commandment of the king was on them, and a firm agreement was on the singers, the matter of a day in its day." The king here is most likely the Persian king, who had given orders to support the temple's worship (Ezra 7:21-24). The singers received a daily portion so they could give

themselves fully to the work. Some think the king here is David, who first set the singers in order. Either way, worship was not an afterthought. Provision was made for it every day.

"And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was at the hand of the king for every matter of the people." Pethahiah seems to have been the Jews' representative to the Persian court, an adviser to the king on Jewish matters. The king of Persia had a Jew at his side, just as he had Nehemiah.

11:25-30 *And as to the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah dwelt in Kiriath-arba and its daughter **towns**, and in Dibon and its daughter **towns**, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, and in Jeshua, and in Moladah, and in Beth-pelet, and in Hazar-shual, and in Beersheba and its daughter **towns**, and in Ziklag, and in Meconah and in its daughter **towns**, and in En-rimmon, and in Zorah, and in Jarmuth, Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its daughter **towns**. And they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom.*

Now the chapter lists the towns where the people of Judah lived. "Kiriath-arba" is the old name for Hebron (Joshua 14:15), where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were buried. "Beersheba" was where Abraham dug a well and called on the name of the LORD (Genesis 21:33). "Ziklag" was the town the Philistine king gave David when he was running from Saul (1 Samuel 27:6). "Adullam" was the cave where David hid (1 Samuel 22:1). "Lachish" and "Azekah" were among the last cities to fall to Babylon before Jerusalem (Jeremiah 34:7). Many of these towns are in the far south, in the Negev.

"And they encamped from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom." The old saying for the whole land was "from Dan to Beersheba" (Judges 20:1). Judah was much smaller now, only from Beersheba to the edge of Jerusalem. But it was theirs, and they were living in it.

11:31-36 *And the sons of Benjamin **dwelt** from Geba: Michmash and Aija and Bethel and its daughter **towns**, Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, Lod and Ono, the valley of the craftsmen. And some of the Levites, the divisions of Judah, **belonged** to Benjamin.*

"And the sons of Benjamin dwelt from Geba," and then the towns north of Jerusalem: Michmash, Aija (that is, Ai), Bethel, Anathoth, Nob, Ramah, Lod, Ono and others. Bethel was where Jacob saw the ladder to heaven (Genesis 28:19). Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown (Jeremiah 1:1). Nob was the town of the priests where David ate the holy bread (1 Samuel 21:1-6). Ramah was Samuel's home (1 Samuel 7:17).

"And some of the Levites, the divisions of Judah, belonged to Benjamin." Some groups of Levites who had lived in Judah moved to Benjamin. The Levites had no land of their own, and they lived among all the tribes.

Why does God give us this list of towns? It shows that the promise was real. The towns where Abraham, Jacob, Samuel and David had walked were lived in again by God's people. The exile had not ended God's plan for Israel and the land. A small, poor people were back where God had put

them. For us, the list is a reminder that God's promises are tied to real places and real people, and that He does not forget what He has said.

Summary

The leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, and the rest cast lots to bring one in ten to live in the holy city, while the other nine lived in the towns, and the people blessed the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. The chapter lists those who lived in Jerusalem: men of Judah from the lines of Perez and Shelah, 468 men of valor of Perez; men of Benjamin, 928, with Joel as overseer and Judah son of Hassenuah second over the city; priests in three groups, with Seraiah as leader of the house of God and Zabdiel over the mighty men; Levites, with Shabbethai and Jozabad over the outside work and Mattaniah leading thanksgiving in prayer, 284 in all; and 172 gatekeepers. The rest of Israel, priests and Levites lived in the towns of Judah on their inheritance, and the temple servants lived on the Ophel. Uzzi of the sons of Asaph oversaw the Levites, the singers received a daily provision by the king's command, and Pethahiah was the king's agent in all matters of the people. The people of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba, Dibon, Beersheba, Ziklag, Adullam, Lachish, Azekah and other towns from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom, and the people of Benjamin lived from Geba to Michmash, Bethel, Anathoth, Ramah, Lod and Ono, with some divisions of Levites from Judah living in Benjamin.

Study Questions

1. How did the people decide who would move into Jerusalem? (11:1)

2. What did the people do for those who volunteered to live in Jerusalem? (11:2)

3. What is Jerusalem called in this chapter, and why was it called that? (11:1, 18)

4. Which two tribes lived in Jerusalem, and why does that make sense? (11:4-9)

5. What was Mattaniah's job, and whose worship was he carrying on? (11:17)

6. What do the towns in verses 25 to 36 remind you of from earlier in the Bible?

7. Why might it have been hard to move into Jerusalem at this time?

8. Some volunteered for the hard place. Is there a place of service God is calling you to that others may avoid?

9. The singers, gatekeepers and wood-carriers all had a part. What is your part in the life of your church?

10. God brought His people back to towns with long histories of His faithfulness. What places in your own life remind you of God's faithfulness?

Nehemiah 12: Priests, Levites, and the Wall Dedicated

Scripture

12:1-26 And these ***are*** the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, Shemaiah, and Joiarib, Jedaiah, Sallu, Amok, Hilkiah, Jedaiah. These ***were*** the heads of the priests and their brothers in the days of Jeshua. And the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, Mattaniah; he and his brothers ***were*** over the songs of thanksgiving. And Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, ***were*** opposite them for charges. And Jeshua fathered Joiakim, and Joiakim fathered Eliashib, and Eliashib ***fathered*** Joiada, and Joiada fathered Jonathan, and Jonathan fathered Jaddua. And in the days of Joiakim there were priests, heads of the fathers: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; of Melicu, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin; of Moadiah, Piltai; of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; and of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel. The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan and Jaddua ***were*** recorded ***as*** heads of fathers, and the priests, in the reign of Darius the Persian. The sons of Levi, the heads of the fathers, ***were*** recorded in the book of the chronicles, and until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib. And the heads of the Levites ***were*** Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, and their brothers opposite them, to praise ***and*** to give thanks according to the commandment of David the man of God, watch corresponding to watch. Mattaniah and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub ***were*** gatekeepers keeping watch at the storerooms of the gates. These ***were*** in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, the scribe.

12:27-43 And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to make a dedication and joy, and with thanksgivings and with song, cymbals, harps, and with lyres. And the sons of the singers were gathered, even from the district around Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathite, and from Beth-gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall. And I brought up the leaders of Judah onto the wall, and I appointed two large thanksgiving ***choirs*** and processions. ***One went*** to the right on the wall to the Dung Gate. And after them went Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam, Judah and Benjamin and Shemaiah and Jeremiah, and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his brothers, Shemaiah and Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, and Judah, Hanani, with the instruments of song of David the man of God; and Ezra the scribe ***was*** before them. And by the Spring Gate, and straight before them, they went up on the steps of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, and to the Water Gate eastward. And the second thanksgiving ***choir was*** going opposite, and I ***was*** behind it, and half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, and to the Broad Wall, and

above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Old Gate, and by the Fish Gate, and the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, and to the Sheep Gate; and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard. And the two thanksgiving ***choirs*** stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me, and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, Hananiah, with trumpets, and Maaseiah and Shemaiah and Eleazar and Uzzi and Jehohanan and Malchijah and Elam and Ezer. And the singers made ***themselves*** heard, and Jezrahiah ***was*** the overseer. And they sacrificed great sacrifices on that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice ***with*** great joy; and also the women and the children rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.

12:44-47 And on that day men were appointed over the rooms for the treasuries, for the contributions, for the first ***fruits***, and for the tithes, to gather into them, according to the fields of the cities, the portions of the law for the priests and for the Levites; for the joy of Judah ***was*** over the priests and over the Levites who were standing ***in service***. And they kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, and the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the commandment of David ***and*** Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old ***there were*** heads of the singers, and song of praise and of giving thanks to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah were giving the portions of the singers and the gatekeepers, the matter of a day in its day; and they were consecrating ***portions*** for the Levites, and the Levites were consecrating ***portions*** for the sons of Aaron.

Preview

The chapter begins with more lists: the priests and Levites who came home with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the line of high priests from Jeshua to Jaddua, and the heads of the priestly families in the next generation. These records show that the worship at the temple stood in an unbroken line from the first return.

Then comes the great day the whole book has been building toward: the dedication of the wall. The Levites and singers are gathered from all around. The priests and Levites purify themselves, the people, the gates and the wall. Nehemiah sets two great choirs on top of the wall. One marches to the right with Ezra leading, the other to the left with Nehemiah following, until they meet at the house of God. They offer great sacrifices and rejoice, women and children too, "and the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar." The chapter ends with men appointed over the storerooms, so that the priests, Levites, singers and gatekeepers are cared for as David and Solomon had ordered.

Study

12:1-9 *And these **are** the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, Shemaiah, and Joiarib, Jedaiah, Sallu, Amok, Hilkiah, Jedaiah. These **were** the heads of the priests and their brothers in the days of Jeshua. And the Levites: Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, Mattaniah; he and his brothers **were** over the songs of thanksgiving. And Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, **were** opposite them for charges.*

"And these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua." This takes us back to the first return in 538 B.C., almost a hundred years before. Twenty-two heads of priestly families are named. Most of these names appear again in verses 12 to 21, where the next generation of heads are listed for each family. The first "Ezra" in verse 1 is not the Ezra of our book, who came much later.

Then the Levites who came with Zerubbabel, including Mattaniah, who "and his brothers were over the songs of thanksgiving," and Bakbukiah and Unni, who stood "opposite them." The singers seem to have stood in two groups facing each other and sung back and forth, one side answering the other. Many psalms seem to be written for singing this way (for example Psalm 136, where every line ends with the same answer).

12:10-11 *And Jeshua fathered Joiakim, and Joiakim fathered Eliashib, and Eliashib **fathered** Joiada, and Joiada fathered Jonathan, and Jonathan fathered Jaddua.*

"And Jeshua fathered Joiakim, and Joiakim fathered Eliashib." This is the line of the high priests. Jeshua was the high priest of the first return (Ezra 3:2). Eliashib was high priest in Nehemiah's day and helped build the Sheep Gate (3:1). He will appear again in chapter 13, and not in a good way. Then Joiada, Jonathan, and Jaddua.

Why does this list matter? The high priest was the one man who could enter the Most Holy Place once a year on the Day of Atonement to make atonement for the people (Leviticus 16). God had promised the priesthood to the line of Aaron (Numbers 25:13). This list showed that the line had not been broken by the exile.

For us, this points to a greater High Priest. The priests of Aaron's line died one after another, and each had to be replaced. Hebrews tells us that Jesus, "because He abides forever, holds the priesthood permanently" (Hebrews 7:24). He never needs to be replaced.

12:12-21 *And in the days of Joiakim there were priests, heads of the fathers: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; of Melicu, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin; of Moadiah, Piltai; of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; and of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel.*

"And in the days of Joiakim there were priests, heads of the fathers." This is the next generation. Joiakim was the son of Jeshua, so these were the heads of the same priestly families about a generation after the first return. For each family name from verses 1 to 7, the head in Joiakim's day is named: "of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah," and so on.

One name stands out: "of Iddo, Zechariah." This is most likely the prophet Zechariah, who is called "Zechariah son of Berechiah, son of Iddo" (Zechariah 1:1) and who preached with Haggai while the temple was being rebuilt (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). The prophet was also a priest, the head of his family. His book gives some of the clearest prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament, including the King coming to Jerusalem humble and riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:5).

12:22-26 *The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan and Jaddua **were** recorded **as** heads of fathers, and the priests, in the reign of Darius the Persian. The sons of Levi, the heads of the fathers, **were** recorded in the book of the chronicles, and until the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib. And the heads of the Levites **were** Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, and their brothers opposite them, to praise **and** to give thanks according to the commandment of David the man of God, watch corresponding to watch. Mattaniah and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, Akkub **were** gatekeepers keeping watch at the storerooms of the gates. These **were** in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, the scribe.*

"The Levites in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan and Jaddua were recorded as heads of fathers, and the priests, in the reign of Darius the Persian." The records of the Levites and priests were kept up through several high priests. "Darius the Persian" here is most likely Darius II, who reigned about 423 to 404 B.C., after Artaxerxes I. "The book of the chronicles" means the official temple records, not our book of Chronicles.

Verse 24 names the heads of the Levites who led the praise, "according to the commandment of David the man of God, watch corresponding to watch." David had organized the singers and the gatekeepers into groups that served in turns (1 Chronicles 23 to 26). That order was still followed.

"These were in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, the scribe." This verse ties the lists together and names the two men who led the people in this time, side by side once more.

Why do these lists matter? Because God's worship had been kept in order, generation after generation, just as God had set it up through Moses and David. God is a God of order (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). The faithful service of ordinary priests, Levites, singers and gatekeepers,

most of them names we know nothing else about, was remembered by God and written in His Word.

12:27-30 *And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to make a dedication and joy, and with thanksgivings and with song, cymbals, harps, and with lyres. And the sons of the singers were gathered, even from the district around Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathite, and from Beth-gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.*

"And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem." To dedicate something is to set it apart to God. The wall was not just a defense. It was being given to God.

"They sought the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to make a dedication and joy, and with thanksgivings and with song, cymbals, harps, and with lyres." The singers came in from the villages they had built around Jerusalem (verses 28 and 29). This was going to be a day of music.

"And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall." Before they rejoiced, they made themselves clean. The Law had many rules for being ceremonially clean, fit to come before God: washing, offering sacrifices, staying away from things that made a person unclean (Numbers 19). Unclean did not always mean sinful. It meant not fit for worship until cleansed. They purified not only the people but even the gates and the wall. Everything was being set apart for God.

We cannot come before a holy God on our own terms. Under the old covenant, purification came by washing and sacrifice. Under the new, "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Before we worship, we come clean before God by confession and faith.

12:31-37 *And I brought up the leaders of Judah onto the wall, and I appointed two large thanksgiving* ***choirs*** *and processions.* ***One went*** *to the right on the wall to the Dung Gate. And after them went Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam, Judah and Benjamin and Shemaiah and Jeremiah, and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his brothers, Shemaiah and Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, and Judah, Hanani, with the instruments of song of David the man of God; and Ezra the scribe* ***was*** *before them. And by the Spring Gate, and straight before them, they went up on the steps of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, and to the Water Gate eastward.*

"And I brought up the leaders of Judah onto the wall, and I appointed two large thanksgiving choirs and processions." Here Nehemiah's first-person record begins again. The two choirs climbed onto the top of the wall. Think of it: just months before, Tobiah had mocked that if a fox climbed on their wall, it would break it down (4:3). Now hundreds of people were marching on top of it.

The first choir went "to the right on the wall to the Dung Gate," heading south and then east. Behind them went Hoshaiah and half the leaders of Judah, then priests with trumpets, and singers with "the instruments of song of David the man of God." "And Ezra the scribe was before them." Ezra led the first procession. They went by the Spring Gate, up the steps of the City of David, and on to the Water Gate on the east side, the very place where Ezra had read the Law in chapter 8.

12:38-39 *And the second thanksgiving **choir was** going opposite, and I **was** behind it, and half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, and to the Broad Wall, and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Old Gate, and by the Fish Gate, and the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, and to the Sheep Gate; and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.*

"And the second thanksgiving choir was going opposite, and I was behind it, and half of the people, on the wall." The second choir went the other way, north and then east, with Nehemiah following behind. They passed the Tower of the Ovens, the Broad Wall, the Gate of Ephraim, the Old Gate, the Fish Gate, the tower of Hananel and the Sheep Gate, and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard. These are the same gates and towers named in chapter 3, where each family built its part. Now the builders walked over the work of their own hands, giving thanks.

Notice that Ezra led one choir and Nehemiah followed the other. The teacher of the Law and the builder of the wall each had their place, and neither put himself above the other. The two choirs went in opposite directions around the city, as if to wrap the whole city in praise.

12:40-42 *And the two thanksgiving **choirs** stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me, and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, Hananiah, with trumpets, and Maaseiah and Shemaiah and Eleazar and Uzzi and Jehohanan and Malchijah and Elam and Ezer. And the singers made **themselves** heard, and Jezrahiah **was** the overseer.*

"And the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God." The two processions met at the temple. The wall led to the house of God. That was the point all along. The wall protected the city, and the city existed for the worship of God.

The priests blew trumpets. "And the singers made themselves heard." Jezrahiah led them.

12:43 *And they sacrificed great sacrifices on that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice **with** great joy; and also the women and the children rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.*

"And they sacrificed great sacrifices on that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and also the women and the children rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar."

This is the high point of the book. Look at how many times joy is named in one verse. They "rejoiced." God "had made them rejoice with great joy." The women and children "rejoiced." "The joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar."

Where did this joy come from? "God had made them rejoice." It was His gift. The joy of the LORD that Nehemiah spoke of in 8:10 was now filling the whole city.

And it was "heard from afar." Jerusalem had been a reproach among the nations (1:3; 2:17). Now its joy could be heard far away. The same enemies who had heard the mocking now heard the singing. When God's people rejoice in Him, the world hears it.

Compare this with Ezra 3:12-13, at the laying of the temple foundation, when the shouting for joy was mixed with the weeping of the old men, and the sound was heard far away. Now, ninety years later, there was no weeping. Only joy. Is your joy in God something others can hear?

12:44-47 *And on that day men were appointed over the rooms for the treasuries, for the contributions, for the first **fruits**, and for the tithes, to gather into them, according to the fields of the cities, the portions of the law for the priests and for the Levites; for the joy of Judah **was** over the priests and over the Levites who were standing **in service**. And they kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, and the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the commandment of David **and** Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old **there were** heads of the singers, and song of praise and of giving thanks to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah were giving the portions of the singers and the gatekeepers, the matter of a day in its day; and they were consecrating **portions** for the Levites, and the Levites were consecrating **portions** for the sons of Aaron.*

"And on that day men were appointed over the rooms for the treasuries." The joy of the dedication led straight to practical care. The people had promised in 10:35-39 to bring the firstfruits and the tithes to the storerooms. Now men were put in charge to receive them, "for the joy of Judah was over the priests and over the Levites who were standing in service." The people were glad to support those who served God.

"And they kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, and the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the commandment of David and Solomon his son." Worship was done God's way, as it had been in the best days of Israel's kings. "For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were heads of the singers, and song of praise and of giving thanks to God."

"And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah were giving the portions of the singers and the gatekeepers." The chapter ends on a high note. The people were giving faithfully, the Levites were giving their tenth to the priests, and the house of God was cared for.

But the next chapter shows how quickly that could change. Joy on the day of dedication does not guarantee faithfulness in the years after. That takes daily obedience.

Summary

The chapter lists the priests and Levites who came up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the Levites in charge of the songs of thanksgiving who sang in groups facing one another, and the high priests from Jeshua through Joiakim, Eliashib, Joiada and Jonathan to Jaddua. It names the heads of the priestly families in the days of Joiakim, among them Zechariah of the family of Iddo, and notes

that the Levites and priests were recorded in the days of the later high priests, in the reign of Darius the Persian, and in the book of the chronicles. The heads of the Levites praised and gave thanks in groups as David had commanded, and the gatekeepers guarded the storerooms, in the days of Joiakim, Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest and scribe. At the dedication of the wall, the Levites and singers were brought to Jerusalem from their villages to celebrate with thanksgiving, songs, cymbals, harps and lyres. The priests and Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates and the wall. Nehemiah brought the leaders of Judah onto the wall and set two great thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right toward the Dung Gate, with Hoshaiah, half the leaders, priests with trumpets and musicians with David's instruments, led by Ezra the scribe, past the Spring Gate and the steps of the City of David to the Water Gate. The other went the opposite way, with Nehemiah and half the people behind it, past the Tower of the Ovens, the Broad Wall, the Ephraim Gate, the Old Gate, the Fish Gate and the towers to the Sheep Gate, and stopped at the Gate of the Guard. Both choirs took their places in the house of God, the priests blew trumpets, and the singers sang loudly. They offered great sacrifices and rejoiced, because God had given them great joy; women and children also rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. That day men were appointed over the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes for the priests and Levites, and the people kept the service of God, the purification, and the order of singers and gatekeepers commanded by David and Solomon. In the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel gave the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers and set aside portions for the Levites, who did the same for the priests.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think the lists of priests and high priests mattered so much to the people after the exile? (12:1-26)

2. How did the singers sing, according to verses 8, 9 and 24?

3. What did the priests and Levites do before the dedication? (12:30)

4. Describe the two processions. Who led the first, and where was Nehemiah in the second? (12:31-38)

5. Where did the two choirs meet, and why does that matter? (12:40)

6. How many times is joy mentioned in verse 43, and where did it come from?

7. What practical step followed the celebration? (12:44-47)

8. The people purified themselves before they celebrated. How do you prepare your heart before worshiping God?

9. "The joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar." Can people around you tell that you have joy in God? How?

10. Ezra and Nehemiah each had their place, and neither put himself above the other. How can you work alongside other believers with different gifts without competing?

Nehemiah 13: Nehemiah's Last Reforms

Scripture

13:1-14 On that day it was read in the book of Moses in the ears of the people, and it was found written in it that an Ammonite and a Moabite shall not come into the assembly of God forever, because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and with water, and he hired Balaam against them to curse them; and our God turned the curse into a blessing. And it came about, when they heard the law, that they separated all ***the*** mixed multitude from Israel. And before this, Eliashib the priest, appointed over the storeroom of the house of our God, ***was*** near ***of kin*** to Tobiah, and he made for him a great storeroom, and there formerly they were putting the grain offering, the frankincense, and the utensils, and the tithe of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil, the commandment of the Levites and the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contribution of the priests. And in all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king; and at the end of days I asked leave from the king. And I came to Jerusalem, and I understood the evil which Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in making for him a storeroom in the courts of the house of God. And it was very displeasing to me, and I threw all the utensils of the house of Tobiah outside, out of the storeroom. And I spoke, and they purified the storerooms; and I brought back there the utensils of the house of God, the grain offering and the frankincense. And I came to know that the portions of the Levites had not been given, and they had fled, each man to his field, the Levites and the singers who did the work. And I contended with the officials and said, "Why has the house of God been forsaken?" And I gathered them and stationed them at their post. And all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the fresh oil to the treasuries. And I appointed as treasurers over the treasuries Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe and Pedaiah of the Levites, and at their hand ***was*** Hanan son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and on them ***it was*** to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my ***deeds of*** steadfast love which I have done in the house of my God and in its duties.

13:15-22 In those days I saw in Judah ***men*** treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading ***them*** on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, and figs, and every load, and bringing ***them into*** Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; and I warned ***them*** on the day they sold provisions. And the Tyrians ***who*** lived in it were bringing fish and every ***kind of*** merchandise and selling ***it*** on the Sabbath to the sons of Judah, and in Jerusalem. And I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What ***is*** this evil thing which you are doing, and profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and our God brought all this evil on us and on this city? And you are adding burning anger on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." And it came about, when the gates of Jerusalem grew dark before the Sabbath, that I spoke, and the doors were shut; and I said that they should not open them until after the Sabbath; and I stationed some of my young men at the gates, ***so that*** no load should come in on the Sabbath day. And the traders and the sellers of every merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem once and twice. And I warned them and said to them, "Why are you spending the night in front of the wall? If you do ***it*** again, I will stretch out a hand against you." From that time they did not come on the Sabbath. And I said to the Levites that they should be purifying themselves and coming ***and*** guarding the gates, to

sanctify the Sabbath day. Also ***for*** this remember me, my God, and have pity on me according to the greatness of Your steadfast love.

13:23-31 Also in those days I saw the Jews ***who*** had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, ***and*** Moabite wives. And of their sons, half ***were*** speaking Ashdodite, and they did not know ***how*** to speak Judean, but according to the language of ***this*** people and ***that*** people. And I contended with them and cursed them, and I struck some men of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, and you shall not take ***any*** of their daughters for your sons and for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of these ***things***? And among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; even him the foreign wives caused to sin. And shall it be heard of you, to do all this great evil, to act unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign wives?" And ***one*** of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest ***was*** son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite; and I drove him away from me. Remember them, my God, concerning the defilements of the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites. And I purified them from everything foreign, and I appointed duties for the priests and for the Levites, each man in his work, and for the offering of the wood at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, my God, for good.

Preview

The book does not end with the joy of chapter 12. It ends with Nehemiah fighting the same old sins all over again. First, the Law is read, and the people separate from those of mixed descent. Then we learn what had happened while Nehemiah was away at the Persian court. Eliashib the priest had given Tobiah, the old enemy of the wall, a room in the temple courts. The Levites had not been paid and had gone back to their fields. Men were working and trading on the Sabbath. And Jews had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, and their children could not even speak the language of Judah.

Nehemiah comes back and deals with each one, hard and fast. He throws Tobiah's things out of the temple room, brings back the Levites, shuts the gates on the Sabbath, and confronts the men who married foreign wives, even striking some of them and pulling out their hair. He drives out a grandson of the high priest who had married Sanballat's daughter. Four times in the chapter he asks God to remember. The book ends with that prayer: "Remember me, my God, for good."

Study

13:1-3 *On that day it was read in the book of Moses in the ears of the people, and it was found written in it that an Ammonite and a Moabite shall not come into the assembly of God forever, because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and with water, and he hired Balaam against them to curse them; and our God turned the curse into a blessing. And it came about, when they heard the law, that they separated all* ***the*** *mixed multitude from Israel.*

"On that day it was read in the book of Moses in the ears of the people." "That day" is likely a general way of saying at that time, somewhere in the years after the dedication. They found "that

an Ammonite and a Moabite shall not come into the assembly of God forever" (see Deuteronomy 23:3-5).

Why? "Because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and with water, and he hired Balaam against them to curse them." When Israel came out of Egypt, Ammon and Moab refused them food and water, and Balak king of Moab hired the prophet Balaam to curse them (Numbers 22 to 24). "And our God turned the curse into a blessing." Every time Balaam opened his mouth to curse, God made him bless instead.

"They separated all the mixed multitude from Israel." The "mixed multitude" was most likely those of foreign descent who had not truly joined themselves to the LORD. What did "the assembly" mean? Most Bible teachers believe it meant full membership in Israel's worship and public life. It did not stop a Moabite from coming to the LORD in faith. Ruth was a Moabite, and she became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:13-17) and is named in the line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). The difference was faith. Ruth had said, "your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Those who clung to the gods of Ammon and Moab were kept out.

13:4-5 *And before this, Eliashib the priest, appointed over the storeroom of the house of our God,* ***was*** *near* ***of kin*** *to Tobiah, and he made for him a great storeroom, and there formerly they were putting the grain offering, the frankincense, and the utensils, and the tithe of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil, the commandment of the Levites and the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contribution of the priests.*

"And before this, Eliashib the priest, appointed over the storeroom of the house of our God, was near of kin to Tobiah." This is likely Eliashib the high priest (3:1; 12:10), though some think he was another priest with the same name. He was related to Tobiah, either by marriage or by blood. Tobiah was the Ammonite official who had mocked and fought the building of the wall (2:10; 4:3, 7; 6:17-19).

"And he made for him a great storeroom." This was one of the temple storerooms where the people's offerings were kept: "the grain offering, the frankincense, and the utensils, and the tithe of the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil." These were the very gifts the people had promised to bring in 10:37-39. The room was cleared out, and Tobiah moved in.

Think about what this means. An Ammonite, one of the people just read about in verse 1, who had fought against God's work from the start, was given a room in the courts of God's house by the priest in charge of it. It is hard to imagine a worse picture of compromise.

13:6-9 *And in all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king; and at the end of days I asked leave from the king. And I came to Jerusalem, and I understood the evil which Eliashib had done for Tobiah, in making for him a storeroom in the courts of the house of God. And it was very displeasing to me, and I threw all the utensils of the house of Tobiah outside, out of the storeroom. And I spoke, and they purified the storerooms; and I brought back there the utensils of the house of God, the grain offering and the frankincense.*

"And in all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king." The thirty-second year of Artaxerxes was 433 B.C. Nehemiah's first term as governor lasted twelve years, from 445 to 433 B.C. (5:14). Then he went back to the king, as he had promised (2:6). Artaxerxes was king of Persia, but he also ruled Babylon, and the Jews still thought of the king as ruling from there.

"At the end of days I asked leave from the king." We are not told how long he was gone. Most think a few years. He returned to Jerusalem about 430 B.C. or a little later, and found the mess. In just a short time, the people had broken most of the promises of chapter 10.

"And it was very displeasing to me, and I threw all the utensils of the house of Tobiah outside, out of the storeroom." Nehemiah did not hold a meeting. He picked up Tobiah's furniture and threw it out. This calls to mind Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple (John 2:13-17).

"And I spoke, and they purified the storerooms; and I brought back there the utensils of the house of God, the grain offering and the frankincense." The room had been made unclean, so it was cleansed and given back to its proper use.

What does this teach us? Sin that is tolerated does not stay in the yard. It moves into the house. Compromise with those who oppose God usually starts small, a friendship, a family tie, a favor, and ends up with the enemy living in the temple courts. Is there anything in your life that has been given a room where it does not belong? Throw it out, and give the room back to God.

13:10-14 *And I came to know that the portions of the Levites had not been given, and they had fled, each man to his field, the Levites and the singers who did the work. And I contended with the officials and said, "Why has the house of God been forsaken?" And I gathered them and stationed them at their post. And all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the fresh oil to the treasuries. And I appointed as treasurers over the treasuries Shelemiah the priest and Zadok the scribe and Pedaiah of the Levites, and at their hand* ***was*** *Hanan son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah; for they were considered faithful, and on them* ***it was*** *to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my* ***deeds of*** *steadfast love which I have done in the house of my God and in its duties.*

"And I came to know that the portions of the Levites had not been given, and they had fled, each man to his field." The people had stopped giving their tithes (10:37). So the Levites and singers, who had no land of their own and lived on the tithes, had to go back to farming to feed their families. The temple worship was falling apart.

"And I contended with the officials and said, Why has the house of God been forsaken?" These are almost the words of the covenant in reverse. They had promised, "we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39). Now it was neglected. Nehemiah held the leaders responsible. "And I gathered them and stationed them at their post." He brought the Levites back to their work.

"And all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the fresh oil to the treasuries." Once someone led, the people followed. Nehemiah then appointed four faithful men as treasurers, a priest, a scribe, a Levite and their assistant, "for they were considered faithful." He put honest men in charge, so the Levites would get their share.

Malachi, who most likely preached in these same years, asked the people, "Will a man rob God?" and told them to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (Malachi 3:8-10). Nehemiah and Malachi were fighting the same sin.

"Remember me, my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my deeds of steadfast love which I have done in the house of my God and in its duties." Nehemiah was not trying to earn God's favor. He was asking God not to let his faithful work be forgotten, even if the people forgot it. God does not forget. "For God is not unjust, to forget your work" (Hebrews 6:10).

13:15-18 *In those days I saw in Judah **men** treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading **them** on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, and figs, and every load, and bringing **them into** Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; and I warned **them** on the day they sold provisions. And the Tyrians **who** lived in it were bringing fish and every **kind of** merchandise and selling **it** on the Sabbath to the sons of Judah, and in Jerusalem. And I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What **is** this evil thing which you are doing, and profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and our God brought all this evil on us and on this city? And you are adding burning anger on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."*

"In those days I saw in Judah men treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys." Farmers were working on the Sabbath. Wine, grapes, figs and every kind of load were being brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. "And the Tyrians who lived in it were bringing fish and every kind of merchandise and selling it on the Sabbath." Merchants from Tyre, the trading city on the coast, had set up in Jerusalem and were doing business with the people on the Sabbath. Again, this broke what they had promised in 10:31.

"And I contended with the nobles of Judah and said to them, What is this evil thing which you are doing, and profaning the Sabbath day?" To profane is to treat something holy as common. God had set the Sabbath apart as holy, a sign of His covenant with Israel (Exodus 31:13-17). The nobles were treating it like any other market day.

"Did not your fathers do thus, and our God brought all this evil on us and on this city?" Nehemiah reminded them of history. Jeremiah had warned that if the people kept carrying loads through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, God would set fire to its gates (Jeremiah 17:21-27). And He did. "And you are adding burning anger on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." They were walking right back into the sin that had sent their fathers into exile.

13:19-22 *And it came about, when the gates of Jerusalem grew dark before the Sabbath, that I spoke, and the doors were shut; and I said that they should not open them until after the Sabbath; and I stationed some of my young men at the gates,* ***so that*** *no load should come in on the Sabbath day. And the traders and the sellers of every merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem once and twice. And I warned them and said to them, "Why are you spending the night in front of the wall? If you do* ***it*** *again, I will stretch out a hand against you." From that time they did not come on the Sabbath. And I said to the Levites that they should be purifying themselves and coming* ***and*** *guarding the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day. Also* ***for*** *this remember me, my God, and have pity on me according to the greatness of Your steadfast love.*

"When the gates of Jerusalem grew dark before the Sabbath." The Jewish day began at sunset, so the Sabbath began on Friday evening. As the shadows fell, Nehemiah ordered the gates shut until the Sabbath was over, and he set his own servants as guards so that "no load should come in on the Sabbath day."

The traders camped outside the wall "once and twice," hoping to do business. Nehemiah warned them: "If you do it again, I will stretch out a hand against you." That was enough. "From that time they did not come on the Sabbath."

Then he had the Levites purify themselves and guard the gates, "to sanctify the Sabbath day." To sanctify means to keep it holy. The Levites took over the job for the long run.

"Also for this remember me, my God, and have pity on me according to the greatness of Your steadfast love." Notice that Nehemiah asks for pity, for mercy. He did not think his zeal made him perfect. He knew he needed God's steadfast love too.

How does this apply to us? The Sabbath was given to Israel under the Law of Moses. Christians differ on how it applies today. Some keep the seventh day; many treat the Lord's Day, Sunday, as a day of rest and worship; others see the Sabbath fulfilled in the rest we have in Christ (Hebrews 4:9-10; Colossians 2:16-17). But all of us can learn from this. God made us to rest and to worship, and if we let work and buying and selling crowd out time with Him, we will lose something precious. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for the sake of man, not man for the sake of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It was a gift, and the people were throwing it away.

13:23-24 *Also in those days I saw the Jews* ***who*** *had married Ashdodite, Ammonite,* ***and*** *Moabite wives. And of their sons, half* ***were*** *speaking Ashdodite, and they did not know* ***how*** *to speak Judean, but according to the language of* ***this*** *people and* ***that*** *people.*

"Also in those days I saw the Jews who had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite wives." Ashdod was one of the old Philistine cities on the coast. Ammon and Moab were east of the Jordan. These were exactly the peoples whose gods had pulled Israel away before. It had been nearly thirty years since Ezra dealt with this sin (Ezra 9 and 10), and only about fifteen years since the people had signed a covenant not to do it again (10:30).

"And of their sons, half were speaking Ashdodite, and they did not know how to speak Judean." "Judean" means Hebrew, the language of Judah. The children were growing up speaking the

language of their mothers' people. Why does that matter? Because the Law of God, the prayers, the psalms and the worship of Israel were in Hebrew. A child who could not understand Hebrew could not understand the Law when it was read, as it had been in chapter 8. Within one generation, these families were losing their ability to hear God's Word.

This is still the danger. A home divided in faith often raises children who do not know the language of faith. Not because they cannot learn it, but because no one is teaching it to them at home (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

13:25 *And I contended with them and cursed them, and I struck some men of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, and you shall not take **any** of their daughters for your sons and for yourselves.*

"And I contended with them and cursed them, and I struck some men of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God."

This is a hard verse, and we should read it honestly. Nehemiah argued with these men. He "cursed them," which most likely means he called down on them the curses of the covenant they had sworn to keep (10:29), rather than swearing at them in the way we use that word. He struck some of them. He pulled out their hair, a mark of shame and disgrace in that culture (compare 2 Samuel 10:4; Isaiah 50:6). Then he made them swear an oath before God.

Notice two things. First, Ezra pulled out his own hair when he heard of this sin (Ezra 9:3). Nehemiah pulled out theirs. Ezra grieved and prayed. Nehemiah confronted and punished. Both were men of God, and the Bible reports both reactions without telling us that one was right and the other wrong.

Second, Nehemiah was the governor, appointed by the king of Persia, with legal authority over the province. What he did was more like a magistrate punishing lawbreakers than a pastor dealing with a church member. In that time and place, a governor had the right to punish in this way.

Does the Bible approve of what he did? Scripture records it without praise or blame. I believe we should not hold it up as a model, and it is certainly no pattern for how the church should deal with sin. The New Testament is plain on this. Church discipline is to be done in love, gently, step by step, with the goal of restoring the one who sinned (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:24-26). No pastor, elder or church member has the right to strike anyone. Paul says an overseer must not be a striker but gentle (1 Timothy 3:3). What we can learn from Nehemiah is how seriously he took sin among God's people. What we must not copy is his method.

What did he make them swear? "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, and you shall not take any of their daughters for your sons and for yourselves." Notice that this oath is about future marriages. Unlike Ezra 10, Nehemiah is not said to have made them send away their wives. He made them promise that their children would not marry outside the faith.

13:26-27 *Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of these **things**? And among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; even him the foreign wives caused to sin. And shall it be heard of you, to do all this great evil, to act unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign wives?"*

"Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of these things? And among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; even him the foreign wives caused to sin."

Nehemiah pointed to the clearest example in Israel's history. Solomon was the wisest king who ever lived. God loved him (2 Samuel 12:24-25). God gave him the throne of all Israel. And yet his foreign wives "turned aside his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:1-8). He built high places for Chemosh, the god of Moab, and Molech, the god of Ammon, the very peoples these men had married into. If marriage to those who served other gods could pull Solomon down, it could pull anyone down.

"And shall it be heard of you, to do all this great evil, to act unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign wives?"

As in Ezra 9 and 10, the issue was not race. It was faith. Nehemiah called it acting "unfaithfully against our God." The danger was that the wife would bring her gods into the home and the children would grow up without the LORD. Ruth the Moabite, who left her gods for the God of Israel, was welcomed. These women, as far as we are told, had not. Malachi, in these same years, described the sin the same way: Judah "has married the daughter of a foreign god" (Malachi 2:11).

For believers today, the lesson is the same one we saw in Ezra. A Christian should marry only another believer (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14). But a believer who is already married to an unbeliever must not leave (1 Corinthians 7:12-14), and may win that spouse by a godly life (1 Peter 3:1-2). Nehemiah's oath looked forward, to the next marriages. That is where the lesson belongs for us too: think hard before you marry, because the choice of a husband or wife will shape your faith and your children's faith for a lifetime.

13:28-29 *And **one** of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest **was** son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite; and I drove him away from me. Remember them, my God, concerning the defilements of the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.*

"And one of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite; and I drove him away from me." This was the worst case of all. A grandson of the high priest, a man who might one day be high priest himself, had married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria and the chief enemy of the wall (2:10, 19; 4:1-2; 6:1-14). The high priest had to marry within Israel and keep himself pure (Leviticus 21:13-15). Nehemiah drove him out of Jerusalem.

"Remember them, my God, concerning the defilements of the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites." This time Nehemiah asked God to remember them, not for good,

but for what they had done. The priests were supposed to guard God's covenant and teach the people (Malachi 2:4-8). Instead, the high priest's own family had joined itself to the enemy.

13:30-31 *And I purified them from everything foreign, and I appointed duties for the priests and for the Levites, each man in his work, and for the offering of the wood at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, my God, for good.*

"And I purified them from everything foreign, and I appointed duties for the priests and for the Levites, each man in his work." Nehemiah cleaned house and set things in order again. He also made sure the practical things were done: "the offering of the wood at appointed times, and for the firstfruits" (see 10:34-35).

"Remember me, my God, for good." These are the last words of the book, and the last words of Old Testament history in time order.

It is a strange way for a book to end. No victory parade, no final celebration. Just a tired man who had given his life to God's people, who had seen them fall back into the same sins again and again, asking God to remember him.

And that tells us something important. Nehemiah's walls were strong. His reforms were good. But they could not change the human heart. The people signed the covenant and broke it within about fifteen years. The priests defiled the priesthood. The Levites were left unpaid. The Sabbath was ignored. The problem was not the wall around the city. It was the hearts of the people inside it.

That is why the Old Testament closes looking forward. God had promised a new covenant, when He would write His Law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) and give them a new heart and His own Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27). He had promised that the Lord would come to His temple and purify the sons of Levi (Malachi 3:1-3). About four hundred years after Nehemiah, Jesus came. He cleansed the temple. He kept the Law perfectly. He died to take away the sins no reformer could remove, and He rose again. Where Nehemiah could only ask God to remember him, Jesus promised a dying thief, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Nehemiah's prayer is a good one for every believer: "Remember me, my God, for good." And because of Christ, we know God will.

Summary

At that time the book of Moses was read to the people, and they found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should enter the assembly of God, because they had not met Israel with bread and water but hired Balaam to curse them, though God turned the curse into a blessing; so they separated the mixed multitude from Israel. Earlier, Eliashib the priest, who was over the storerooms and related to Tobiah, had given Tobiah a large storeroom where the offerings for the priests and Levites had been kept. This happened while Nehemiah was away, having returned to King Artaxerxes in his thirty-second year. When Nehemiah came back, he threw Tobiah's goods out, had the rooms purified, and brought back the temple utensils and offerings. He learned that

the Levites and singers had not received their portions and had gone back to their fields, so he rebuked the officials, restored the Levites to their posts, and appointed faithful treasurers, and all Judah brought in the tithes. He saw people working and bringing loads into Jerusalem on the Sabbath and men of Tyre selling on the Sabbath, rebuked the nobles of Judah for profaning the Sabbath, reminding them that this had brought disaster on their fathers, and ordered the gates shut from dusk before the Sabbath until it was over. When traders camped outside the wall, he warned them away, and he had the Levites purify themselves and guard the gates. He saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, whose children could not speak the language of Judah. He contended with them, cursed them, struck some and pulled out their hair, and made them swear not to give or take their children in marriage with those peoples, reminding them that foreign wives had led even Solomon into sin. He drove away a grandson of Eliashib the high priest who had married Sanballat's daughter, and asked God to remember those who had defiled the priesthood. He cleansed the priests and Levites from everything foreign, assigned their duties, and provided for the wood offering and the firstfruits. Three times he asked God to remember him, ending with, "Remember me, my God, for good."

Study Questions

1. Why were Ammonites and Moabites kept out of the assembly, and how was Ruth different? (13:1-3; Ruth 1:16)

2. What had Eliashib done for Tobiah, and what did Nehemiah do about it? (13:4-9)

3. Why had the Levites left the temple, and which promise of chapter 10 had the people broken? (13:10-11; 10:37-39)

4. What was happening on the Sabbath, and how did Nehemiah stop it? (13:15-22)

5. What problem did Nehemiah see in the children of the mixed marriages? (13:24)

6. What example from Israel's history did Nehemiah use to warn the men, and why was it so strong? (13:26)

7. How many times does Nehemiah pray "Remember me" or "Remember them" in this chapter? What do those prayers show about him? (13:14, 22, 29, 31)

8. Tobiah was given a room in God's house. Is there anything in your life that has been given a place it does not belong?

9. Nehemiah took sin seriously, but his method is not a model for us. How can we take sin seriously and still deal with it in the gentle way the New Testament teaches (Galatians 6:1)?

10. The people broke their covenant within about fifteen years. What does that tell you about the human heart, and why do we need Jesus and not just better rules?

Overview of Esther

Esther is the seventeenth book of the Bible. It comes right after Nehemiah and is the last of the history books of the Old Testament in our English Bibles. But its events come earlier than Nehemiah's. They happen between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, during the reign of King Ahasuerus of Persia, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes. The temple in Jerusalem had been finished for about thirty years. Ezra had not yet come to Jerusalem, and Nehemiah was not yet the king's cupbearer.

Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the Jews who went home. Esther tells of the Jews who stayed in Persia. Most of them never went back. They lived scattered across the empire, from India to Cush, in cities and towns among other peoples. The book tells how one man, Haman, planned to wipe them all out in a single day, and how God saved them through a young Jewish woman who had become queen and her older cousin Mordecai.

The most famous thing about Esther is what it does not say. The name of God does not appear anywhere in the book. There is no mention of prayer, of the temple, of the Law, or of a prophet. And yet God's hand is on every page. A queen falls from favor at just the right time. A young Jewish orphan is chosen out of the whole empire. Mordecai happens to overhear a plot against the king. The king cannot sleep on the very night Haman comes to ask for Mordecai's death, and the servant happens to read the very page that tells what Mordecai did. Haman is hanged on the tree he built for Mordecai. The day set for the Jews' destruction becomes the day of their victory. None of this is called a miracle. All of it is God's providence, His quiet, wise and powerful care, working through ordinary events to keep His promises.

The theme of Esther is God's hidden care for His people. Even when He seems silent and far away, He is working. The key verse is Mordecai's word to Esther:

Esther 4:14 (SLB)

"For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?"

Esther has 10 chapters and 167 verses. Here is its structure:

Part One: Esther Becomes Queen (chapters 1 to 2)

- Esther 1: Queen Vashti Refuses the King
- Esther 2: Esther Becomes Queen

Part Two: Haman's Plot (chapters 3 to 5)

- Esther 3: Haman's Plot Against the Jews
- Esther 4: For Such a Time as This
- Esther 5: Esther Goes In to the King

Part Three: The Tables Turned (chapters 6 to 10)

- Esther 6: The King Honors Mordecai
- Esther 7: Haman Is Hanged
- Esther 8: A New Decree for the Jews
- Esther 9: The Jews Defend Themselves and Purim Begins
- Esther 10: The Greatness of Mordecai

Where this book points to Christ: the New Testament does not quote Esther, but the book matters for the coming of Christ. God had promised that the Savior would come from Abraham's family, from Judah, from David's line (Genesis 12:3; 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:12-16). Haman's decree would have killed every Jew in the empire, including those in Judah and Jerusalem, which were part of it. If it had succeeded, there would have been no people from whom the Messiah could come. By saving the Jews, God was keeping His promise alive. Esther herself is also a picture of Christ in a small way. She risked her life to go before the king on behalf of her people, who were under a sentence of death, and she pleaded for them. Jesus did far more. He did not only risk His life; He gave it, and now He lives to intercede for us before the Father (Hebrews 7:25). The New Testament does not name Esther as a picture of Christ, so I hold this as a picture only.

Background of Esther

Author: The book does not name its writer. The SLB introduction says only that the writer was a Jew who knew the Persian court well. Some Jewish tradition named the men of the Great Assembly, the leaders after the exile, as the ones who wrote it down; others have suggested Mordecai himself, since he wrote down these events (9:20, 32). The writer knew Persian customs, officials, palace layout and names in close detail, which fits someone who lived in Persia not long after the events.

When it was written: Sometime after the reign of Ahasuerus ended in 465 B.C., since 10:2 speaks of his reign as finished and recorded. Most conservative scholars date it in the later fifth century B.C., perhaps about 460 to 400 B.C. Some modern scholars date it much later and treat it as a story rather than history. I take it as history, as the book presents itself, with real kings, real records and real dates.

When the events happened: About 483 to 473 B.C. The feast of chapter 1 is in the third year of Ahasuerus, 483 B.C. Esther became queen in his seventh year, about 479 B.C. (2:16). Haman cast the lot in the twelfth year, 474 B.C. (3:7), and the day of the decree fell almost a year later, about 473 B.C. These years come between the finishing of the temple in 516 B.C. (Ezra 6) and Ezra's journey to Jerusalem in about 458 B.C. (Ezra 7).

King Ahasuerus: Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name the Greeks wrote as Xerxes. He was Xerxes I, son of Darius I, and he reigned from 486 to 465 B.C. Between the great feast of chapter 1 and the choosing of Esther in chapter 2, he led a huge army against Greece and was defeated at sea at Salamis in 480 B.C. Greek historians remember him as proud, quick-tempered and given to great displays of wealth, which fits the king we meet in Esther. He is also named in Ezra 4:6.

Setting: Susa, one of the royal cities of Persia, in what is now southwest Iran. It was the winter palace of the kings and the same city where Nehemiah later served (Nehemiah 1:1). The citadel was the fortified palace area on a hill above the city. The empire was divided into 127 provinces (1:1), each with its own officials, script and language. The king's word was law, and a law written in his name and sealed with his ring could not be undone (1:19; 8:8).

Who it was written to: The Jews scattered through the Persian Empire and in Judah, and their children. They needed to know why they kept the feast of Purim each year, and they needed to know that God had not forgotten them, even far from the land and the temple.

Words to know: Providence is God's care and control over all things, working through ordinary events and people to carry out His plan (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). Purim is the feast the Jews keep each year in the month of Adar, February to March, to remember their rescue. Its name comes from pur, a word for the lot Haman cast to pick the day for killing the Jews (3:7; 9:24-26). The Agagite means a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites in the days of Saul (1 Samuel 15). The Amalekites were Israel's oldest enemies, who attacked them in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8-16).

God's name in Esther: God is never named in the Hebrew book of Esther. Why? Scripture does not tell us. Some think the writer left God's name out on purpose, to show how God works behind the scenes even when He seems hidden. Some think it was because the book was to be read at a noisy, joyful feast, or because it copied the style of Persian court records. Whatever the reason, the book teaches by its silence. God does not have to be seen to be at work.

The Greek additions: The Greek translation of Esther, made later, adds about a hundred verses, with prayers by Mordecai and Esther and many mentions of God; these additions are not part of the Hebrew text and are not Scripture, and this study follows the Hebrew book found in the 66 books of the Bible.

Purpose: Esther was written to show that God watches over His people and keeps His promises even when He seems silent, to explain the beginning of the feast of Purim, and to show how ordinary people, placed by God at the right time, must have the courage to act. It also shows that pride goes before a fall, and that God can turn the plans of the wicked back on their own heads (9:25).

Esther 1: Queen Vashti Refuses the King

Scripture

1:1-9 And it was in the days of Ahasuerus; he ***is the*** Ahasuerus who reigned from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces; in those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom which ***was*** in Susa the citadel, in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and his servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and the officials of the provinces ***being*** before him, when he showed the riches of the glory of his kingdom and the honor of the splendor of his greatness many days, a hundred and eighty days. And when these days were completed, the king made for all the people who were found in Susa the citadel, from great to small, a feast ***of*** seven days in the court of the garden of the palace of the king. ***Hangings of*** white cloth, cotton, and violet ***were*** fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on rods of silver and pillars of marble; couches of gold and silver ***were*** on a pavement of porphyry and marble and mother-of-pearl and colored stone. And ***they*** gave drink in vessels of gold, and vessels differing from vessels, and royal wine ***was*** abundant, according to the hand of the king. And the drinking ***was*** according to the law; no one compelled, for so the king had appointed for every chief officer of his house, to do according to the pleasure of each and every man. Also Vashti the queen made a feast of women ***in*** the royal house which ***belonged*** to King Ahasuerus.

1:10-22 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was good with wine, he said to Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served before the face of King Ahasuerus, to bring Vashti the queen before the king with a royal crown, to show the peoples and the officials her beauty, for she ***was*** good of appearance. And Queen Vashti refused to come at the word of the king which ***was*** by the hand of the eunuchs; and the king was very angry, and his rage burned in him. And the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for so ***was*** the manner of the king before all who knew law and judgment, and those near him ***were*** Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media who saw the face of the king, who sat first in the kingdom), "According to law, what ***is one*** to do with Queen Vashti, because she has not done the command of King Ahasuerus by the hand of the eunuchs?" And Memucan said before the king and the officials, "Not against the king alone has Vashti the queen done wrong, but against all the officials and against all the peoples who ***are*** in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the matter of the queen will go out to all the women, to make their husbands despicable in their eyes, when they say, 'King Ahasuerus said to bring Vashti the queen before him, and she did not come.' And this day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the matter of the queen will say ***so*** to all the officials of the king, and ***there will be*** plenty of contempt and anger. If ***it is*** good to the king, let a royal word go out from before him, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Media, and it will not pass away, that Vashti shall not come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royalty to her companion who ***is*** better than she. And the decree of the king which he will make will be heard in all his kingdom, for it is great, and all the women will give honor to their husbands, from great to small." And the word was good in the eyes of the king and the officials, and the king did according to the word of Memucan. And he sent letters to all the provinces of the king, to each and every

province according to its script, and to each and every people according to its language, for every man to be ruling in his own house and speaking according to the language of his people.

Preview

The book opens in the palace of King Ahasuerus at Susa, in the third year of his reign. To show off the riches and glory of his kingdom, the king holds a feast for his officials and army that lasts a hundred and eighty days, and then a seven-day feast for all the people of Susa in the palace garden. Everything is gold, silver, marble and fine cloth, and the wine flows without limit. Queen Vashti holds her own feast for the women.

On the seventh day, when the king is merry with wine, he orders Vashti brought before him wearing her royal crown, to show off her beauty to the crowd. She refuses. The king is furious. His wise men warn that if the queen gets away with it, every wife in the empire will look down on her husband. So the king removes Vashti as queen and sends out a decree that every man should be master in his own house. God is not named, but the stage is being set. The throne of the queen is now empty.

Study

1:1-2 *And it was in the days of Ahasuerus; he **is the** Ahasuerus who reigned from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces; in those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom which **was** in Susa the citadel,*

"And it was in the days of Ahasuerus; he is the Ahasuerus who reigned from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces." Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the name the Greeks wrote as Xerxes. He was Xerxes I, who ruled Persia from 486 to 465 B.C. His empire reached from India in the east to Cush in the south, the land south of Egypt, in what is now Sudan. It was the greatest empire the world had yet seen.

"When King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom which was in Susa the citadel." Susa was one of the royal cities, where the kings spent the winter months. The citadel was the fortified palace on the hill. Nehemiah would serve in this same palace almost forty years later (Nehemiah 1:1).

The book opens with the world's greatest king on the world's greatest throne. But as we read, we will see that the real King is the One who is never named.

1:3-4 *in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and his servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and the officials of the provinces **being** before him, when he showed the riches of the glory of his kingdom and the honor of the splendor of his greatness many days, a hundred and eighty days.*

"In the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and his servants, the army of Persia and Media." The third year was 483 B.C. Many historians think this great gathering was

part of the planning for Xerxes' invasion of Greece, which came a few years later. If so, the king was showing his commanders the riches that stood behind his war.

"When he showed the riches of the glory of his kingdom and the honor of the splendor of his greatness many days, a hundred and eighty days." Six months of showing off. This was a king who wanted the whole world to see how great he was. Compare that with the God of the Bible, who does not need to show off His glory to prove it, and whose Son "emptied Himself" and took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7).

1:5-8 *And when these days were completed, the king made for all the people who were found in Susa the citadel, from great to small, a feast **of** seven days in the court of the garden of the palace of the king. **Hangings of** white cloth, cotton, and violet **were** fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on rods of silver and pillars of marble; couches of gold and silver **were** on a pavement of porphyry and marble and mother-of-pearl and colored stone. And **they** gave drink in vessels of gold, and vessels differing from vessels, and royal wine **was** abundant, according to the hand of the king. And the drinking **was** according to the law; no one compelled, for so the king had appointed for every chief officer of his house, to do according to the pleasure of each and every man.*

"The king made for all the people who were found in Susa the citadel, from great to small, a feast of seven days in the court of the garden of the palace of the king." After the officials' feast, the king threw a party for everyone in the citadel.

The writer describes it in detail: white and violet hangings fastened with cords of linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, couches of gold and silver on a floor of colored stone and mother-of-pearl. "And they gave drink in vessels of gold, and vessels differing from vessels." Every cup was different. "And royal wine was abundant, according to the hand of the king."

"And the drinking was according to the law; no one compelled." Each man could drink as much or as little as he liked. In some Persian feasts, guests were expected to drink whenever the king drank. Here, the king let each man do as he wished.

Why all this detail? The writer wants us to feel how rich and powerful this king was. Everything in this world seems to be in his hands. But the rest of the book will show that this king, for all his gold, is not really in control. He will be moved by his anger, his wine, his advisers and his sleepless nights. God is in control.

1:9 *Also Vashti the queen made a feast of women **in** the royal house which **belonged** to King Ahasuerus.*

"Also Vashti the queen made a feast of women in the royal house which belonged to King Ahasuerus." Men and women often feasted separately in the Persian court. Vashti hosted the wives of the officials and the women of the palace. Greek historians name Xerxes' queen Amestris, and some think Vashti was another name for her, or a different wife. Scripture does not tell us more about her.

1:10-12 *On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was good with wine, he said to Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served before the face of King Ahasuerus, to bring Vashti the queen before the king with a royal crown, to show the peoples and the officials her beauty, for she **was** good of appearance. And Queen Vashti refused to come at the word of the king which **was** by the hand of the eunuchs; and the king was very angry, and his rage burned in him.*

"On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was good with wine." After a week of drinking, the king was drunk. He sent seven eunuchs, officials who served in the palace, to bring Queen Vashti "before the king with a royal crown, to show the peoples and the officials her beauty, for she was good of appearance."

The king wanted to put his wife on display before a crowd of drunken men, as one more thing to show off, like his gold cups and marble pillars. Many Jewish teachers later thought he meant for her to appear wearing only her crown, but the text does not say that. What it does say is enough: he wanted to parade her beauty before a room full of drinking men.

"And Queen Vashti refused to come at the word of the king." We are not told why. Perhaps she would not be shamed in front of drunken men. Perhaps it was pride, or she was busy with her own guests. The writer does not judge her. But her refusal was a public insult to the king in front of his whole court.

"And the king was very angry, and his rage burned in him." The man who ruled 127 provinces could not rule his own temper. Proverbs says it is better to be "he who rules over his spirit than he who captures a city" (Proverbs 16:32). This king had captured many cities, but he could not control himself.

1:13-15 *And the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for so **was** the manner of the king before all who knew law and judgment, and those near him **were** Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media who saw the face of the king, who sat first in the kingdom), "According to law, what **is one** to do with Queen Vashti, because she has not done the command of King Ahasuerus by the hand of the eunuchs?"*

"And the king said to the wise men who knew the times." These were his advisers, men who knew the law and the customs and perhaps read the stars to find lucky times. Seven of them, "the seven officials of Persia and Media who saw the face of the king, who sat first in the kingdom." They were the inner circle who could come into the king's presence.

The king asked them, "According to law, what is one to do with Queen Vashti, because she has not done the command of King Ahasuerus by the hand of the eunuchs?" He wanted it to look like a legal matter, not just a hurt pride.

1:16-18 *And Memucan said before the king and the officials, "Not against the king alone has Vashti the queen done wrong, but against all the officials and against all the peoples who **are** in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the matter of the queen will go out to all the women, to make their husbands despicable in their eyes, when they say, 'King Ahasuerus said to bring Vashti the queen before him, and she did not come.' And this day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the matter of the queen will say **so** to all the officials of the king, and **there will be** plenty of contempt and anger.*

"And Memucan said before the king and the officials, Not against the king alone has Vashti the queen done wrong, but against all the officials and against all the peoples." Memucan turned one woman's refusal into a danger to the whole empire.

His fear: "the matter of the queen will go out to all the women, to make their husbands despicable in their eyes." If the queen could say no to the king, every wife would feel free to say no to her husband. "And this day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the matter of the queen will say so to all the officials of the king, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger."

Memucan was worried about his own household as much as the king's. He knew the wives of the officials had been at Vashti's feast, and they would talk.

1:19-20 *If **it is** good to the king, let a royal word go out from before him, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Media, and it will not pass away, that Vashti shall not come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royalty to her companion who **is** better than she. And the decree of the king which he will make will be heard in all his kingdom, for it is great, and all the women will give honor to their husbands, from great to small."*

"If it is good to the king, let a royal word go out from before him, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Media, and it will not pass away, that Vashti shall not come before King Ahasuerus."

"It will not pass away." Once a Persian law was written and sealed, even the king could not undo it (Daniel 6:8, 15). This will matter a great deal later in the book, when Haman's decree cannot be undone and a second decree has to be written (8:8).

"And let the king give her royalty to her companion who is better than she." The queen's place was to be given to someone else. Without knowing it, Memucan was opening the door for Esther.

"And all the women will give honor to their husbands, from great to small." Memucan thought a law could make wives honor their husbands. But honor cannot be forced by decree. It is earned by love and character. The Bible's picture is very different: husbands are to love their wives "even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25), and to live with them in an understanding way, giving them honor (1 Peter 3:7).

1:21-22 *And the word was good in the eyes of the king and the officials, and the king did according to the word of Memucan. And he sent letters to all the provinces of the king, to each and every province according to its script, and to each and every people according to its language, for every man to be ruling in his own house and speaking according to the language of his people.*

"And the word was good in the eyes of the king and the officials, and the king did according to the word of Memucan." The king made a huge decision in a drunken rage, on the advice of a man worried about his own wife. That tells us a lot about the king we are dealing with.

"And he sent letters to all the provinces of the king, to each and every province according to its script, and to each and every people according to its language." The Persian Empire had a fast and well-organized system of royal messengers. The decree went out "for every man to be ruling in his own house and speaking according to the language of his people." The man of the house was to rule, and the language spoken at home was to be his. Imagine every family in the empire hearing that the king had lost an argument with his wife. The decree may have made the king look more foolish, not less.

Where is God in this chapter? He is not named. But He is at work. A drunken king, a proud refusal and a foolish law have just opened the door for a young Jewish woman to become queen of Persia. God was preparing the answer to a problem that had not yet even begun. Haman's plot was still nine years away. But God was already making room for Esther. That is how God's providence works. He is often working long before we know we need Him.

Summary

In the days of Ahasuerus, who ruled 127 provinces from India to Cush from his throne in Susa, the king held a feast in his third year for his officials, the army of Persia and Media, and the nobles of the provinces, and for 180 days he displayed the riches and glory of his kingdom. Then he held a seven-day feast in the palace garden for all the people in Susa, with fine hangings, couches of gold and silver, wine served in gold cups without limit, and no one forced to drink. Queen Vashti also held a feast for the women. On the seventh day, merry with wine, the king sent seven eunuchs to bring Vashti before him wearing her royal crown, to show her beauty to the peoples and officials, but she refused, and the king burned with anger. He asked his seven wise counselors what the law said should be done. Memucan answered that Vashti had wronged not only the king but all the officials and peoples, since every wife in the empire would hear of it and despise her husband. He advised the king to issue an unchangeable royal decree that Vashti would never again come before him and that her royal position would be given to someone better, so that all wives would honor their husbands. The king did as Memucan advised and sent letters to every province in its own script and language, declaring that every man should rule his own house.

Study Questions

1. How large was the kingdom of Ahasuerus, and where was his throne? (1:1-2)

2. How long did the king display his riches, and what does that tell us about him? (1:4)

3. What did the king ask of Vashti, and what was his condition at the time? (1:10-11)

4. How did the king react to Vashti's refusal? (1:12)

5. What did Memucan fear would happen if Vashti was not punished? (1:16-18)

6. What does "it will not pass away" mean for a Persian law, and why will that matter later in the book? (1:19; 8:8)

7. God is not named in this chapter. What do you see in it that prepares the way for what God will do?

8. The most powerful man in the world could not rule his own temper. How do you handle anger, and what does Proverbs 16:32 say to you?

9. Memucan thought a law could force honor. How does the Bible teach husbands and wives to honor one another (Ephesians 5:25; 1 Peter 3:7)?

10. God was preparing an answer before the problem came. When have you seen God at work in your life long before you knew you needed Him?

Esther 2: Esther Becomes Queen

Scripture

2:1-11 After these things, when the rage of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. And the young men of the king who served him said, "Let them seek for the king young women, virgins, good of appearance. And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom, and let them gather every young woman, a virgin good of appearance, to Susa the citadel, to the house of the women, into the hand of Hegai the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the women; and let their cosmetics be given. And the young woman who is good in the eyes of the king shall reign in place of Vashti." And the word was good in the eyes of the king, and he did so. A Jewish man was in Susa the citadel, and his name ***was*** Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the exiles who had been taken into exile with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile. And he was bringing up Hadassah, that ***is*** Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had no father or mother; and the young woman ***was*** beautiful of form and good of appearance; and at the death of her father and her mother Mordecai took her for himself as a daughter. And it came about, when the word of the king and his law were heard, and when many young women were gathered to Susa the citadel into the hand of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the house of the king, into the hand of Hegai the keeper of the women. And the young woman was good in his eyes, and she obtained kindness before him; and he hastened her cosmetics and her portions, to give ***them*** to her, and the seven chosen young women, to give ***them*** to her from the house of the king; and he moved her and her young women to the best ***place*** of the house of the women. Esther had not told her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her that she should not tell. And each and every day Mordecai was walking back and forth in front of the court of the house of the women, to know the welfare of Esther and what would be done with her.

2:12-18 And when the turn of each and every young woman arrived to go in to King Ahasuerus, at the end of her having twelve months according to the law of the women (for so the days of their beauty treatments were completed: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with spices and with the cosmetics of the women), then in this ***way*** the young woman went in to the king: all that she said was given to her to go with her from the house of the women to the house of the king. In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, into the hand of Shaashgaz the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the concubines. She did not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and she was called by name. And when the turn of Esther the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for himself as a daughter, arrived to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the women, said. And Esther was obtaining favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal house, in the tenth month, that ***is*** the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness before him more than all the virgins; and he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. And the king made a great feast

for all his officials and his servants, the feast of Esther; and he made a release for the provinces, and he gave gifts according to the hand of the king.

2:19-23 And when virgins were gathered a second ***time***, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king, Esther was not telling her kindred or her people, just as Mordecai had commanded her; and Esther was doing the command of Mordecai, just as when she was in guardianship with him. In those days, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, became angry and sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus. And the matter became known to Mordecai, and he told ***it*** to Esther the queen; and Esther spoke to the king in the name of Mordecai. And the matter was investigated and found ***so***, and the two of them were hanged on a tree; and it was written in the book of the matters of the days before the king.

Preview

Some time later, when the king's anger has cooled, he remembers Vashti. His servants suggest a search through the whole empire for beautiful young virgins, to be brought to the palace in Susa so the king can choose a new queen. Among the young women taken is Hadassah, also called Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her older cousin Mordecai, a Benjamite whose family had been carried into exile from Jerusalem. On Mordecai's advice, Esther does not tell anyone she is a Jew.

Esther wins the favor of Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the women, and of everyone who sees her. After a year of preparation, she is taken to the king, and he loves her more than all the others and makes her queen in place of Vashti. Then, while Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate, he learns of a plot by two of the king's guards to kill the king. He tells Esther, she tells the king in Mordecai's name, the men are hanged, and the matter is written in the king's records. No reward is given. Not yet.

This chapter is hard in places. Esther and many other young women were taken into a pagan king's palace and had no say in what happened to them. We will read it honestly and with care, and we will not judge Esther beyond what the text says.

Study

2:1 *After these things, when the rage of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.*

"After these things, when the rage of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her." Some time had passed. Esther 2:16 tells us Esther came to the king in his seventh year, about four years after the feast of chapter 1. In between, Xerxes had led his great invasion of Greece and lost.

"He remembered Vashti." Perhaps he missed her. Perhaps he regretted his hasty decree. But a Persian law could not be undone. Vashti could not come back. The king was trapped by his own law, a theme that will come back in a much more serious way later in the book.

2:2-4 *And the young men of the king who served him said, "Let them seek for the king young women, virgins, good of appearance. And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom, and let them gather every young woman, a virgin good of appearance, to Susa the citadel, to the house of the women, into the hand of Hegai the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the women; and let their cosmetics be given. And the young woman who is good in the eyes of the king shall reign in place of Vashti." And the word was good in the eyes of the king, and he did so.*

"And the young men of the king who served him said, Let them seek for the king young women, virgins, good of appearance." The king's servants saw that he was unhappy and came up with a plan. Officials would be appointed in every province to "gather every young woman, a virgin good of appearance, to Susa the citadel, to the house of the women." The house of the women was the king's harem, where his wives and concubines lived.

"And the young woman who is good in the eyes of the king shall reign in place of Vashti." The king liked the idea, "and he did so."

We should be honest about what this was. Young women from all over the empire were gathered for the pleasure of the king. They were not asked. Their families were not asked. Most of them would spend one night with the king and then live the rest of their lives in the house of the concubines, a concubine being a wife of lower rank, never to marry anyone else. This was the power of an ancient king, and the Bible does not present it as good. It simply tells us what happened.

2:5-6 *A Jewish man was in Susa the citadel, and his name **was** Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the exiles who had been taken into exile with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile.*

"A Jewish man was in Susa the citadel, and his name was Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite,"

Now the writer brings in the hero. Mordecai is called "a Jewish man," a man of Judah's people, though he was from the tribe of Benjamin. Notice the names in his family line: Shimei and Kish. Kish was the name of King Saul's father (1 Samuel 9:1), and Shimei was a man of Saul's family who cursed David (2 Samuel 16:5). These may be Mordecai's own grandfather and great-grandfather, or the names may point back to Saul's family as famous forefathers. Either way, the writer wants us to know that Mordecai came from the tribe and perhaps the family of King Saul. That will matter in the next chapter, when we meet Haman the Agagite.

"Who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the exiles who had been taken into exile with Jeconiah king of Judah." Jeconiah, also called Jehoiachin, was taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. (2 Kings 24:10-16). That was more than a hundred years before this. So the one "taken into exile" was most likely Kish, Mordecai's great-grandfather, and Mordecai was born in exile. The family had chosen to stay in Persia when others went home.

2:7 *And he was bringing up Hadassah, that **is** Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had no father or mother; and the young woman **was** beautiful of form and good of appearance; and at the death of her father and her mother Mordecai took her for himself as a daughter.*

"And he was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had no father or mother." Esther was an orphan. Her father, Abihail (2:15), was Mordecai's uncle, which made her Mordecai's cousin. Mordecai was much older, and he "took her for himself as a daughter." He raised her as his own child.

She had two names. Hadassah is a Hebrew name meaning myrtle, a fragrant shrub. Esther is a Persian name, likely meaning star. Like Daniel and his friends, who were given Babylonian names (Daniel 1:7), Esther lived in two worlds.

"And the young woman was beautiful of form and good of appearance." Her beauty is what put her in the king's path. God would use it, but it was not her beauty that would save her people. It was her courage.

Think about Mordecai for a moment. He took in an orphan girl and raised her as his daughter. The Bible honors those who care for orphans (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). He could not have known that the little girl he raised would one day save their whole people.

2:8 *And it came about, when the word of the king and his law were heard, and when many young women were gathered to Susa the citadel into the hand of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the house of the king, into the hand of Hegai the keeper of the women.*

"When the word of the king and his law were heard, and when many young women were gathered to Susa the citadel into the hand of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the house of the king."

"Esther was taken." The text uses a passive verb. She did not go to the palace. She was taken. Nothing in the text suggests she volunteered or had a choice. A king's officials had come for the beautiful young women of the land, and a Jewish orphan in a foreign empire had no power to refuse.

How should we think about Esther here? Bible teachers have read her in different ways. Some think she should have resisted, or that she gave up too easily on keeping herself apart as a daughter of Israel. They point to Daniel, who would not eat the king's food (Daniel 1:8). Others point out that she was a young woman with no parents, living under the most powerful king on earth, and that refusing would likely have meant death, for her and maybe for Mordecai. Still others see her as a victim of the king's power, and the story as one where God brings good out of something that was not good.

I believe we must be careful here. The text does not blame Esther, and neither should we. It does not praise how she was brought to the palace either. It tells us she was taken, and then it shows us God at work in a situation she did not choose. Joseph was sold into slavery and later said, "you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Genesis 50:20). God can work His purposes through what others do to us, without approving of what they did.

If you have ever been in a situation where someone with power over you made choices for you, choices you would never have made, Esther's story is not a story of blame. It is a story of a God who sees, who does not leave His children, and who can bring good even out of what was meant for harm.

2:9 *And the young woman was good in his eyes, and she obtained kindness before him; and he hastened her cosmetics and her portions, to give **them** to her, and the seven chosen young women, to give **them** to her from the house of the king; and he moved her and her young women to the best **place** of the house of the women.*

"And the young woman was good in his eyes, and she obtained kindness before him." Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the women, was pleased with Esther. The word for kindness here is hesed, the same word often used for God's steadfast love. God's name is not mentioned, but this is the same kind of favor He gave Joseph in prison (Genesis 39:21) and Daniel before the chief of the eunuchs (Daniel 1:9).

Hegai "hastened her cosmetics and her portions," giving her the beauty treatments and food right away, gave her seven chosen young women from the palace to serve her, "and he moved her and her young women to the best place of the house of the women."

2:10-11 *Esther had not told her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her that she should not tell. And each and every day Mordecai was walking back and forth in front of the court of the house of the women, to know the welfare of Esther and what would be done with her.*

"Esther had not told her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her that she should not tell." Why did Mordecai tell her to keep quiet? We are not told. Perhaps he feared that a Jewish woman would be looked down on or treated badly. Perhaps he sensed danger. As things turned out, it was wise. When Haman's plot came, no one knew the queen was a Jew.

Was it wrong for Esther to hide who she was? The text does not say so. Keeping quiet about her family was not the same as denying her God. And the time would come when she would speak openly, at great risk (7:3-4).

"And each and every day Mordecai was walking back and forth in front of the court of the house of the women, to know the welfare of Esther and what would be done with her." Every single day. Mordecai could not go in, but he would not stop caring. He walked outside the walls and listened for news. That is a father's love. Do the people you love know that you are watching out for them?

2:12-14 *And when the turn of each and every young woman arrived to go in to King Ahasuerus, at the end of her having twelve months according to the law of the women (for so the days of their beauty treatments were completed: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with spices and with the cosmetics of the women), then in this* ***way*** *the young woman went in to the king: all that she said was given to her to go with her from the house of the women to the house of the king. In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, into the hand of Shaashgaz the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the concubines. She did not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and she was called by name.*

"At the end of her having twelve months according to the law of the women." Each young woman spent a full year in preparation: "six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with spices and with the cosmetics of the women." Myrrh was a costly perfumed oil.

"All that she said was given to her to go with her from the house of the women to the house of the king." Each woman could take whatever she wanted with her, clothing or jewels, to make herself more pleasing to the king.

"In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, into the hand of Shaashgaz the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the concubines. She did not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and she was called by name."

The writer says this plainly, without detail, and so will I. After one night with the king, each young woman became a concubine and lived in the second house, often for life, unless the king remembered her and called her by name. It was a lonely life. Many of these women would never be called again.

2:15 *And when the turn of Esther the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for himself as a daughter, arrived to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the women, said. And Esther was obtaining favor in the eyes of all who saw her.*

"And when the turn of Esther the daughter of Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for himself as a daughter, arrived to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai the eunuch of the king, the keeper of the women, said."

Esther did not grab for every jewel and robe she could take. She trusted Hegai's advice. He knew the king, and he knew what would please him. That shows humility and wisdom. She did not try to win by her own cleverness. She listened to counsel (Proverbs 12:15).

"And Esther was obtaining favor in the eyes of all who saw her." Not just the king's, but everyone's. Her character, not only her looks, won people over.

2:16-17 *And Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal house, in the tenth month, that **is** the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness before him more than all the virgins; and he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti.*

"And Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal house, in the tenth month, that is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign." Tebeth is December to January. The seventh year was about 479 B.C. Again the passive: "Esther was taken."

"And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness before him more than all the virgins; and he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti."

Out of all the young women of the empire, the king chose Esther, a Jewish orphan. Did God make that happen? The text does not say. But the rest of the book will make it clear that she was where she was for a reason. Proverbs tells us, "Streams of water is the heart of a king in the hand of the LORD; to all that He desires He turns it" (Proverbs 21:1).

2:18 *And the king made a great feast for all his officials and his servants, the feast of Esther; and he made a release for the provinces, and he gave gifts according to the hand of the king.*

"And the king made a great feast for all his officials and his servants, the feast of Esther." Chapter 1 began with a feast and ended with a queen removed. Chapter 2 ends with a queen crowned and a feast in her honor. "And he made a release for the provinces," most likely a break from taxes or a holiday, "and he gave gifts according to the hand of the king."

2:19-20 *And when virgins were gathered a second **time**, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king, Esther was not telling her kindred or her people, just as Mordecai had commanded her; and Esther was doing the command of Mordecai, just as when she was in guardianship with him.*

"And when virgins were gathered a second time, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king." We are not sure what this second gathering was. Perhaps more young women were still being brought in. What matters is where Mordecai was: "sitting at the gate of the king." The gate was where officials did business and judges heard cases (Ruth 4:1; Daniel 2:49). Mordecai likely held some post there, perhaps given to him after Esther became queen.

"Esther was not telling her kindred or her people, just as Mordecai had commanded her; and Esther was doing the command of Mordecai, just as when she was in guardianship with him." Even as queen, Esther still listened to the man who raised her. Power did not make her proud. She honored her father's counsel, as Scripture teaches (Exodus 20:12; Proverbs 1:8).

2:21-23 *In those days, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, became angry and sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus. And the matter became known to Mordecai, and he told **it** to Esther the queen; and Esther spoke to the king in the name of Mordecai. And the matter was investigated and found **so**, and the two of them were hanged on a tree; and it was written in the book of the matters of the days before the king.*

"In those days, and Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the king, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, became angry and sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus." Two of the men who guarded the doors of the king's private rooms planned to kill him. These men were trusted with the king's life, which made them the most dangerous of traitors. Xerxes was in fact killed in a palace plot about fourteen years later, in 465 B.C.

"And the matter became known to Mordecai." How? We are not told. He was in the right place at the right time. "And he told it to Esther the queen; and Esther spoke to the king in the name of Mordecai." Esther gave Mordecai the credit.

"And the matter was investigated and found so, and the two of them were hanged on a tree." Hanging on a tree in Persia most likely meant being impaled on a wooden stake, or the body hung up after death, as a public warning.

"And it was written in the book of the matters of the days before the king." Mordecai saved the king's life, and it was written down. But he was given no reward. That seems unfair. Why would God let a good deed go unrewarded? Wait until chapter 6. God had a better time in mind. Sometimes God lets a good deed sit unnoticed for years, because He plans to use it at just the right moment.

Have you ever done something right and been forgotten? God does not forget. It is written down, and He will bring it out at His time.

Summary

When the king's anger had cooled, he remembered Vashti and the decree against her, and his servants proposed gathering beautiful young virgins from every province to the harem in Susa under Hegai, the king's eunuch, so that the one who pleased the king could become queen; the king agreed. In Susa lived Mordecai, a Benjamite descended from Kish, whose family had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with King Jeconiah. He had raised his orphaned cousin Hadassah, also called Esther, as his own daughter, and she was very beautiful. Esther was taken into the king's palace with many other young women, and she pleased Hegai and won his kindness, so that he gave her beauty treatments, food, seven attendants and the best place in the harem. On Mordecai's command, she did not reveal her people or family, and every day Mordecai walked near the court of the harem to learn how she was. Each young woman had twelve months of beauty treatments and then went in to the king for one night, returning afterward to the house of the concubines, not to go to him again unless he called her by name. When Esther's turn came, she asked for nothing beyond what Hegai advised, and she won the favor of all who saw her. She

was taken to the king in the tenth month of his seventh year, and he loved her more than all the others, set the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. He held a great feast in her honor, gave a release to the provinces and gave gifts. While Mordecai sat at the king's gate, and Esther still kept her background secret as he had told her, two of the king's doorkeepers, Bigthan and Teresh, plotted to kill the king. Mordecai learned of it and told Esther, who told the king in Mordecai's name. The plot was confirmed, the two men were hanged on a tree, and the account was written in the king's chronicles.

Study Questions

1. What plan did the king's servants suggest to find a new queen? (2:2-4)

2. What do we learn about Mordecai's family and about how Esther came to live with him? (2:5-7)

3. How does the text describe the way Esther came to the palace? Why does that matter? (2:8)

4. How did Esther win favor with Hegai and with everyone who saw her? (2:9, 15)

5. What did Mordecai command Esther, and how did she respond even after she became queen? (2:10, 20)

6. What did Mordecai do every day while Esther was in the harem? (2:11)

7. How did Mordecai save the king's life, and what happened to the record of it? (2:21-23)

8. Esther was placed in a situation she did not choose. How have you seen God work in a situation you did not choose?

9. Mordecai took in an orphan and raised her as his own. Who in your life needs someone to care for them the way Mordecai cared for Esther?

10. Mordecai's good deed went unrewarded for years. How do you respond when you do right and no one notices?

Esther 3: Haman's Plot Against the Jews

Scripture

3:1-6 After these things King Ahasuerus made Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite great, and he exalted him and set his seat above all the officials who ***were*** with him. And all the servants of the king who ***were*** at the gate of the king were kneeling and bowing down to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. And Mordecai did not kneel and did not bow down. And the servants of the king who ***were*** at the gate of the king said to Mordecai, "Why are you transgressing the commandment of the king?" And it came about, when they spoke to him each and every day and he did not listen to them, that they told Haman, to see whether the words of Mordecai would stand; for he had told them that he ***was*** a Jew. And Haman saw that Mordecai was not kneeling and bowing down to him, and Haman was filled ***with*** rage. And he disdained in his eyes to stretch out a hand against Mordecai alone, for they had told him the people of Mordecai; and Haman sought to annihilate all the Jews who ***were*** in all the kingdom of Ahasuerus, the people of Mordecai.

3:7-15 In the first month, that ***is*** the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, ***one*** cast Pur, that ***is*** the lot, before Haman from day to day and from month to month, ***to the*** twelfth ***month***, that ***is*** the month of Adar. And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is one people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws ***are*** different from every people, and the laws of the king they are not doing; and for the king it is not fitting to let them remain. If ***it is*** good to the king, let it be written to destroy them; and I will weigh out approximately 750,000 pounds (ten thousand talents) of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring ***it*** into the treasuries of the king." And the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, "The silver ***is*** given to you, and the people, to do with it as ***is*** good in your eyes." And the scribes of the king were summoned in the first month, on the thirteenth day of it, and it was written according to all that Haman commanded to the satraps of the king and to the governors who ***were*** over each and every province, and to the officials of each and every people, to each and every province according to its script and each and every people according to its language. In the name of King Ahasuerus it was written, and it was sealed with the signet ring of the king. And letters were sent by the hand of the runners to all the provinces of the king, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy all the Jews, from young to old, little ones and women, on one day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, that ***is*** the month of Adar, and to plunder their spoil. A copy of the writing, to be given ***as*** law in each and every province, ***was*** disclosed to all the peoples, to be ready for this day. The runners went out, hurried by the word of the king, and the law was given in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Susa was in confusion.

Preview

Some years pass. The king promotes a man named Haman, an Agagite, above all his officials, and commands everyone at the king's gate to bow down to him. Everyone does, except Mordecai. Day after day the other servants ask him why, and he tells them he is a Jew. When Haman sees that

Mordecai will not bow, he is filled with rage. But killing one man is not enough for him. He decides to destroy all of Mordecai's people, every Jew in the empire.

Haman casts the lot, called pur, to find the right day, and it falls on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, almost a year away. Then he goes to the king with a half-truth: there is a certain people scattered through your kingdom whose laws are different and who do not keep the king's laws. He offers to pay a huge sum of silver into the king's treasury if the king will let him destroy them. The king hands Haman his signet ring and lets him do as he pleases. Letters go out to every province: on one day, kill all the Jews, young and old, women and children, and take their goods. Then the king and Haman sit down to drink, while the city of Susa is thrown into confusion.

Study

3:1 *After these things King Ahasuerus made Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite great, and he exalted him and set his seat above all the officials who **were** with him.*

"After these things King Ahasuerus made Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite great, and he exalted him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him." About four or five years have passed since Esther became queen (compare 2:16 and 3:7). Haman became the king's chief official, second only to the king himself.

Notice what we would have expected. Mordecai had just saved the king's life (2:21-23). We would expect Mordecai to be promoted. Instead, it is Haman. That seems unfair. But the story is not over.

"The Agagite." This word is the key to the chapter. Agag was the king of the Amalekites in the days of King Saul. The Amalekites were Israel's oldest enemy. They attacked Israel in the wilderness, picking off the weak and weary at the back of the line (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). The LORD would have war with Amalek "from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16). Centuries later, God commanded Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely, but Saul spared King Agag and the best of the animals (1 Samuel 15:1-9). For that disobedience God rejected Saul as king (1 Samuel 15:23). Samuel himself then put Agag to death (1 Samuel 15:32-33).

Now, more than five hundred years later, a descendant of Agag stands against a descendant of Kish, from the family of Saul (2:5). The old war has come back. What Saul failed to finish, his descendant Mordecai will face.

3:2-4 *And all the servants of the king who **were** at the gate of the king were kneeling and bowing down to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. And Mordecai did not kneel and did not bow down. And the servants of the king who **were** at the gate of the king said to Mordecai, "Why are you transgressing the commandment of the king?" And it came about, when they spoke to him each and every day and he did not listen to them, that they told Haman, to see whether the words of Mordecai would stand; for he had told them that he **was** a Jew.*

"And all the servants of the king who were at the gate of the king were kneeling and bowing down to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. And Mordecai did not kneel and did not bow down."

Why would Mordecai not bow? The Bible does not forbid all bowing. Abraham bowed to the Hittites (Genesis 23:7), and David bowed to Saul (1 Samuel 24:8). Bowing to show respect to a ruler was normal. So why did Mordecai refuse?

The text gives us one clue: "he had told them that he was a Jew." His refusal had something to do with his being a Jew. There are two main views. Some think the Persians treated their kings and high officials almost as gods, and bowing to Haman would have been a kind of worship that a Jew could not give to anyone but God, as Daniel's friends would not bow to the golden image (Daniel 3:12-18). Others think it was because Haman was an Agagite, an Amalekite, the enemy God had cursed, and no son of Israel would bow to an Amalekite. Both may be true. Either way, Mordecai's refusal was a matter of conscience, tied to his faith.

"And the servants of the king who were at the gate of the king said to Mordecai, Why are you transgressing the commandment of the king?" They asked him "each and every day," and "he did not listen to them." Every day the pressure came, and every day Mordecai stood firm.

"They told Haman, to see whether the words of Mordecai would stand." They wanted to see if his reason, that he was a Jew, would be accepted.

Standing firm for God every day, when everyone around you bends, is hard. But that is what faith often looks like. Not one great moment, but daily faithfulness when no one else is standing with you.

3:5-6 *And Haman saw that Mordecai was not kneeling and bowing down to him, and Haman was filled **with** rage. And he disdained in his eyes to stretch out a hand against Mordecai alone, for they had told him the people of Mordecai; and Haman sought to annihilate all the Jews who **were** in all the kingdom of Ahasuerus, the people of Mordecai.*

"And Haman saw that Mordecai was not kneeling and bowing down to him, and Haman was filled with rage." Haman had all the honor the empire could give, and one man's refusal to bow drove him into a fury. Pride is like that. It is never satisfied. One person who will not give it what it wants is enough to ruin everything else (5:13).

"And he disdained in his eyes to stretch out a hand against Mordecai alone, for they had told him the people of Mordecai; and Haman sought to annihilate all the Jews who were in all the kingdom of Ahasuerus, the people of Mordecai."

Killing Mordecai was beneath him. He wanted to kill them all. His hatred was not just for one man, but for a whole people. This is the first recorded plan to wipe out every Jew everywhere, and sadly not the last. Pharaoh had tried to kill Israel's sons (Exodus 1:22). Through the centuries many others have tried. Behind them all, the Bible shows us an enemy who has always hated the people through whom God would bring the Savior (Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17).

But God had made a promise to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who disdains you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). Haman was about to learn what that means.

3:7 *In the first month, that **is** the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, **one** cast Pur, that **is** the lot, before Haman from day to day and from month to month, **to the** twelfth **month**, that **is** the month of Adar.*

"In the first month, that is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus." Nisan is March to April. The twelfth year was 474 B.C. "One cast Pur, that is the lot, before Haman from day to day and from month to month." The Persians and Babylonians used lots, small stones or clay pieces marked with signs, to find the lucky day for an important act. Haman's advisers cast lots day by day and month by month to see which day the gods would favor.

The lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar, February to March, almost a full year later. Haman would have to wait eleven months.

Who decided where the lot fell? Haman thought it was his gods, or fate. But Proverbs says, "Into the lap the lot is thrown, and from the LORD is its every judgment" (Proverbs 16:33). God controlled the lot. And by making it fall almost a year away, He gave His people eleven months to be saved. The very lot Haman trusted became the gift of time God gave to the Jews. The feast of Purim takes its name from this lot (9:24-26).

3:8-9 *And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is one people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws **are** different from every people, and the laws of the king they are not doing; and for the king it is not fitting to let them remain. If **it is** good to the king, let it be written to destroy them; and I will weigh out approximately 750,000 pounds (ten thousand talents) of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring **it** into the treasuries of the king."*

"And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, There is one people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are different from every people, and the laws of the king they are not doing; and for the king it is not fitting to let them remain."

Look at how clever and how wicked this is. Haman did not name the people. The king never asked who they were. He mixed truth with lies. It was true that the Jews were "scattered and separated." It was true that "their laws are different," because they followed God's Law. But it was a lie that they did not keep the king's laws. One man had refused to bow, and Haman turned that into a whole people in rebellion.

This is how hatred of God's people has often worked. Take one true thing, that they are different, and twist it into a reason to destroy them. Jesus warned His followers that the world would hate them because they do not belong to the world (John 15:18-19).

"If it is good to the king, let it be written to destroy them." Then Haman offered to pay "ten thousand talents" of silver into the king's treasury. A talent was about 75 pounds, so this was around 375 tons of silver, a huge fortune, perhaps two-thirds of the empire's yearly income. Haman may have planned to take it from the goods of the Jews who were killed (3:13). He was buying a people's death.

3:10-11 *And the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, "The silver **is** given to you, and the people, to do with it as **is** good in your eyes."*

"And the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews." The signet ring carried the king's seal. Whatever was sealed with it had the king's full authority. The king handed Haman the power to write any law he wished.

Here the writer gives Haman his title for the rest of the book: "the adversary of the Jews." An adversary is an enemy, one who opposes. The name Satan carries the same idea; it means the adversary.

"And the king said to Haman, The silver is given to you, and the people, to do with it as is good in your eyes." The king did not even want the money, or perhaps this was a polite way of saying yes, as in Genesis 23:11-16. He did not ask who the people were. He did not ask for proof. He simply signed away a whole people's lives without a second thought. A leader who does not care enough to ask questions can do great evil.

3:12-13 *And the scribes of the king were summoned in the first month, on the thirteenth day of it, and it was written according to all that Haman commanded to the satraps of the king and to the governors who **were** over each and every province, and to the officials of each and every people, to each and every province according to its script and each and every people according to its language. In the name of King Ahasuerus it was written, and it was sealed with the signet ring of the king. And letters were sent by the hand of the runners to all the provinces of the king, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy all the Jews, from young to old, little ones and women, on one day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, that **is** the month of Adar, and to plunder their spoil.*

"And the scribes of the king were summoned in the first month, on the thirteenth day of it." The decree was written the day after the lot was cast. Notice the date: the thirteenth of Nisan. The next day, the fourteenth of Nisan, was the Passover (Exodus 12:6), the feast when Israel remembered how God saved them from death in Egypt. As the Jews of the empire began to keep the Passover that year, the order for their death was going out.

It was written "to the satraps of the king and to the governors" and officials, the rulers of every province, in every script and language. "In the name of King Ahasuerus it was written, and it was sealed with the signet ring of the king." Once sealed, it could not be undone (1:19; 8:8).

"And letters were sent by the hand of the runners to all the provinces of the king, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy all the Jews, from young to old, little ones and women, on one day." Three words pile up: annihilate, kill, destroy. Not one Jew was to be left. Not the old, not the young, not the women, not the children. And the killers could "plunder their spoil," take everything the Jews owned. That made it a reward for anyone who joined in.

3:14-15 *A copy of the writing, to be given **as** law in each and every province, **was** disclosed to all the peoples, to be ready for this day. The runners went out, hurried by the word of the king, and the law was given in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Susa was in confusion.*

"A copy of the writing, to be given as law in each and every province, was disclosed to all the peoples, to be ready for this day." The decree was made public everywhere, nearly a year ahead, so that the enemies of the Jews could get ready.

"The runners went out, hurried by the word of the king, and the law was given in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Susa was in confusion."

This is one of the coldest lines in the Bible. The king and Haman sat down to drink. They had just ordered the death of a whole people, and they relaxed over wine. Meanwhile, "the city of Susa was in confusion." Even the ordinary people of the capital, many of them not Jews, were shocked. What kind of government orders the death of its own neighbors? Who would be next?

Where is God in this chapter? Again, He is not named. The darkness is very deep. A powerful enemy has the king's ring, the king does not care, and the day of death has been set. But God has already placed Esther on the throne (chapter 2). He has already let Mordecai's good deed be written in the king's book. And He has made the lot fall eleven months away. The enemy has made his plans. God made His first.

Summary

After this, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite and set him above all the officials, and the king commanded all his servants at the king's gate to kneel and bow down to him. Mordecai would not kneel or bow. When the servants asked him day after day why he disobeyed the king's command and he would not listen, they told Haman, because Mordecai had told them he was a Jew. Haman was filled with rage, and since he scorned to kill only Mordecai, he set out to destroy all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the kingdom. In the first month of the king's twelfth year, the lot, called pur, was cast before Haman day by day and month by month, and it fell on the twelfth month. Haman told the king that a certain people, scattered and separate throughout the provinces, had laws different from all others and did not obey the king's laws, so it was not in the king's interest to let them remain. He asked for a decree to destroy them and offered ten thousand talents of silver for the king's treasury. The king gave Haman his signet

ring and told him to keep the silver and do with the people as he pleased. On the thirteenth day of the first month, the king's scribes wrote Haman's orders to the satraps, governors and officials of every province in its own script and language, in the king's name and sealed with his ring. Couriers carried letters to every province with orders to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, women and children, on a single day, the thirteenth of the twelfth month, and to plunder their goods. The decree was published to all peoples so they would be ready, and while the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Study Questions

1. Who was Haman, and what does "the Agagite" tell us about him? (3:1; 1 Samuel 15:8-9, 32-33)

2. What did the king command concerning Haman, and what did Mordecai do? (3:2)

3. What reason did Mordecai give the servants for not bowing? (3:4)

4. Why was Haman not satisfied with killing only Mordecai? (3:5-6)

5. How did Haman decide on the day, and what does Proverbs 16:33 say about that? (3:7)

6. What half-truths and lies did Haman tell the king? (3:8)

7. What did the king and Haman do after the decree went out, and how did the city respond? (3:15)

8. Mordecai stood firm every day while others bowed. Where are you being pressured to go along with something you know is wrong?

9. Haman's pride could not stand one man who would not honor him. Is there someone whose lack of approval eats at you? How can you let it go?

10. The king signed away a whole people without asking a single question. What can we learn about taking responsibility for decisions that affect others?

Esther 4: For Such a Time as This

Scripture

4:1-9 And Mordecai knew all that had been done, and Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and he went out into the midst of the city and cried a loud and bitter cry. And he went as far as before the gate of the king, for ***one is*** not to go into the gate of the king in clothing of sackcloth. And in each and every province, ***in*** the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching, ***there was*** great mourning among the Jews, and fasting and weeping and wailing; sackcloth and ashes were spread ***as a bed*** for many. And the young women of Esther and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was greatly distressed; and she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and to remove his sackcloth from him, and he did not accept ***them***. And Esther summoned Hathach, ***one*** of the eunuchs of the king whom he had stationed before her, and she commanded him concerning Mordecai, to know what this ***was*** and why this ***was***. And Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the open square of the city which ***was*** before the gate of the king. And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of the silver which Haman had said to weigh out to the treasuries of the king for the Jews, to destroy them. And the copy of the writing of the law which had been given in Susa to annihilate them he gave to him, to show Esther and to tell her, and to command her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to make request before him for her people. And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

4:10-17 And Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him ***to say*** to Mordecai, "All the servants of the king and the people of the provinces of the king know that every man or woman who goes to the king into the inner court, who is not summoned, his law ***is*** one: to put ***him*** to death, apart from ***one*** to whom the king extends the golden scepter, and he will live. And I have not been summoned to go in to the king these thirty days." And they told Mordecai the words of Esther. And Mordecai said to bring back to Esther, "Do not imagine in your soul to escape ***in*** the house of the king more than all the Jews. For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" And Esther said to bring back to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day. Also I and my young women will fast likewise; and so I will go in to the king, which ***is*** not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish." And Mordecai passed on and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Preview

When Mordecai learns of Haman's decree, he tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes, and walks through the city crying out loud and bitter cries. In every province where the decree arrives, the Jews mourn, fast, weep and wail. Esther, inside the palace, hears that Mordecai is in sackcloth and sends him clothes, but he refuses them. So she sends a trusted eunuch, Hathach, to find out what is wrong. Mordecai tells him everything, gives him a copy of the decree, and sends word that Esther must go to the king and plead for her people.

Esther answers that anyone who goes to the king without being called is put to death, unless the king holds out his golden scepter, and she has not been called for thirty days. Mordecai's reply is one of the most famous lines in the Bible: if you keep silent, deliverance will come from another place, but you and your father's house will perish, "and who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" Esther decides. She asks all the Jews in Susa to fast for her for three days, and she and her maids will fast too. Then she will go to the king, against the law, "and as I perish, I perish."

Study

4:1-3 *And Mordecai knew all that had been done, and Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and he went out into the midst of the city and cried a loud and bitter cry. And he went as far as before the gate of the king, for* ***one is*** *not to go into the gate of the king in clothing of sackcloth. And in each and every province,* ***in*** *the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching,* ***there was*** *great mourning among the Jews, and fasting and weeping and wailing; sackcloth and ashes were spread* ***as a bed*** *for many.*

"And Mordecai knew all that had been done." Mordecai, sitting at the king's gate, knew what was in the decree, and he likely knew it was because of him. "And Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes." Tearing clothes and wearing sackcloth and ashes were the signs of deep grief and humbling before God (Genesis 37:34; Jonah 3:6; Daniel 9:3).

"He went out into the midst of the city and cried a loud and bitter cry." Mordecai did not grieve quietly. He went public. He wanted everyone to know that something terrible had been done.

"And he went as far as before the gate of the king, for one is not to go into the gate of the king in clothing of sackcloth." No one was allowed to bring sorrow into the king's presence. The palace was a place of pleasure and power, and no grief was allowed to spoil it. Mordecai stood right at the edge, as close as he could come.

"And in each and every province, in the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting and weeping and wailing; sackcloth and ashes were spread as a bed for many." All across the empire, as the runners arrived, the Jews heard that they had less than a year to live. They mourned and fasted.

Fasting in the Bible almost always goes with prayer (Ezra 8:21-23; Nehemiah 1:4; Joel 2:12-13). The book does not say they prayed. God's name is still not spoken. But who were they fasting before? Who were they crying out to? The writer does not need to tell us. Every Jewish reader knew.

4:4-5 *And the young women of Esther and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was greatly distressed; and she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and to remove his sackcloth from him, and he did not accept* ***them****. And Esther summoned Hathach,* ***one*** *of the eunuchs of the king whom he had stationed before her, and she commanded him concerning Mordecai, to know what this* ***was*** *and why this* ***was****.*

"And the young women of Esther and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was greatly distressed." Esther did not yet know about the decree. Inside the palace, she was cut off from the news. She knew only that Mordecai was in sackcloth at the gate.

"She sent garments to clothe Mordecai and to remove his sackcloth from him, and he did not accept them." Perhaps she wanted him to be able to come into the gate, or perhaps she was just trying to comfort him. But Mordecai would not take off his sackcloth. New clothes would not fix the problem.

"And Esther summoned Hathach, one of the eunuchs of the king whom he had stationed before her, and she commanded him concerning Mordecai, to know what this was and why this was." If clothes would not help, Esther wanted to know the real problem.

4:6-9 *And Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the open square of the city which* ***was*** *before the gate of the king. And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of the silver which Haman had said to weigh out to the treasuries of the king for the Jews, to destroy them. And the copy of the writing of the law which had been given in Susa to annihilate them he gave to him, to show Esther and to tell her, and to command her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to make request before him for her people. And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.*

"And Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the open square of the city which was before the gate of the king." Hathach was trusted by both of them. He carried every message back and forth in this chapter.

"And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of the silver which Haman had said to weigh out to the treasuries of the king for the Jews, to destroy them." Mordecai knew the whole story, even the price Haman had offered. The Jews had been sold, with a price on their heads.

"And the copy of the writing of the law which had been given in Susa to annihilate them he gave to him, to show Esther." Mordecai gave Esther proof. She would need to see it with her own eyes.

"And to command her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to make request before him for her people." For the first time, the phrase "her people" is used. Esther had kept her people a secret on Mordecai's orders (2:10, 20). Now Mordecai told her that the time for secrets was over. She must go to the king and plead for her people, which meant telling him she was one of them.

"And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai."

4:10-12 *And Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him **to say** to Mordecai, "All the servants of the king and the people of the provinces of the king know that every man or woman who goes to the king into the inner court, who is not summoned, his law **is** one: to put **him** to death, apart from **one** to whom the king extends the golden scepter, and he will live. And I have not been summoned to go in to the king these thirty days." And they told Mordecai the words of Esther.*

Esther sent her answer back. "All the servants of the king and the people of the provinces of the king know that every man or woman who goes to the king into the inner court, who is not summoned, his law is one: to put him to death, apart from one to whom the king extends the golden scepter, and he will live."

This was not an excuse. It was the law, and everyone knew it. The Persian kings guarded themselves closely, partly for safety and partly for majesty. Anyone who came in without being called would be killed on the spot, unless the king held out his golden scepter as a sign of mercy. Remember that two of the king's own doorkeepers had recently tried to kill him (2:21). He would not be in a forgiving mood toward surprise visitors.

"And I have not been summoned to go in to the king these thirty days." This made it worse. The king had not called for her in a month. Had she lost his favor? If even Vashti could be put away for saying no, what might happen to a queen who came uninvited?

Esther's fear was real and reasonable. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is doing what is right while you are afraid.

"And they told Mordecai the words of Esther."

4:13 *And Mordecai said to bring back to Esther, "Do not imagine in your soul to escape **in** the house of the king more than all the Jews.*

"And Mordecai said to bring back to Esther, Do not imagine in your soul to escape in the house of the king more than all the Jews."

Mordecai's answer was blunt. Do not think the palace will save you. The decree said all the Jews. Esther was a Jew. Sooner or later, someone would find out, and Haman of all people would be glad to see the queen fall. Her crown would not protect her. Silence would not save her.

4:14 *For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?"*

"For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?"

This is the key verse of the book. Let us look at it closely, one part at a time.

"For if you indeed keep silent at this time." Mordecai named the choice in front of her. Not to act was also a choice. If she said nothing, that would be her answer.

"Relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place." This is a statement of faith. Mordecai was sure the Jews would be saved, with or without Esther. Why was he so sure? He does not say. But the only reason a Jew could be that confident, with a royal decree of death already sealed, was that he believed God's promises. God had promised Abraham that his seed would be a great nation and that through it all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3). God had promised David an everlasting throne (2 Samuel 7:16). The prophets had promised that God would never make a complete end of His people (Jeremiah 30:11; 31:35-37). If Haman's plan worked, all of those promises would fail. Mordecai knew they would not fail.

"From another place." Many Bible teachers believe this is the closest the book comes to naming God. In later Jewish writing, "the Place" became a way to speak of God without saying His name. Whether or not Mordecai meant it that way, the point is the same. Help would come, because God would see to it.

"And you and the house of your father will perish." This is the warning. God's plan would go forward, but Esther would miss her part in it, and she and her family would not escape. God does not need any one of us. But when He calls us and we refuse, we are the ones who lose.

"And who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?"

This is the heart of it. Why had an orphan girl from a family of exiles become queen of Persia? Was it luck? Was it her beauty? Mordecai asks her to look at it another way. Perhaps God had put her on the throne for exactly this moment.

Look back at what we have seen. A queen was put away at just the right time (chapter 1). Out of all the young women in the empire, a Jewish girl was chosen (chapter 2). She had kept her people a secret, so no one suspected her (2:10, 20). And she became queen about five years before Haman's plot. None of that was an accident. This is what the Bible calls providence: God's wise and loving control over all things, working through ordinary events and ordinary people to carry out His plans.

Notice that Mordecai says "who knows." He did not claim to know God's plan for certain. He did not have a word from a prophet. He simply looked at what had happened and asked Esther to consider that God might have put her there on purpose. That is often how God guides us too. We do not hear a voice. We look at where He has placed us, what He has given us, and what need is in front of us, and we ask, Is this why I am here?

Here is what this verse teaches us.

First, God is always at work, even when He seems silent. There was no prophet in Persia, no miracle, no voice from heaven. Yet God was arranging every detail. If you are going through a time when God seems far away and quiet, Esther's story is for you. He has not left. He is working in ways you cannot see yet (Romans 8:28).

Second, God's plans do not depend on us, but He invites us to be part of them. Deliverance would come "from another place" if Esther refused. God is never stuck. But He gives us the honor of being His tools, and when we say no, we miss the blessing.

Third, where God has placed you matters. Esther was queen. Nehemiah was cupbearer. Joseph was in Pharaoh's house. Daniel was in Babylon's court. Where has God placed you? Your job, your family, your neighborhood, your friendships, your gifts? "For a time like this" may be true of you too. Not in such a dramatic way, perhaps. But God puts His people in places for a reason, so that they can do good and speak up for what is right.

Fourth, silence is sometimes sin. Esther could have stayed quiet and safe for a while. Many people stay quiet when they see evil done to others because speaking up is dangerous. Proverbs tells us to rescue those being taken away to death (Proverbs 24:11-12). Is there someone who needs you to speak up for them?

4:15-16 *And Esther said to bring back to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day. Also I and my young women will fast likewise; and so I will go in to the king, which* ***is*** *not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish."*

Esther's answer: "Go, gather all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day."

Esther did not answer with a plan or a speech. She answered with a call to fast. And fasting, as we saw, always goes with prayer. Again, God is not named, but who were the Jews of Susa going to fast before, if not the God of Israel? Esther knew she could not do this in her own strength. She needed her people to seek God for her.

Notice also that it was a total fast: no food and no water, for three days. That was a desperate fast for a desperate time.

"Also I and my young women will fast likewise." Esther would not ask others to do what she would not do herself. Her maids, who may not even have been Jews, would fast with her.

"And so I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and as I perish, I perish."

Here is Esther's turning point. The frightened young woman of verse 11 became the brave queen of verse 16. She did not know how it would end. She knew she might die. But she decided to go anyway. "As I perish, I perish" does not mean she had given up. It means she had settled it. She would do what was right and leave the outcome with God.

This is what faith looks like. Not certainty about how things will turn out, but trust in God enough to obey when you do not know. Daniel's three friends said almost the same thing before the furnace: our God is able to deliver us, but even if He does not, we will not bow (Daniel 3:17-18).

And this points us to Jesus. Esther was willing to risk her life to go before the king for her people, who were under a sentence of death. Jesus did not just risk His life. He gave it. In the garden He

prayed, "not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42), and He went to the cross for a people under the sentence of death. And now He stands before the Father for us, and He always lives to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25).

4:17 *And Mordecai passed on and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.*

"And Mordecai passed on and did according to all that Esther had commanded him." The tables have turned in this chapter. At the start, Mordecai gave Esther commands (4:8). At the end, Esther gives the commands and Mordecai obeys. The orphan girl had become the queen who would lead her people.

Summary

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city crying loudly and bitterly, as far as the king's gate, which no one could enter in sackcloth. In every province the decree reached, the Jews mourned with fasting, weeping and wailing, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's maids and eunuchs told her about Mordecai, she was greatly distressed and sent him clothes, but he refused them. She sent Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, to find out what was wrong. Mordecai told him everything, including the exact amount of silver Haman had promised for the destruction of the Jews, and gave him a copy of the decree to show Esther, with the command that she go to the king and plead for her people. Esther replied that anyone who approached the king in the inner court without being called was put to death unless the king held out his golden scepter, and that she had not been called in thirty days. Mordecai answered that she should not think she would escape in the palace any more than the other Jews; if she kept silent, relief and deliverance would come for the Jews from another place, but she and her father's house would perish, and who knew whether she had come to the kingdom for such a time as this. Esther told Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa to fast for her for three days and nights without food or drink, while she and her maids fasted too; then she would go to the king, though it was against the law, and if she perished, she perished. Mordecai went and did all that Esther had commanded him.

Study Questions

1. How did Mordecai and the Jews of the provinces respond to Haman's decree? (4:1-3)

2. Why do you think Mordecai refused the clothes Esther sent? (4:4)

3. What did Mordecai send to Esther, and what did he tell her to do? (4:7-8)

4. Why was Esther afraid to go to the king? (4:11)

5. What three things did Mordecai say in verse 14?

6. What did Esther ask the Jews of Susa to do before she went to the king, and what does that show about her faith? (4:16)

7. How had the roles of Mordecai and Esther changed by the end of the chapter? (4:8, 17)

8. Esther's courage came after real fear. What are you afraid to do that you know is right?

9. Mordecai asked, "who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" Where has God placed you, and what might He want you to do there?

10. Esther asked others to fast with her before she acted. Who stands with you in prayer when you face something hard, and whom could you stand with?

Esther 5: Esther Goes In to the King

Scripture

5:1-8 And it came about on the third day, that Esther put on royalty and stood in the inner court of the house of the king, in front of the house of the king; and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal house, in front of the entrance of the house. And it came about, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, ***that*** she obtained favor in his eyes; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which ***was*** in his hand, and Esther drew near and touched the top of the scepter. And the king said to her, "What ***is it*** to you, Queen Esther? And what ***is*** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be given to you." And Esther said, "If ***it is*** good to the king, let the king and Haman come today to the feast which I have made for him." And the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, to do the word of Esther." And the king and Haman came to the feast which Esther had made. And the king said to Esther at the feast of wine, "What ***is*** your petition? And it shall be given to you. And what ***is*** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be done." And Esther answered and said, "My petition and my request ***is***: if I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if ***it is*** good to the king to grant my petition and to do my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast which I will make for them, and tomorrow I will do according to the word of the king."

5:9-14 And Haman went out on that day joyful and good of heart; and when Haman saw Mordecai at the gate of the king, and he did not stand up and did not tremble before him, Haman was filled ***with*** rage against Mordecai. And Haman restrained himself and went to his house, and he sent and brought his friends and Zeresh his wife. And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches and the multitude of his sons, and all that ***with which*** the king had made him great, and how he had exalted him above the officials and the servants of the king. And Haman said, "Also Queen Esther let no one come with the king to the feast which she had prepared except me; and also tomorrow I am invited by her with the king. And all this is not sufficient for me every time that I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the gate of the king." And Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, "Let them make a tree approximately 75 feet (fifty cubits) high, and in the morning speak to the king, and let them hang Mordecai on it; and go with the king to the feast joyful." And the word was good before Haman, and he made the tree.

Preview

On the third day of the fast, Esther puts on her royal robes and stands in the inner court of the palace, where the king can see her from his throne. It is the moment of life or death. The king sees her, and she wins his favor. He holds out the golden scepter, and she comes near and touches it. "What is your request?" he asks. "Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be given to you." Esther does not tell him yet. She simply invites the king and Haman to a banquet she has prepared. At the banquet, the king asks again, and again Esther waits. She invites them to a second banquet the next day, where she promises to give her answer.

Haman leaves the first banquet walking on air. Then he sees Mordecai at the king's gate, who will not stand up or tremble before him, and his joy turns to rage. At home, he boasts to his wife and

friends of his riches, his sons, his honors and his invitation from the queen, and then admits that none of it satisfies him as long as he sees Mordecai the Jew sitting at the gate. His wife Zeresh and his friends suggest he build a tall tree, a gallows, and ask the king in the morning to hang Mordecai on it. Haman likes the idea and has it built that night.

Study

5:1 *And it came about on the third day, that Esther put on royalty and stood in the inner court of the house of the king, in front of the house of the king; and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal house, in front of the entrance of the house.*

"And it came about on the third day, that Esther put on royalty." The three days of fasting were over, or at least the third day had come. Esther put on her royal robes. She did not go before the king in sackcloth. She went as his queen.

"And stood in the inner court of the house of the king, in front of the house of the king; and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal house, in front of the entrance of the house." Picture it. The king on his throne inside the great hall, looking out through the entrance. Esther standing in the court, in full view, uninvited. Every guard was ready. Everyone knew the law (4:11). One word from the king, and she would die.

How long did she stand there? The text does not say. It may have felt like forever.

5:2 *And it came about, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court,* ***that*** *she obtained favor in his eyes; and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which* ***was*** *in his hand, and Esther drew near and touched the top of the scepter.*

"And it came about, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his eyes." Once more Esther "obtained favor" (see 2:9, 15, 17). The king's heart turned toward her. We have already seen that the heart of a king is in the hand of the LORD (Proverbs 21:1). Three days of fasting had gone up before God, and now the king's heart was moved.

"And the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand, and Esther drew near and touched the top of the scepter." She would live. The scepter was the sign of the king's mercy and his welcome. Touching it showed that she accepted his favor.

For us, there is a wonderful contrast here. Esther had to risk death to come before an earthly king. But Christians are invited to come boldly before the King of kings. "Let us therefore come with boldness to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help" (Hebrews 4:16). We do not have to wonder whether the scepter will be held out. Because of Jesus, it already has been.

5:3 *And the king said to her, "What **is it** to you, Queen Esther? And what **is** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be given to you."*

"And the king said to her, What is it to you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be given to you." The king knew she would not have risked her life for a small thing. "Up to half of the kingdom" was a common royal way of saying, I will be very generous (compare Mark 6:23). He was not really offering to split his empire, but he was telling her she could ask for something big.

5:4-5 *And Esther said, "If **it is** good to the king, let the king and Haman come today to the feast which I have made for him." And the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, to do the word of Esther." And the king and Haman came to the feast which Esther had made.*

"And Esther said, If it is good to the king, let the king and Haman come today to the feast which I have made for him."

This must have surprised everyone, and it surprises us. She had risked her life, the king had offered her half the kingdom, and she asked only for a dinner? Why?

Esther was wise. She did not rush. A public request in the throne room, with officials standing around, might have shamed the king, since he had signed the decree himself. At a private dinner, with wine and good food, the king would be relaxed and in a good mood. And with Haman present, she could name him face to face. Notice too that she had already prepared the feast. She had planned this before she ever walked into the court. Her fast had not been instead of planning. It had come with it.

Faith and wisdom go together. Prayer does not mean we stop thinking. Nehemiah prayed and then planned (Nehemiah 2:4-8). Esther fasted and then planned.

"And the king said, Bring Haman quickly, to do the word of Esther. And the king and Haman came to the feast which Esther had made."

5:6-8 *And the king said to Esther at the feast of wine, "What **is** your petition? And it shall be given to you. And what **is** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be done." And Esther answered and said, "My petition and my request **is**: if I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if **it is** good to the king to grant my petition and to do my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast which I will make for them, and tomorrow I will do according to the word of the king."*

"And the king said to Esther at the feast of wine, What is your petition? And it shall be given to you." The feast of wine was the part of the banquet after the meal, when wine was served. The king asked again, and offered again, "Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be done."

Esther began: "My petition and my request is." And then she stopped and asked for another banquet. "Let the king and Haman come to the feast which I will make for them, and tomorrow I will do according to the word of the king."

Why wait again? We are not told. Perhaps she lost her nerve. Perhaps she sensed it was not yet the right time. Perhaps she wanted the king's curiosity to grow. Whatever her reason, the delay turned out to be exactly what God needed. Between this banquet and the next, a sleepless night and a book of records would change everything (chapter 6). If Esther had spoken that first night, Mordecai might have been hanged before morning, and the king would not yet have remembered what Mordecai did for him.

Sometimes God's timing includes a delay we do not understand. Waiting can be part of His plan.

5:9 *And Haman went out on that day joyful and good of heart; and when Haman saw Mordecai at the gate of the king, and he did not stand up and did not tremble before him, Haman was filled* ***with*** *rage against Mordecai.*

"And Haman went out on that day joyful and good of heart." Haman thought the queen had singled him out for honor. He was the only guest at the queen's private banquet with the king. He was on top of the world.

"And when Haman saw Mordecai at the gate of the king, and he did not stand up and did not tremble before him, Haman was filled with rage against Mordecai." Mordecai was no longer in sackcloth. He was back at the gate, and he still would not stand or show fear. Mordecai knew the decree. He knew what Haman wanted to do to him. And still he did not tremble. He feared God more than he feared Haman (Matthew 10:28).

In one moment, Haman went from joy to rage. That shows how thin his joy was. It depended on everyone honoring him. Joy built on pride is easily broken.

5:10-12 *And Haman restrained himself and went to his house, and he sent and brought his friends and Zeresh his wife. And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches and the multitude of his sons, and all that* ***with which*** *the king had made him great, and how he had exalted him above the officials and the servants of the king. And Haman said, "Also Queen Esther let no one come with the king to the feast which she had prepared except me; and also tomorrow I am invited by her with the king.*

"And Haman restrained himself and went to his house." He held his anger in for now and went home. Then "he sent and brought his friends and Zeresh his wife."

"And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches and the multitude of his sons." He had ten sons (9:10). "And all that with which the king had made him great, and how he had exalted him above the officials and the servants of the king." His friends and wife surely already knew all this. But Haman had to say it out loud. He loved hearing himself talk about his own greatness.

"And Haman said, Also Queen Esther let no one come with the king to the feast which she had prepared except me; and also tomorrow I am invited by her with the king." He thought this was the greatest honor of all. He had no idea that the queen's banquet was a trap, and that the queen was one of the very people he had sentenced to death.

5:13 *And all this is not sufficient for me every time that I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the gate of the king."*

"And all this is not sufficient for me every time that I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the gate of the king."

This is one of the most revealing verses in the Bible about the human heart. Haman had riches, ten sons, the highest office in the empire, the favor of the king, and a private invitation from the queen. And it was worth nothing to him, because one man would not bow.

That is what pride and envy do. They take everything good God has given us and make it taste like nothing, because we cannot have the one thing we want. Solomon said that whoever loves money will never be satisfied with money (Ecclesiastes 5:10). The same is true of honor. The proud heart is a bottomless pit.

Is there one thing in your life that makes all your blessings feel like "not sufficient"? Paul wrote that he had learned to be content in every circumstance (Philippians 4:11-13). Contentment is not getting everything we want. It is trusting God with what we have, and letting go of what we do not.

5:14 *And Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, "Let them make a tree approximately 75 feet (fifty cubits) high, and in the morning speak to the king, and let them hang Mordecai on it; and go with the king to the feast joyful." And the word was good before Haman, and he made the tree.*

"And Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, Let them make a tree," fifty cubits high, about 75 feet, as tall as a seven-story building. "And in the morning speak to the king, and let them hang Mordecai on it; and go with the king to the feast joyful."

The "tree" was a tall wooden pole or stake. Mordecai would be impaled on it or his body hung on it, high enough for the whole city to see. Haman did not want just to kill Mordecai. He wanted to make a show of him.

Notice that no one in Haman's house told him to stop. His wife and friends fed his anger. Bad counsel from the people closest to us can push us further into sin. "He who walks with wise ones will become wise, and he who associates with fools will be harmed" (Proverbs 13:20).

"And the word was good before Haman, and he made the tree." He built it that very night. Haman went to bed thinking that by the next evening Mordecai would be dead and he would feast with the king and queen.

But as we will see in the next chapter, the king could not sleep that night. Haman had his plans. God had His.

Summary

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, facing the king's hall, where the king sat on his throne. When he saw her, she won his favor, and he held

out the golden scepter; she came near and touched its tip. He asked what she wanted and promised it would be given her, up to half the kingdom. Esther asked that the king and Haman come that day to a feast she had prepared, and the king had Haman brought quickly. At the feast of wine the king again asked her petition and request, up to half the kingdom. Esther asked that if she had found favor, the king and Haman come the next day to another feast, and then she would answer the king's question. Haman went out joyful and glad of heart, but when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate, who did not rise or tremble before him, he was filled with rage. He restrained himself and went home, and gathered his friends and his wife Zeresh. He boasted of his great riches, his many sons, his promotion above all the king's officials and servants, and the queen's invitation to him alone with the king that day and the next. Yet he said that none of it satisfied him as long as he saw Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. His wife and friends told him to have a tree fifty cubits high made, to ask the king in the morning to hang Mordecai on it, and then go joyfully to the feast with the king. The idea pleased Haman, and he had the tree made.

Study Questions

1. What did Esther wear, and where did she stand when she went to the king? (5:1)

2. What did the king do when he saw her, and what did that mean? (5:2)

3. What did the king offer Esther, and what did she ask for instead? (5:3-4)

4. Why do you think Esther waited to make her real request? (5:4-8)

5. How did Haman's mood change after the first banquet, and why? (5:9)

6. What did Haman boast about, and what did he say spoiled it all? (5:11-13)

7. What advice did Zeresh and Haman's friends give him? (5:14)

8. Esther could come before the king only at risk of death. How does Hebrews 4:16 change the way you come to God in prayer?

9. Esther fasted and planned. How do you balance prayer and wise planning when you face a hard situation?

10. Haman said all his blessings were "not sufficient" because of one man. Is there something that steals your contentment? What would it take to let it go?

Esther 6: The King Honors Mordecai

Scripture

6:1-14 On that night the sleep of the king fled, and he said to bring the book of the records, the matters of the days; and they were read before the king. And it was found written that Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, who had sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus. And the king said, "What honor and greatness has been done for Mordecai concerning this?" And the young men of the king who served him said, "Nothing has been done with him." And the king said, "Who ***is*** in the court?" And Haman had come into the outer court of the house of the king to say to the king to hang Mordecai on the tree which he had prepared for him. And the servants of the king said to him, "Look, Haman ***is*** standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." And Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What ***is one*** to do for the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said in his heart, "Whom would the king delight to do honor more than me?" And Haman said to the king, "***For*** the man whom the king delights to honor, let them bring royal clothing which the king has worn, and a horse which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been put; and let the clothing and the horse be given into the hand of a man of the officials of the king, the nobles; and let them clothe the man whom the king delights to honor, and make him ride on the horse in the open square of the city, and proclaim before him, 'Thus it shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor.'" And the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the clothing and the horse, just as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the gate of the king. Do not let a word fall from all that you have said." And Haman took the clothing and the horse, and he clothed Mordecai and made him ride in the open square of the city, and he proclaimed before him, "Thus it shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor." And Mordecai returned to the gate of the king; and Haman hurried to his house, mourning and ***with*** head covered. And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and to all his friends all that had happened to him. And his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, ***is*** of the seed of the Jews, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him." They ***were*** still speaking with him, and the eunuchs of the king arrived, and they hurried to bring Haman to the feast which Esther had prepared.

Preview

That same night, the king cannot sleep. He asks for the royal records to be read to him, and the reader comes to the page that tells how Mordecai saved the king's life from Bigthan and Teresh. The king asks what honor Mordecai was given for it. Nothing, his servants say. At that very moment, Haman walks into the outer court, coming early to ask the king to hang Mordecai on the tree he has just built.

The king calls him in and asks, "What is one to do for the man whom the king delights to honor?" Haman is sure the king means him, so he describes the greatest honor he can imagine: the king's own robe, the king's own horse, and a high official leading him through the city square, proclaiming his honor. Then the king says, Do it all for Mordecai the Jew. Haman has to lead his enemy through the city on the king's horse, shouting his praise. He goes home mourning, with his

head covered, and even his wife and his wise men tell him that if Mordecai is a Jew, he will surely fall before him. While they are still talking, the king's eunuchs arrive to hurry Haman to Esther's second banquet.

Study

6:1 *On that night the sleep of the king fled, and he said to bring the book of the records, the matters of the days; and they were read before the king.*

"On that night the sleep of the king fled." Of all the nights for the king to lose sleep, it was this one. The night between Esther's two banquets. The night Haman built his tree. The night before Haman planned to ask for Mordecai's death.

Why could the king not sleep? The text does not say. Perhaps he was wondering what Esther wanted. Perhaps it was too much wine. But the writer wants us to see that this was no accident. God is never named, and He does not need to be. The Keeper of Israel, who "will not slumber and He will not sleep" (Psalm 121:4), kept the king of Persia awake.

"And he said to bring the book of the records, the matters of the days; and they were read before the king." The king asked for the royal chronicles to be read to him. Maybe he hoped the dull records would put him to sleep.

6:2-3 *And it was found written that Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, who had sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus. And the king said, "What honor and greatness has been done for Mordecai concerning this?" And the young men of the king who served him said, "Nothing has been done with him."*

"And it was found written that Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the eunuchs of the king, of the guards of the threshold, who had sought to stretch out a hand against King Ahasuerus."

Out of all the records of a huge empire, the reader came to this one page. It had been written about five years earlier (2:21-23). It had sat in the book all that time, forgotten. Now, on this night, it was read.

"And the king said, What honor and greatness has been done for Mordecai concerning this?" A Persian king was expected to reward those who served him well. Failing to reward a man who saved his life was an embarrassment.

"And the young men of the king who served him said, Nothing has been done with him."

Remember how unfair it seemed in chapter 2 that Mordecai got nothing? Now we see why. If Mordecai had been rewarded back then, the record would have been closed, and there would have been nothing for the king to remember tonight. God let the good deed go unrewarded for five years so that it could be rewarded on the one night when it would matter most.

God's delays are not God's denials. When He seems to have forgotten something good you did, He may be saving it for just the right moment.

6:4-5 *And the king said, "Who **is** in the court?" And Haman had come into the outer court of the house of the king to say to the king to hang Mordecai on the tree which he had prepared for him. And the servants of the king said to him, "Look, Haman **is** standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."*

"And the king said, Who is in the court?" The king wanted to do something right away. He needed an official.

"And Haman had come into the outer court of the house of the king to say to the king to hang Mordecai on the tree which he had prepared for him." Haman was so eager that he came in the middle of the night or very early in the morning. He was standing in the outer court, waiting to ask for Mordecai's death, at the very moment the king was looking for someone to honor Mordecai.

"And the servants of the king said to him, Look, Haman is standing in the court. And the king said, Let him come in."

The timing is almost too perfect to believe. That is the point. In a book where God is never named, the "coincidences" pile up until no honest reader can call them chance.

6:6 *And Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What **is one** to do for the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said in his heart, "Whom would the king delight to do honor more than me?"*

"And Haman came in, and the king said to him, What is one to do for the man whom the king delights to honor?"

The king did not say who the man was. And Haman did not wait to hear what the king wanted. He had come to talk about Mordecai, but he never got the chance.

"And Haman said in his heart, Whom would the king delight to do honor more than me?" This is pride speaking. Haman could not imagine that the king would want to honor anyone else. In his mind, he was the only one worthy.

6:7-9 *And Haman said to the king, "**For** the man whom the king delights to honor, let them bring royal clothing which the king has worn, and a horse which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been put; and let the clothing and the horse be given into the hand of a man of the officials of the king, the nobles; and let them clothe the man whom the king delights to honor, and make him ride on the horse in the open square of the city, and proclaim before him, 'Thus it shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor.'"*

So Haman described what he wanted for himself. "Let them bring royal clothing which the king has worn, and a horse which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been put."

The king's own robe. The king's own horse, decked out with a royal crest on its head. Haman did not ask for money. He already had money. He wanted to be seen as almost a king.

"And let the clothing and the horse be given into the hand of a man of the officials of the king, the nobles." One of the highest nobles in the land would serve as his attendant. "And let them clothe the man whom the king delights to honor, and make him ride on the horse in the open square of the city, and proclaim before him." The words to be proclaimed were the same as the king's question: this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor.

Haman pictured himself riding through the city with everyone watching, while a great noble walked in front calling out his praise. It was the dream of a proud man.

6:10 *And the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the clothing and the horse, just as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the gate of the king. Do not let a word fall from all that you have said."*

"And the king said to Haman, Hurry, take the clothing and the horse, just as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the gate of the king. Do not let a word fall from all that you have said."

Imagine Haman's face. "Mordecai the Jew." The king even named him as a Jew. He did not know that Haman's decree was against Mordecai's people, or that Haman had come that morning to ask for Mordecai's life. And the king made Haman himself the noble who would lead the horse. "Do not let a word fall." Haman had to do every single thing he had just described.

This is God's justice at work, and the turn is hard to miss. Jesus said, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). That happened here before our eyes. The man who wanted all the honor had to give it to the man he hated.

6:11 *And Haman took the clothing and the horse, and he clothed Mordecai and made him ride in the open square of the city, and he proclaimed before him, "Thus it shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor."*

"And Haman took the clothing and the horse, and he clothed Mordecai and made him ride in the open square of the city, and he proclaimed before him, Thus it shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor."

The man who would not bow to Haman was now being led through the city by Haman. The man who had worn sackcloth in that same square a few days before (4:1) now wore the king's robe. The man Haman wanted on a tree was now on the king's horse.

Can you see Haman walking in front, calling out the words through gritted teeth? The writer does not tell us what Mordecai felt. He simply lets the scene speak.

6:12 *And Mordecai returned to the gate of the king; and Haman hurried to his house, mourning and **with** head covered.*

"And Mordecai returned to the gate of the king." This is a beautiful little detail. After the parade, Mordecai went back to work. He did not let the honor go to his head. He returned to his post at the gate. His danger was not over, and the decree was still in force. He went back to his duty.

"And Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with head covered." Covering the head was a sign of grief and shame (2 Samuel 15:30; Jeremiah 14:3-4). Haman had come to the palace that morning to ask for Mordecai's death. He went home having honored him.

6:13 *And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and to all his friends all that had happened to him. And his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, **is** of the seed of the Jews, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him."*

"And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and to all his friends all that had happened to him." The night before, he had boasted to them of his greatness (5:11). Now he told them of his shame.

"And his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him."

This is remarkable. The night before, these same people had told Haman to build the tree. Now they told him he was finished. Why? Because Mordecai was "of the seed of the Jews." Even these pagans seemed to sense that there was something different about the Jewish people, that they were protected by a power greater than Persia. Perhaps they knew the history: Pharaoh, Babylon, and others who had set themselves against this people and fallen. God had promised Abraham He would curse those who cursed his seed (Genesis 12:3).

"You have begun to fall." The fall had begun, and it would not stop. Proverbs says, "Before breaking is pride, and before stumbling, haughtiness of spirit" (Proverbs 16:18). Haman's pride had carried him up. Now it was carrying him down.

6:14 *They **were** still speaking with him, and the eunuchs of the king arrived, and they hurried to bring Haman to the feast which Esther had prepared.*

"They were still speaking with him, and the eunuchs of the king arrived, and they hurried to bring Haman to the feast which Esther had prepared."

Haman had no time to think, no time to plan, no time to recover. Before he could catch his breath, he was rushed off to Esther's banquet. He did not know that he was being hurried to his own downfall.

Look at this chapter as a whole. A king's sleepless night. A random page of a record book. A good deed forgotten for five years. A proud man who walked in at exactly the wrong moment. Not one miracle. Not one mention of God. And yet every piece fell into place. This is what providence looks like. God is not always in the earthquake or the fire. Often He is in the quiet details, arranging them for the good of His people (Romans 8:28).

Has God ever arranged the details of your life like this? Looking back, can you see His hand in things that seemed like chance at the time?

Summary

That night the king could not sleep, so he ordered the book of records, the chronicles, to be brought and read to him. It was found written that Mordecai had reported Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the door, when they plotted to kill King Ahasuerus. The king asked what honor and dignity had been given to Mordecai for this, and his servants answered that nothing had been done for him. The king asked who was in the court. Haman had just come into the outer court to ask the king to hang Mordecai on the tree he had prepared, and the servants told the king that Haman was there, so the king had him come in. The king asked Haman what should be done for the man the king delighted to honor. Thinking the king meant him, Haman said to bring a royal robe the king had worn and a horse the king had ridden, with a royal crown on its head, and to have one of the king's most noble officials dress the man, lead him on the horse through the city square, and proclaim before him that this is what is done for the man the king delights to honor. The king told Haman to hurry and do just that for Mordecai the Jew, who sat at the king's gate, leaving out nothing he had said. Haman took the robe and horse, dressed Mordecai, led him through the city square, and proclaimed his honor. Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried home mourning, with his head covered. When he told his wife Zeresh and his friends what had happened, his wise men and his wife told him that if Mordecai, before whom he had begun to fall, was of Jewish descent, he would not prevail against him but would surely fall before him. While they were still speaking, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman to the feast Esther had prepared.

Study Questions

1. What happened to the king on the night between Esther's two banquets, and what did he do about it? (6:1)

2. What did the king learn from the records, and what did he ask? (6:2-3)

3. Why had Haman come to the palace so early? (6:4)

4. Why did Haman think the king meant to honor him? (6:6)

5. What honor did Haman describe, and who ended up receiving it? (6:7-11)

6. What did Mordecai do after the parade, and what did Haman do? (6:12)

7. What did Haman's wife and wise men tell him, and why? (6:13)

8. God used a sleepless night and a forgotten record. Looking back, where can you see God's hand in events that seemed like chance?

9. Mordecai's good deed went unrewarded for five years. How does this chapter encourage you when your faithfulness seems unnoticed?

10. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled" (Luke 14:11). Where do you see pride in your own heart, and how can you humble yourself before God?

Esther 7: Haman Is Hanged

Scripture

7:1-10 And the king and Haman went to drink with Esther the queen. And the king said to Esther also on the second day at the feast of wine, "What ***is*** your petition, Queen Esther? And it shall be given to you. And what ***is*** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be done." And Queen Esther answered and said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, and if ***it is*** good to the king, let my life be given to me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy. And if we had been sold as male slaves and female slaves, I would have kept silent, for the distress ***would*** not ***be*** equal to the injury of the king." And King Ahasuerus said, and he said to Esther the queen, "Who ***is*** he, this ***one***, and where ***is*** he, this ***one***, who has filled his heart to do so?" And Esther said, "A man, an adversary and an enemy: this evil Haman!" And Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. And the king rose in his rage from the feast of wine ***and went*** into the garden of the palace; and Haman remained to make request for his life from Esther the queen, for he saw that evil had been determined against him by the king. And the king returned from the garden of the palace to the house of the feast of wine, and Haman was falling on the couch on which Esther ***was***. And the king said, "Also to violate the queen with me in the house?" The word went out from the mouth of the king, and they covered the face of Haman. And Harbona, one of the eunuchs, said before the king, "Also look, the tree which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good concerning the king, is standing at the house of Haman, approximately 75 feet (fifty cubits) high." And the king said, "Hang him on it." And they hanged Haman on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai; and the rage of the king subsided.

Preview

At the second banquet, the king asks Esther a third time what she wants. This time she tells him. She asks for her life and the life of her people, because they have been sold to be destroyed, killed and wiped out. If they had only been sold as slaves, she says, she would have kept quiet. The king demands to know who would dare do such a thing. Esther points across the table: "A man, an adversary and an enemy: this evil Haman!"

The king storms out into the palace garden in a rage. Haman, terrified, stays behind to beg the queen for his life and falls onto the couch where she is reclining. Just then the king comes back in and sees it, and he accuses Haman of assaulting the queen in his own house. The servants cover Haman's face. One of the eunuchs, Harbona, mentions the tall tree Haman built for Mordecai, standing at Haman's own house. The king says, "Hang him on it." And they hang Haman on the tree he had prepared for Mordecai.

Study

7:1-2 *And the king and Haman went to drink with Esther the queen. And the king said to Esther also on the second day at the feast of wine, "What **is** your petition, Queen Esther? And it shall be given to you. And what **is** your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it shall be done."*

"And the king and Haman went to drink with Esther the queen." Haman had just come from leading Mordecai through the city square (6:11-12). He arrived at the banquet still shaken, hurried along by the king's eunuchs (6:14).

"And the king said to Esther also on the second day at the feast of wine, What is your petition, Queen Esther? And it shall be given to you." For the third time, the king asked her (5:3, 6). For the third time, he promised up to half the kingdom. Esther had waited, and now the time had come.

7:3-4 *And Queen Esther answered and said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, and if **it is** good to the king, let my life be given to me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy. And if we had been sold as male slaves and female slaves, I would have kept silent, for the distress **would** not **be** equal to the injury of the king."*

"And Queen Esther answered and said, If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, and if it is good to the king, let my life be given to me at my petition, and my people at my request."

Notice how Esther made her request. She did not start with Haman. She did not start with the decree. She started with herself: "let my life be given to me." The king must have been stunned. Who would threaten the queen? And then "my people." In one sentence, Esther told the king she was a Jew, the secret she had kept for five years (2:10, 20). She was now standing with her people, whatever it cost.

"For we have been sold, I and my people, to annihilate, to kill, and to destroy." She used the very words of Haman's decree (3:13). "Sold" may point to the silver Haman had offered for their destruction (3:9; 4:7).

"And if we had been sold as male slaves and female slaves, I would have kept silent, for the distress would not be equal to the injury of the king." Esther was saying: I would not bother the king over slavery. But this is death, and it will cost the king too. He would lose a whole people from his empire, and his own queen.

Esther was wise in how she spoke. She showed respect for the king. She did not accuse him, even though he had signed the decree. She let him see the evil for himself.

7:5-6 *And King Ahasuerus said, and he said to Esther the queen, "Who **is** he, this **one**, and where **is** he, this **one**, who has filled his heart to do so?" And Esther said, "A man, an adversary and an enemy: this evil Haman!" And Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.*

"And King Ahasuerus said, and he said to Esther the queen, Who is he, this one, and where is he, this one, who has filled his heart to do so?" The king's words come out in a rush, as if he is too

angry to speak smoothly. Did he not remember the decree he had sealed? Perhaps he never knew which people Haman meant. He had never asked (3:8-11).

"And Esther said, A man, an adversary and an enemy: this evil Haman!"

This is the moment the whole book has been building toward. The queen pointed across the table at the most powerful man in the empire and named him. "An adversary," the same word the writer has used of Haman (3:10). "An enemy." "This evil Haman."

"And Haman was terrified before the king and the queen." For the first time, Haman was afraid. The man who had made a whole people tremble now trembled himself.

7:7 *And the king rose in his rage from the feast of wine* ***and went*** *into the garden of the palace; and Haman remained to make request for his life from Esther the queen, for he saw that evil had been determined against him by the king.*

"And the king rose in his rage from the feast of wine and went into the garden of the palace." The king was furious. But why did he leave? Perhaps to cool down. Perhaps to think. He was in a hard place. Haman was his chief official, and he had given Haman his ring and his approval. To punish Haman was to admit his own foolishness. And the decree itself could not be undone. He needed a moment.

"And Haman remained to make request for his life from Esther the queen, for he saw that evil had been determined against him by the king." Haman knew he was finished. He knew the king. So he turned to the only one who might save him, the queen, the very Jew he had sentenced to death. The man who had refused mercy to a whole people now begged for mercy from one of them.

7:8 *And the king returned from the garden of the palace to the house of the feast of wine, and Haman was falling on the couch on which Esther* ***was****. And the king said, "Also to violate the queen with me in the house?" The word went out from the mouth of the king, and they covered the face of Haman.*

"And the king returned from the garden of the palace to the house of the feast of wine, and Haman was falling on the couch on which Esther was." At meals, people reclined on couches. Haman, begging for his life, had thrown himself down at the queen's couch, perhaps grabbing at her feet. In the Persian court, no man but the king was allowed to come that close to the queen.

"And the king said, Also to violate the queen with me in the house?" The king either believed that Haman was attacking Esther, or he chose to take it that way. Either way, it settled the matter. Haman was not only an enemy of the queen's people. In the king's eyes, he had now laid hands on the queen herself, in the king's own presence.

"The word went out from the mouth of the king, and they covered the face of Haman." Covering the face of a condemned man was a sign that he was finished. He would never look on the king again.

Think of how fast Haman fell. That morning he had come to ask for Mordecai's death. By noon he had led Mordecai through the city. By evening his face was covered as a dead man. Pride goes before destruction (Proverbs 16:18).

7:9 *And Harbona, one of the eunuchs, said before the king, "Also look, the tree which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good concerning the king, is standing at the house of Haman, approximately 75 feet (fifty cubits) high." And the king said, "Hang him on it."*

"And Harbona, one of the eunuchs, said before the king, Also look, the tree which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good concerning the king, is standing at the house of Haman." Harbona was one of the seven eunuchs sent to bring Vashti (1:10). He knew about the tree, and he knew that Mordecai had saved the king's life. It may be that the whole palace already knew what Haman had planned.

"Who spoke good concerning the king." Harbona reminded the king that the tree was built for the very man who saved his life. That was the last thing Haman needed the king to hear.

"And the king said, Hang him on it."

7:10 *And they hanged Haman on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai; and the rage of the king subsided.*

"And they hanged Haman on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai; and the rage of the king subsided."

Haman died on the tree he made for his enemy. The trap he set caught him. The Bible says this again and again: "He has dug a hole, and he has hollowed it out; and he has fallen into the pit that he made" (Psalm 7:15). "He who digs a pit will fall in it" (Proverbs 26:27). Haman planned death for Mordecai and found it for himself.

How should we think about Haman's death? It is a hard thing to read about any man being put to death, and we should not cheer it in a bloodthirsty way. But we should see it as justice. Haman had planned the murder of every Jewish man, woman and child in the empire. He was the one who chose evil, and he was paid back by the very means he had prepared. The king, not the Jews, sentenced him, under the law of Persia. And the Bible tells us plainly that God judges those who set themselves against His people and His purposes. Haman reaped what he had sown (Galatians 6:7).

Yet notice what had not changed. "The rage of the king subsided." Haman was dead. But his decree was still law. In less than a year, every Jew in the empire could still be killed. Removing the enemy did not remove the sentence of death. That will be the problem of the next chapter.

There is a picture here for us. Another tree stands at the center of the Bible's story, the cross. Paul says Christ became a curse for us, as it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). Haman died on a tree for his own sin. Jesus died on a tree for ours. Haman's death was justice. Jesus' death was justice and mercy at once: the just penalty for sin, paid by the One who had no sin, so that the guilty could go free (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

Summary

The king and Haman came to dine with Queen Esther, and on the second day, at the feast of wine, the king again asked Esther her petition and request, up to half the kingdom. Esther answered that if she had found favor, she asked for her life and the life of her people, because they had been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated; if they had only been sold as slaves, she would have kept quiet, since that trouble would not be worth the king's loss. King Ahasuerus asked who and where the man was who had dared to do this. Esther said that the adversary and enemy was this wicked Haman, and Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king rose in his rage from the feast of wine and went into the palace garden, while Haman stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life, seeing that the king had determined evil against him. When the king came back, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining, and the king asked whether he would even assault the queen with the king in the house. As soon as the king spoke, they covered Haman's face. Harbona, one of the eunuchs, told the king that the tree Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken up for the king, stood at Haman's house, fifty cubits high, and the king ordered Haman hanged on it. They hanged Haman on the tree he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.

Study Questions

1. How many times had the king asked Esther for her request by this point, and what did he promise each time? (5:3, 6; 7:2)

2. How did Esther make her request, and what secret did she reveal? (7:3-4)

3. Why did Esther say she would have kept silent if her people had only been sold as slaves? (7:4)

4. How did Esther name Haman, and how did he react? (7:6)

5. What was Haman doing when the king came back from the garden, and how did the king take it? (7:7-8)

6. What did Harbona tell the king, and what was the result? (7:9-10)

7. What was still unsolved at the end of the chapter, even after Haman's death?

8. Esther revealed she was a Jew when it was most dangerous to do so. When have you needed to be open about your faith at a cost?

9. Haman fell into the trap he set for another. What does Galatians 6:7 say about what we sow and reap?

10. Haman died on a tree for his own sin; Jesus died on a tree for ours (Galatians 3:13). How does that difference change the way you see the cross?

Esther 8: A New Decree for the Jews

Scripture

8:1-8 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Esther the queen the house of Haman, the adversary of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he ***was*** to her. And the king removed his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman and gave it to Mordecai; and Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman. And Esther again spoke before the king, and she fell before his feet and wept and implored his favor to take away the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plan which he had planned against the Jews. And the king extended to Esther the golden scepter, and Esther arose and stood before the king. And she said, "If ***it is*** good to the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I ***am*** good in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters, the plan of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who ***are*** in all the provinces of the king. For how can I ***bear it*** and look on the evil which will find my people? And how can I ***bear it*** and look on the destruction of my kindred?" And King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, "Look, the house of Haman I have given to Esther, and him they have hanged on the tree, because he stretched out his hand against the Jews. And you, write concerning the Jews as ***is*** good in your eyes, in the name of the king, and seal ***it*** with the signet ring of the king; for a writing which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the signet ring of the king, there is no revoking."

8:9-17 And the scribes of the king were summoned at that time, in the third month, that ***is*** the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third ***day*** of it; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces which ***are*** from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to each and every province according to its script and each and every people according to its language, and to the Jews according to their script and according to their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed ***it*** with the signet ring of the king, and he sent letters by the hand of the runners on horses, riders of the royal steeds, sons of the mares, that the king had granted to the Jews who ***were*** in each and every city to assemble and to make a stand for their life, to annihilate and to kill and to destroy every army of ***any*** people and province that attacks them, little ones and women, and to plunder their spoil, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, that ***is*** the month of Adar. A copy of the writing, to be given ***as*** law in each and every province, ***was*** disclosed to all the peoples, and for the Jews to be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies. The runners, riders of the royal steeds, went out hastened and hurried at the word of the king; and the law was given in Susa the citadel. And Mordecai went out from before the king in royal clothing of violet and white cloth, and a great crown of gold, and a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted for joy and rejoiced. To the Jews ***there*** was light and gladness and joy and honor. And in each and every province and in each and every city, ***in*** the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching, ***there was*** gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a good day. And many of the peoples of the land were becoming Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.

Preview

Haman is dead, and on the same day the king gives his house to Esther. Mordecai comes before the king, now that Esther has told him how they are related, and the king gives Mordecai the signet ring he took back from Haman. Esther puts Mordecai in charge of Haman's house. But the decree to kill the Jews still stands. So Esther goes before the king again, falls at his feet weeping, and begs him to undo Haman's evil plan.

The king explains that a decree written in the king's name and sealed with his ring cannot be revoked. But Esther and Mordecai may write a new decree, in the king's name, however they see fit. Mordecai writes it, and swift riders carry it to all 127 provinces: on the same day set for their destruction, the Jews may gather and defend themselves against anyone who attacks them. Mordecai goes out from the king in royal robes and a great golden crown, and the city of Susa shouts for joy. Wherever the decree reaches, the Jews have light and gladness, feasting and a good day, and many people of the land become Jews.

Study

8:1-2 *On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Esther the queen the house of Haman, the adversary of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he **was** to her. And the king removed his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman and gave it to Mordecai; and Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.*

"On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Esther the queen the house of Haman, the adversary of the Jews." In Persia, the property of a man executed for a crime went to the king. The king gave all of it to Esther. The man who wanted to plunder the Jews (3:13) had his own house handed to a Jew.

"And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her." For the first time, the king learned that the man who saved his life was the queen's cousin and the one who raised her.

"And the king removed his signet ring which he had taken away from Haman and gave it to Mordecai." The ring that sealed the decree of death was now in the hand of the man it was meant to kill. Mordecai now held Haman's place, the king's chief official.

"And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman." Esther gave Haman's estate into Mordecai's care. The whole of Haman's power and wealth had passed to his enemy. As Proverbs says, "the wealth of a sinner is stored up for the righteous" (Proverbs 13:22).

8:3-4 *And Esther again spoke before the king, and she fell before his feet and wept and implored his favor to take away the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plan which he had planned against the Jews. And the king extended to Esther the golden scepter, and Esther arose and stood before the king.*

"And Esther again spoke before the king, and she fell before his feet and wept and implored his favor to take away the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plan which he had planned against the Jews."

Esther could have stopped here. She was safe. Mordecai was safe and honored. The king loved her. But her people were not safe. In less than a year, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, anyone in the empire could kill a Jew and take his goods, and the law of Persia would back them.

So she went before the king again. This time she did not stand as a queen in royal robes. She fell at his feet and wept. She begged. Was this another unsummoned visit, with the same risk of death? It may have been, since the king again held out the scepter (verse 4).

"And the king extended to Esther the golden scepter, and Esther arose and stood before the king." Once again the king showed her favor.

Esther's love for her people did not stop when she herself was safe. That is the mark of a true intercessor. Paul felt the same about his people Israel. He had great sorrow in his heart and wished he himself could be cut off from Christ for their sake (Romans 9:1-3).

8:5-6 *And she said, "If **it is** good to the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I **am** good in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters, the plan of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who **are** in all the provinces of the king. For how can I **bear it** and look on the evil which will find my people? And how can I **bear it** and look on the destruction of my kindred?"*

"If it is good to the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I am good in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters, the plan of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews."

Esther was careful again. She stacked up four polite phrases before she asked. And notice how she put the blame: "the letters, the plan of Haman." She did not say "your decree," though the king had sealed it. She let the king save face by putting the blame where it belonged.

"For how can I bear it and look on the evil which will find my people? And how can I bear it and look on the destruction of my kindred?" Esther could not stand by and watch. Her people's suffering was her suffering.

8:7-8 *And King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, "Look, the house of Haman I have given to Esther, and him they have hanged on the tree, because he stretched out his hand against the Jews. And you, write concerning the Jews as **is** good in your eyes, in the name of the king, and seal **it** with the signet ring of the king; for a writing which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the signet ring of the king, there is no revoking."*

"And King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Look, the house of Haman I have given to Esther, and him they have hanged on the tree, because he stretched out his hand against the Jews." The king reminded them how much he had already done.

"And you, write concerning the Jews as is good in your eyes, in the name of the king, and seal it with the signet ring of the king; for a writing which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the signet ring of the king, there is no revoking."

Here is the problem. Even the king could not undo his own sealed law (1:19; Daniel 6:8, 15). Haman's decree would stand. But a new decree could be written to answer it. The king gave Esther and Mordecai the power to write whatever they thought best.

This is a picture of something deep. God's law says the soul who sins will die (Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 6:23). That sentence is just, and it cannot be simply set aside. But God, in Christ, gave a second word: the good news that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). The first law was not erased. It was answered by a greater one. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:2).

8:9-10 *And the scribes of the king were summoned at that time, in the third month, that **is** the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third **day** of it; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces which **are** from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to each and every province according to its script and each and every people according to its language, and to the Jews according to their script and according to their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed **it** with the signet ring of the king, and he sent letters by the hand of the runners on horses, riders of the royal steeds, sons of the mares,*

"And the scribes of the king were summoned at that time, in the third month, that is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day of it." Sivan is May to June. The first decree had gone out on the thirteenth day of the first month (3:12). Seventy days had passed. The day of slaughter was still about eight and a half months away. There was time for the new decree to reach every corner of the empire.

"And it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces which are from India and as far as Cush, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces." The same wide reach as Haman's decree. And this time it was also written "to the Jews according to their script and according to their language." Haman's decree had been sent to everyone except the Jews themselves. This one went to them too, in their own language.

"And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the signet ring of the king, and he sent letters by the hand of the runners on horses, riders of the royal steeds." The fastest horses in the empire carried the good news. Persia was famous for its royal road and its relay of riders, which could carry a message across the empire in a matter of days.

8:11-12 *that the king had granted to the Jews who **were** in each and every city to assemble and to make a stand for their life, to annihilate and to kill and to destroy every army of **any** people and province that attacks them, little ones and women, and to plunder their spoil, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, that **is** the month of Adar.*

"That the king had granted to the Jews who were in each and every city to assemble and to make a stand for their life."

This is the heart of the new decree. It did not tell the Jews to attack anyone. It gave them the right to "assemble," to gather together, and "to make a stand for their life," to defend themselves. Under Haman's decree, anyone could attack a Jew and the law would be on the attacker's side. Under Mordecai's decree, the Jews could fight back, and the law would be on their side too.

The decree allowed them "to annihilate and to kill and to destroy every army of any people and province that attacks them." Notice the words "that attacks them." The decree was aimed at those who came against the Jews. It used the same three words as Haman's decree (3:13), turning them back on those who would use them.

The verse also mentions "little ones and women, and to plunder their spoil." This is hard. Bible teachers read it in two ways. Some read it as allowing the Jews to strike back against the families of their attackers, mirroring Haman's decree word for word, because in that world a law had to answer a law in the same terms. Others read the Hebrew as describing the attackers' threat: an army that attacks them, their little ones and women. Either way, chapter 9 tells us what the Jews actually did. They fought those who attacked them, and three times we are told they did not touch the plunder (9:10, 15, 16), even though this decree allowed it. We will look at that more closely in the next chapter.

The day was the same: "on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus," the thirteenth of the twelfth month, the very day Haman had chosen.

8:13-14 *A copy of the writing, to be given **as** law in each and every province, **was** disclosed to all the peoples, and for the Jews to be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies. The runners, riders of the royal steeds, went out hastened and hurried at the word of the king; and the law was given in Susa the citadel.*

"A copy of the writing, to be given as law in each and every province, was disclosed to all the peoples, and for the Jews to be ready for this day to avenge themselves on their enemies." "To avenge" here means to see justice done against those who would attack them. The decree was public, so every enemy of the Jews would know that an attack would now be met with force. That alone would have stopped many from joining in.

"The runners, riders of the royal steeds, went out hastened and hurried at the word of the king; and the law was given in Susa the citadel." The runners for the first decree had "hurried" too (3:15). Now the good news raced to overtake the bad.

8:15 *And Mordecai went out from before the king in royal clothing of violet and white cloth, and a great crown of gold, and a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted for joy and rejoiced.*

"And Mordecai went out from before the king in royal clothing of violet and white cloth, and a great crown of gold, and a robe of fine linen and purple." Violet and white were the royal colors of Persia, the same colors as the hangings at the king's feast (1:6). The "crown" here was most likely a large turban or headdress of gold, the sign of high office.

Think of Mordecai's journey. In chapter 4 he wore sackcloth and ashes in the city square. In chapter 6 he rode the king's horse for a day and went back to the gate. Now he wore royal robes for good.

"And the city of Susa shouted for joy and rejoiced." When Haman's decree went out, "the city of Susa was in confusion" (3:15). Now the city rejoiced. The people of Susa, Jews and non-Jews alike, were glad to see justice. "When righteous ones increase, the people rejoice" (Proverbs 29:2).

8:16-17 *To the Jews **there** was light and gladness and joy and honor. And in each and every province and in each and every city, **in** the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching, **there was** gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a good day. And many of the peoples of the land were becoming Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them.*

"To the Jews there was light and gladness and joy and honor." Light stands for life and hope after darkness. Psalm 30:5 says weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. The Jews had lived for two months under a sentence of death. Now there was light.

"And in each and every province and in each and every city, in the place where the word of the king and his law were reaching, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a good day." Compare 4:3. In the same places where the first decree had brought mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing, the second decree brought gladness, joy and feasting. God had turned their mourning into dancing (Psalm 30:11).

"And many of the peoples of the land were becoming Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them." What does this mean? Some may have become Jews only to save their own skins. But many likely saw that the God of the Jews was real and powerful, that He had saved His people from certain death, and they turned to Him. That is what God had always wanted: for the nations to see His work in Israel and come to Him (Isaiah 49:6; 56:6-7). Ruth had done it (Ruth 1:16). So had others who "separated" themselves from the nations to seek the LORD (Ezra 6:21).

Here is what this chapter shows us: God did not only save His people. He turned their sorrow into joy so completely that others were drawn to Him. That is still how the gospel spreads. When people see what God has done in His people's lives, many want to know Him too.

Summary

That same day King Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, and Mordecai came before the king, because Esther had told how he was related to her. The king took off the signet ring he had taken back from Haman and gave it to Mordecai, and Esther set Mordecai over Haman's house. Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping, and begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite against the Jews. The king held out the golden scepter, and Esther rose and asked that letters be written to revoke Haman's letters, for she could not bear to see the destruction of her people and family. The king answered that he had given Haman's house to Esther and hanged Haman for attacking the Jews, and told Esther and Mordecai to write whatever they wished concerning the Jews in the king's name and seal it with his ring, since a decree written in the king's name and sealed with his ring

could not be revoked. On the twenty-third day of the third month, Sivan, the king's scribes wrote all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews and to the satraps, governors and officials of the 127 provinces from India to Cush, in every script and language, and to the Jews in their own script and language. Mordecai sealed it with the king's ring and sent it by couriers on the king's swift horses. The decree allowed the Jews in every city to gather and defend their lives, and to destroy any armed force of any people or province that attacked them, along with their little ones and women, and to plunder their goods, on the single day of the thirteenth of the twelfth month. A copy was published as law in every province so the Jews would be ready that day to avenge themselves on their enemies, and the couriers hurried out at the king's command. Mordecai went out from the king in royal robes of violet and white, with a great gold crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light, gladness, joy and honor, and in every province and city where the decree came, there was gladness and joy, feasting and a holiday among the Jews. Many people of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Study Questions

1. What did the king give Esther and Mordecai after Haman's death? (8:1-2)

2. Why did Esther go before the king again, even though she and Mordecai were now safe? (8:3-6)

3. Why could the king not simply cancel Haman's decree? (8:8; 1:19)

4. What did the new decree allow the Jews to do, and against whom? (8:11)

5. How was the second decree sent out, and to whom was it written? (8:9-10, 14)

6. Compare the city's reaction in 3:15 with its reaction in 8:15. What changed?

7. Why did many of the peoples of the land become Jews? (8:17)

8. Esther kept pleading for her people even after she was safe. Who do you need to keep praying for, even when your own life is going well?

9. The second decree answered the first. How does the gospel answer the sentence of death our sin deserves (Romans 6:23; 8:2)?

10. Many came to the God of Israel when they saw what He had done. What has God done in your life that you could tell others?

Esther 9: The Jews Defend Themselves and Purim Begins

Scripture

9:1-10 And in the twelfth month, that ***is*** the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day in it, when the word of the king and his law drew near to be done, on the day when the enemies of the Jews had hoped to domineer over them, and it was turned about, so that the Jews themselves domineered over those who hated them, the Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to stretch out a hand on those seeking their harm; and no one stood before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples. And all the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the doers of the work which ***belonged*** to the king ***were*** supporting the Jews, for the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai ***was*** great in the house of the king, and the report of him ***was*** going through all the provinces; for the man Mordecai ***was*** going on and becoming great. And the Jews struck down all their enemies ***with*** a striking of ***the*** sword and slaughter and destruction, and they did to those who hated them according to their pleasure. And in Susa the citadel the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, and Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the adversary of the Jews, they killed; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand.

9:11-19 On that day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel came before the king. And the king said to Esther the queen, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman; in the rest of the provinces of the king what have they done? And what ***is*** your petition? And it shall be given to you. And what ***is*** your request further? And it shall be done." And Esther said, "If ***it is*** good to the king, let it be given also tomorrow to the Jews who ***are*** in Susa to do according to the law of today; and let them hang the ten sons of Haman on the tree." And the king said ***for it*** to be done so; and a law was given in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman they hanged. And the Jews who ***were*** in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed in Susa three hundred men; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand. And the rest of the Jews who ***were*** in the provinces of the king assembled and stood for their life, and had rest from their enemies, and killed among those who hated them seventy-five thousand; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand. ***This was*** on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar; and they rested on the fourteenth ***day*** of it, and made it a day of feasting and joy. And the Jews who ***were*** in Susa assembled on the thirteenth ***day*** of it and on the fourteenth ***day*** of it, and they rested on the fifteenth ***day*** of it, and made it a day of feasting and joy. Therefore the Jews, the villagers, who dwell in the cities of the open regions, ***are*** keeping the fourteenth day of the month of Adar ***as*** joy and feasting and a good day, and ***as a day of*** sending portions each to his neighbor.

9:20-32 And Mordecai wrote these words, and he sent letters to all the Jews who ***were*** in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the near and the far, to establish on them to be keeping the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth day of it, in each and every year, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy and from mourning into a good day; to make them days of feasting and joy and of sending portions each to his neighbor and gifts to the needy. And the Jews accepted what they had

begun to do and what Mordecai had written to them, because Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had planned against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that ***is*** the lot, to throw them into confusion and to destroy them; and when she came before the king, he said with the letter, "Let his evil plan which he planned against the Jews return on his own head, and let them hang him and his sons on the tree." Therefore they called these days Purim, after the name of the Pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, and what they had seen concerning this, and what had come to them, the Jews established and accepted on themselves and on their offspring and on all who joined themselves to them, and it shall not pass away, to be keeping these two days according to their writing and according to their appointed time, in each and every year; and these days ***are*** remembered and kept in each and every generation, each and every clan, each and every province, and each and every city; and these days of Purim shall not pass away from among the Jews, and their remembrance shall not cease from their offspring. And Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote ***with*** all authority, to establish this second letter of Purim. And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, words of peace and truth, to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had established on them, and just as they had established on themselves and on their offspring, the matters of the fasts and their cry. And the command of Esther established these matters of Purim, and ***it was*** written in the book.

Preview

The thirteenth day of the twelfth month arrives, the day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to destroy them. But everything is turned around. The Jews gather in their cities to defend themselves against those who seek their harm, and no one can stand against them. The officials of the provinces help the Jews, because they fear Mordecai, who has become great. In Susa the Jews kill five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman, and across the provinces seventy-five thousand of those who hated them. Three times we are told that they did not touch the plunder.

The king asks Esther what more she wants. She asks for one more day in Susa to carry out the decree, and for the bodies of Haman's ten sons to be hanged on the tree. On the fourteenth the Jews of Susa kill three hundred more. Then the Jews rest and celebrate, in the provinces on the fourteenth and in Susa on the fifteenth. Mordecai and Esther write letters to make these two days a yearly feast for all Jews, a time of feasting and joy, sending gifts to one another and to the poor. They call it Purim, after the pur, the lot Haman cast.

This is one of the hardest chapters in the book. We will read it carefully and honestly.

Study

9:1 *And in the twelfth month, that **is** the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day in it, when the word of the king and his law drew near to be done, on the day when the enemies of the Jews had hoped to domineer over them, and it was turned about, so that the Jews themselves domineered over those who hated them,*

"When the word of the king and his law drew near to be done, on the day when the enemies of the Jews had hoped to domineer over them, and it was turned about, so that the Jews themselves domineered over those who hated them."

This verse sums up the whole book in one phrase: "it was turned about." The Hebrew word means overturned, flipped upside down. The day of death became the day of deliverance. The ones who planned to rule over the Jews were ruled over. Haman's tree held Haman. Haman's ring sealed Mordecai's decree. Haman's house was given to Esther. And now Haman's day of slaughter became the day of his followers' defeat.

Who turned it? The passive verb does not say. But by now we know. God is the One who turns things around for His people. Joseph said it: "you planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

9:2-4 *the Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to stretch out a hand on those seeking their harm; and no one stood before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples. And all the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the doers of the work which **belonged** to the king **were** supporting the Jews, for the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai **was** great in the house of the king, and the report of him **was** going through all the provinces; for the man Mordecai **was** going on and becoming great.*

"The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to stretch out a hand on those seeking their harm."

Notice who the Jews fought: "those seeking their harm." This was not an attack on their neighbors in general. It was defense against those who came to kill them, as the second decree allowed (8:11). Haman's decree was still law. On this day, anyone in the empire could legally attack a Jew and take his goods. Many would. The Jews gathered together to defend themselves against them.

"And no one stood before them, for the dread of them had fallen on all the peoples." Many who might have attacked were afraid. The tide had turned, and they knew it.

"And all the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the doers of the work which belonged to the king were supporting the Jews, for the dread of Mordecai had fallen on them." The government officials took the Jews' side. They knew where power now lay. "For Mordecai was great in the house of the king, and the report of him was going through all the provinces; for the man Mordecai was going on and becoming great." Mordecai was rising, just as Haman's wife had predicted Haman would fall before him (6:13).

9:5-10 *And the Jews struck down all their enemies **with** a striking of **the** sword and slaughter and destruction, and they did to those who hated them according to their pleasure. And in Susa the citadel the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, and Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the adversary of the Jews, they killed; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand.*

"And the Jews struck down all their enemies with a striking of the sword and slaughter and destruction, and they did to those who hated them according to their pleasure."

We need to stop here and think carefully. This is a hard verse, and the Bible does not soften it.

Who were these enemies? The text calls them "their enemies" and "those who hated them." They were people who wanted to use Haman's decree to kill Jewish men, women and children and take their property. The decree was public, so these enemies had nearly a year to prepare. They were not innocent bystanders. They were armed men who came to kill on the day the law allowed it.

What does "according to their pleasure" mean? It most likely means the Jews were able to do as they wished with their attackers, with no one able to stop them. It is a phrase about power, not about cruelty. It is the reverse of what Haman had planned to do to them "as is good in your eyes" (3:11).

Was this right? Here are some things to keep in mind. First, it was self-defense. The second decree allowed the Jews to defend themselves against those who attacked them (8:11), and nothing in the text says they attacked anyone who left them alone. Second, it was under the law of the land. The king had given them this right. Third, they did not take the plunder, even though the decree allowed it (8:11). The writer says this three times (9:10, 15, 16). They were not fighting for gain. Fourth, there is a link to Saul and Agag. Saul had been told to fight Amalek and had taken the plunder, and God rejected him (1 Samuel 15:9, 19). Mordecai, of Saul's family, and the Jews of his day fought the Agagite's house and did not take the plunder. What Saul did wrong, they did right.

Even so, this is a chapter of real bloodshed. We should not read it with glee. Many died, and war is always a grief. Scripture records it as part of God's protection of His people in a world where their enemies had been given a license to kill them. It is not a pattern for believers today. Jesus told His followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44). Paul tells believers not to avenge themselves but to leave it to God (Romans 12:19). The church does not take up the sword to defend the gospel. But the right of a people to defend their lives against those who come to kill them is a different matter, and that is what the text describes.

"And in Susa the citadel the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men." Notice the word "men." The text speaks only of men here, the fighting men who attacked them.

Then come ten names, "the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the adversary of the Jews, they killed." Haman's sons were most likely leading the attack, carrying on their father's hatred. In the Hebrew Bible, these ten names are written in a column, one under another, a way of marking a list of fallen enemies.

"And on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand." The first of three times.

9:11-12 *On that day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel came before the king. And the king said to Esther the queen, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman; in the rest of the provinces of the king what have they done? And what **is** your petition? And it shall be given to you. And what **is** your request further? And it shall be done."*

"On that day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel came before the king." The king heard the count and said to Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman; in the rest of the provinces of the king what have they done?" He seemed almost impressed. If five hundred fell in the citadel alone, what about the rest of the empire?

"And what is your petition? And it shall be given to you. And what is your request further? And it shall be done." For the fourth time, the king offered Esther whatever she asked.

9:13-14 *And Esther said, "If **it is** good to the king, let it be given also tomorrow to the Jews who **are** in Susa to do according to the law of today; and let them hang the ten sons of Haman on the tree." And the king said **for it** to be done so; and a law was given in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman they hanged.*

"And Esther said, If it is good to the king, let it be given also tomorrow to the Jews who are in Susa to do according to the law of today; and let them hang the ten sons of Haman on the tree."

This is the hardest verse in the chapter, and many readers stumble over it. Why would Esther ask for another day of fighting? And why hang men who were already dead?

Scripture does not tell us her reasons, and we should be careful not to put words in her mouth. But the text gives some clues. Her request was only for Susa, the capital, where Haman had lived and where his household and supporters were strongest. The law of "today" allowed defense against attackers, so another day meant another day of that same right, not a license to kill anyone. It seems likely that many enemies were still active in Susa and would strike once the one-day protection ended. The fact that three hundred more men came against them the next day (9:15) suggests that was true.

As for Haman's sons, they had already been killed (9:10). Hanging their bodies on the tree was a public display. In the ancient world, this was a way to show that a threat had been fully ended and to warn anyone else who might try the same thing (compare 1 Samuel 31:10). The house of Haman, which had planned to wipe out every Jew, was finished.

Some readers think Esther went too far here, and that her request shows a desire for revenge. Others think she was wise and protective, ending a danger that would otherwise have gone on. The text does not judge her either way. I believe we should be humble here. Esther knew the danger in Susa far better than we do, and the text gives her request without blame. But we should also not hold it up as an example for how Christians treat their enemies, because the New Testament calls us to something higher (Romans 12:17-21).

"And the king said for it to be done so; and a law was given in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman they hanged."

9:15-16 *And the Jews who **were** in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they killed in Susa three hundred men; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand. And the rest of the Jews who **were** in the provinces of the king assembled and stood for their life, and had rest from their enemies, and killed among those who hated them seventy-five thousand; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand.*

"And the Jews who were in Susa assembled also on the fourteenth day." They "killed in Susa three hundred men; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand." The second time.

"And the rest of the Jews who were in the provinces of the king assembled and stood for their life, and had rest from their enemies." Notice the words: they "stood for their life." This was the language of defense. And they "had rest from their enemies." The goal was not slaughter. It was rest, safety from those who wanted them dead.

They "killed among those who hated them seventy-five thousand; and on the plunder they did not stretch out their hand." The third time. Seventy-five thousand across an empire of 127 provinces, from India to Cush, shows how many people had been ready to kill the Jews when the law allowed it. Haman's hatred had spread far.

9:17-19 ***This was** on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar; and they rested on the fourteenth **day** of it, and made it a day of feasting and joy. And the Jews who **were** in Susa assembled on the thirteenth **day** of it and on the fourteenth **day** of it, and they rested on the fifteenth **day** of it, and made it a day of feasting and joy. Therefore the Jews, the villagers, who dwell in the cities of the open regions, **are** keeping the fourteenth day of the month of Adar **as** joy and feasting and a good day, and **as a day of** sending portions each to his neighbor.*

The fighting in the provinces was on the thirteenth, and "they rested on the fourteenth day of it, and made it a day of feasting and joy." In Susa, where there were two days of fighting, the Jews rested on the fifteenth. That is why, the writer explains, Jews in the villages kept the feast on the fourteenth, while those in the capital kept it on the fifteenth. To this day, Jews in Jerusalem and some other old walled cities keep Purim on the fifteenth, called Shushan Purim, and others on the fourteenth.

Notice what the feast was not. It was not on the day of fighting. It was on the day of rest. They did not celebrate the killing. They celebrated being alive and safe.

Part of the feast was "sending portions each to his neighbor." We saw the same in Nehemiah 8:10, when the people were told to send portions to those who had nothing. Joy in God's deliverance turns outward in generosity.

9:20-22 *And Mordecai wrote these words, and he sent letters to all the Jews who **were** in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the near and the far, to establish on them to be keeping the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth day of it, in each and every year, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy and from mourning into a good day; to make them days of feasting and joy and of sending portions each to his neighbor and gifts to the needy.*

"And Mordecai wrote these words, and he sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the near and the far." Mordecai, now second only to the king, used his power to make sure the Jews everywhere remembered what God had done.

The letters set the feast for both days, the fourteenth and fifteenth, "in each and every year, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow into joy and from mourning into a good day."

"From sorrow into joy." That is the story of the whole book, and of the whole Bible. The psalmist said, "You have turned my mourning into dancing" (Psalm 30:11). Jesus told His disciples before the cross, "your grief will become joy" (John 16:20). God specializes in turning sorrow into joy.

The feast was to be kept with "feasting and joy and of sending portions each to his neighbor and gifts to the needy." Even the poor were to have a share. A people who had been rescued from death were to remember by giving.

9:23-25 *And the Jews accepted what they had begun to do and what Mordecai had written to them, because Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had planned against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that **is** the lot, to throw them into confusion and to destroy them; and when she came before the king, he said with the letter, "Let his evil plan which he planned against the Jews return on his own head, and let them hang him and his sons on the tree."*

"And the Jews accepted what they had begun to do and what Mordecai had written to them." The people took up the feast willingly.

Then the writer sums up the whole story in a few lines: "Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had planned against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to throw them into confusion and to destroy them." But "when she came before the king," when Esther went in, the king commanded that Haman's "evil plan which he planned against the Jews return on his own head," and that he and his sons be hanged on the tree.

"Return on his own head." That is the justice of God. The evil a man plans for others comes back on him (Psalm 7:16).

9:26-28 *Therefore they called these days Purim, after the name of the Pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, and what they had seen concerning this, and what had come to them, the Jews established and accepted on themselves and on their offspring and on all who joined themselves to them, and it shall not pass away, to be keeping these two days according to their writing and according to their appointed time, in each and every year; and these days* ***are*** *remembered and kept in each and every generation, each and every clan, each and every province, and each and every city; and these days of Purim shall not pass away from among the Jews, and their remembrance shall not cease from their offspring.*

"Therefore they called these days Purim, after the name of the Pur." Purim is the plural of pur, the lot. The feast was named after Haman's lot. The very thing Haman used to plan the Jews' destruction became the name of their celebration. Every year, the name itself would remind them that God, not chance, decides how the lot falls (Proverbs 16:33).

"The Jews established and accepted on themselves and on their offspring and on all who joined themselves to them." Notice "all who joined themselves to them." Those from other peoples who had turned to the God of Israel (8:17) were included. The feast was not about race. It was about belonging to God's people.

"And these days of Purim shall not pass away from among the Jews, and their remembrance shall not cease from their offspring." And it has not. For about twenty-five hundred years, Jews around the world have kept Purim each year. The book of Esther is read aloud, and many listeners stamp their feet or make noise whenever Haman's name is read.

Purim is not one of the feasts commanded in the Law of Moses. It was set by Mordecai and Esther and accepted by the people. That shows us that God's people may rightly set aside days to remember what He has done. Many think the feast mentioned in John 5:1 may have been Purim, but Scripture does not say.

9:29-32 *And Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote* ***with*** *all authority, to establish this second letter of Purim. And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, words of peace and truth, to establish these days of Purim at their appointed times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had established on them, and just as they had established on themselves and on their offspring, the matters of the fasts and their cry. And the command of Esther established these matters of Purim, and* ***it was*** *written in the book.*

"And Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote with all authority, to establish this second letter of Purim." A second letter, this time with Esther's royal authority, confirmed the first. Mordecai "sent letters to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, words of peace and truth." Peace and truth: the letters brought good news and an honest account.

They were to keep these days "just as they had established on themselves and on their offspring, the matters of the fasts and their cry." Remembering Purim also meant remembering the fasting

and crying out of chapter 4. The joy came after the tears. Jews still keep the Fast of Esther on the day before Purim.

"And the command of Esther established these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book." Esther, the orphan girl who had been taken into the palace, now gave a command that her people have obeyed for centuries.

What does this chapter teach us? It shows us that God keeps His people. Haman's plan was not a small threat. It was a plan to end the Jewish people, and with them the line through which the Messiah would come. God turned it upside down. And it teaches us to remember. The Jews were told never to forget. We are told the same about our own deliverance. Jesus gave His followers a meal of remembrance, the Lord's Supper, and said, "do this for My remembrance" (Luke 22:19). Purim remembers the day God saved His people from death. The Lord's Supper remembers the day God saved us from a far greater death, through the death of His Son.

Summary

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the day the king's decree was to be carried out, when the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, it was turned around so that the Jews overpowered those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities in all the provinces to strike those who sought their harm, and no one could stand against them, because fear of them had fallen on all the peoples. All the officials, satraps and governors helped the Jews out of fear of Mordecai, who had become great in the king's palace and whose fame spread through all the provinces. The Jews struck down their enemies with the sword. In the citadel of Susa they killed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman, but they did not lay hands on the plunder. When the king heard the number, he told Esther what had happened in Susa and asked what more she wanted. Esther asked that the Jews in Susa be allowed to do the same the next day, and that Haman's ten sons be hanged on the tree. The king granted it, and the Jews in Susa gathered on the fourteenth and killed three hundred men, again taking no plunder. In the provinces the Jews gathered, defended their lives, gained rest from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them, without taking plunder. They fought on the thirteenth and rested and feasted on the fourteenth, while the Jews of Susa fought on the thirteenth and fourteenth and rested on the fifteenth; so the village Jews keep the fourteenth as a day of joy, feasting and sending gifts. Mordecai recorded these events and sent letters to all the Jews in the empire, near and far, establishing the fourteenth and fifteenth days as yearly days of feasting and joy, of sending gifts to one another and to the poor, because on those days they gained rest from their enemies and their sorrow was turned to joy. The Jews accepted the custom, because Haman the Agagite had plotted to destroy them and had cast the pur, the lot, but when the matter came before the king, he ordered that Haman's evil plan fall back on his own head and that he and his sons be hanged. So the days were called Purim, from pur, and the Jews bound themselves, their descendants and all who joined them to keep these two days every year without fail, so that they would be remembered in every generation. Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter about Purim, sent with words of peace and truth to all the Jews of the 127 provinces, to establish these days at their appointed times, together with

their times of fasting and lament. Esther's command confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was written in the record.

The one thing God has done for me that I never want to forget is His absolute forgiveness and grace. Purim was a feast of remembrance. So is the Lord's Supper. Both call us to remember what God did when we could not save ourselves.

Study Questions

1. What does "it was turned about" mean, and how does it describe the whole book? (9:1)

2. Who did the Jews fight against, according to verses 2, 5 and 16?

3. How many times are we told the Jews did not take the plunder, and why might that matter? (9:10, 15, 16; 1 Samuel 15:9, 19)

4. What two things did Esther ask for in verse 13, and what reasons can we find in the text?

5. On what days did the Jews rest and feast, and why were there two days? (9:17-19)

6. What were the people to do on the days of Purim, and why did the feast get its name? (9:22, 26)

7. Who was included in keeping the feast, according to verse 27?

8. This chapter is hard to read. How does it help to know that the Jews were defending themselves against those who came to kill them?

9. God turned "sorrow into joy" for His people (9:22). Where have you seen God turn sorrow into joy in your own life?

10. Purim and the Lord's Supper are both meals of remembrance. What has God done for you that you never want to forget, and how do you remember it?

Esther 10: The Greatness of Mordecai

Scripture

10:1-3 And King Ahasuerus put forced labor on the land and the coastlands of the sea. And all the work of his power and his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king made great, ***are*** they not written in the book of the words of the days of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew ***was*** second to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brothers, seeking good for his people and speaking peace to all his offspring.

Preview

The shortest chapter in the book closes the story in three verses. King Ahasuerus lays a tax of forced labor on his whole empire, from the mainland to the coasts and islands. His power and might, and the full account of how he made Mordecai great, are written in the royal chronicles of Media and Persia.

The book ends with Mordecai: second only to the king, great among the Jews, loved by his many brothers, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants. The orphan's guardian who once sat in sackcloth at the gate now stands at the right hand of the king, using his power for the good of others.

Study

10:1 *And King Ahasuerus put forced labor on the land and the coastlands of the sea.*

"And King Ahasuerus put forced labor on the land and the coastlands of the sea." Forced labor here likely means a tax or tribute, paid in work or in goods. The coastlands were the islands and shores of the Mediterranean. The king's power reached from the heart of Persia to the edges of the sea.

Why end the book with a note about taxes? It reminds us that the world went on as before. Ahasuerus was still a powerful, demanding king. The Jews were still subjects in a foreign empire. God had saved His people, but He had not yet ended their exile or set up His kingdom. The ordinary business of empire continued. Many Bible teachers also think this verse shows the empire was at peace and orderly under Mordecai's leadership, able to collect its revenues from far and wide.

10:2 *And all the work of his power and his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king made great,* ***are*** *they not written in the book of the words of the days of the kings of Media and Persia?*

"And all the work of his power and his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king made great, are they not written in the book of the words of the days of the kings of Media and Persia?"

This sounds like the books of Kings, which often end a king's story by pointing the reader to the official book of the chronicles of the kings (for example 1 Kings 14:19). The writer is telling us this is real history, and that anyone could check it in the official records of Persia. These were not legends. They happened, and they were written down.

Notice that the great king and Mordecai are named together. A Jew born in exile, who once refused to bow and once wore sackcloth, was now written into the official history of the greatest empire on earth.

10:3 *For Mordecai the Jew **was** second to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brothers, seeking good for his people and speaking peace to all his offspring.*

"For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brothers, seeking good for his people and speaking peace to all his offspring."

These last words of the book describe the kind of leader God wants. Look at them one at a time.

"Second to King Ahasuerus." Like Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 41:40-43) and Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 2:48; 6:3), Mordecai rose to the highest place a servant could hold. God had raised up a Jew in a foreign court to protect His people.

"Great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brothers." Not everyone is loved when they rise to power. Some are envied, some are feared. Mordecai was respected and welcomed by his own people. He had not forgotten where he came from.

"Seeking good for his people." He did not use his position to make himself rich, as Haman had. He used it for the good of others. That is what power is for in God's eyes. Jesus said, "whoever desires to become great among you will be your servant" (Mark 10:43).

"Speaking peace to all his offspring." He spoke peace, the Hebrew word shalom, meaning wholeness, safety and well-being, to his people and their children after them. He looked beyond his own lifetime.

Haman sought evil for a whole people. Mordecai sought good for them. Haman's story ended on a tree. Mordecai's ended at the king's right hand. The book is a lesson in where pride leads and where faithfulness leads.

And Mordecai points beyond himself. He is a picture, in a small way, of a greater Son of Israel. Jesus was humbled even to death on a cross, and God "highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:9). He now sits at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 1:3). He seeks the good of His people, He speaks peace to them (John 14:27; Ephesians 2:17), and one day He will reign not as second to any king but as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). On that day the promise behind the whole book of Esther will be complete. God's people will be safe, not for a season under a foreign king, but forever under their own King.

The book of Esther ends without ever naming God. But by now we have seen Him on every page. A queen removed. An orphan crowned. A plot overheard. A lot that fell eleven months away. A sleepless king. A forgotten record. A tree that held its builder. A decree of death answered by a decree of life. A day of slaughter turned into a feast. Not one of these is called a miracle. All of them together show the hand of the God who keeps His promises.

What about you? Are you in a season where God seems silent? Esther says: He is still at work. Keep doing what is right. Keep standing for His people. Keep waiting. The God who turned Haman's day into Purim can turn your sorrow into joy.

Summary

King Ahasuerus imposed forced labor on the land and the coastlands of the sea. All his acts of power and might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had raised to high position, are written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, great among the Jews and well liked by his many brothers, because he sought the good of his people and spoke peace to all his descendants.

Study Questions

1. What did King Ahasuerus do in verse 1, and what does it tell us about the world after the events of Esther?

2. Where were the acts of the king and the greatness of Mordecai recorded, and why does that matter? (10:2)

3. What position did Mordecai hold at the end of the book? (10:3)

4. What does verse 3 say about the kind of man Mordecai was?

5. How is Mordecai like Joseph and Daniel? (Genesis 41:40-43; Daniel 6:3)

6. Compare how Haman used his power with how Mordecai used his.

7. Looking back over the whole book, list some of the "coincidences" through which God worked.

8. Mordecai used his position to seek the good of others. How can you use whatever influence you have for the good of others?

9. Mordecai was "speaking peace" to all his offspring. What kind of spiritual legacy do you want to leave for those who come after you?

10. Esther never names God, yet He is everywhere in it. Where do you need to trust that God is at work, even though you cannot see Him right now?

Conclusion

Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther tell the story of God's people after the exile, when they were few, poor and ruled by foreign kings. It would have been easy to think God had finished with them. But these books show the opposite. God moved the heart of Cyrus to send His people home, just as Jeremiah and Isaiah had said. He brought the temple back from the ashes, sent Ezra to teach His Law, and sent Nehemiah to build the wall in fifty-two days. And in Persia, where most of the Jews still lived, He watched over them so quietly that His name is never written in the book of Esther, yet so completely that a plan to wipe them out in a single day was turned upside down.

As I said at the start of this study, the guiding principle throughout has been to read God's Word plainly, as it is written, and let Scripture explain Scripture. Read that way, these three books give us real history: real kings, real letters, real gates and walls, real lists of families who left everything to go home. They also give us an honest picture of God's people. They wept when the foundation was laid, confessed their sins with Ezra, rejoiced at the reading of the Law, signed a covenant, and then broke it within about fifteen years. Nehemiah's last prayer, "Remember me, my God, for good" (Nehemiah 13:31), is the prayer of a man who had done all he could and knew it was not enough. Walls, lists, reforms and promises could not change the human heart.

That is why these books point beyond themselves. God kept a people, a city and a temple safe so that the Savior He promised would come from Abraham's family, from Judah and from David's line, to that very city and that very temple. About four hundred years after Nehemiah, Jesus came. He taught God's Word with authority, cleansed the temple, wept over Jerusalem, and gave His life on a tree for a people under a sentence of death, as Esther had risked hers. He rose again, and He now lives to intercede for us. The joy the people found when they understood God's Word is still ours in Him: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your stronghold" (Nehemiah 8:10). And God still has a future for the nation of Israel. The full gathering and restoration the prophets promised is still ahead, when Christ returns and reigns (Romans 11:25-27).

I hope this study has done what I set out to do: bring you closer to God, help you grow in your walk with Him, and give you confidence that He is at work even when He seems silent. Mordecai asked Esther, "who knows whether for a time like this you have attained to royalty?" (Esther 4:14). God has placed you where you are for a reason too. The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God. Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of

my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, and find a church where you can hear God's Word read and explained, as the people did in Nehemiah 8:8, and grow in the joy of the Lord.

Bibliography

The following source was consulted throughout this study. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

Green, Jay P., Sr. (ed.). The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English. Hendrickson Publishers, 1986 (2nd ed.; printing used 2005). ISBN 1-56563-977-4.