

Lesson 1: An Introduction to Ezra

Why Study Ezra & Esther?

Apart from being books of the Bible (which is certainly reason enough to study them), Ezra and Esther are fascinating historical accounts of one of the most interesting periods of time in man's history. As the handout indicates, during the 300 year period from Nabopolassar until Alexander's conquest of the Persians, we see a string of Babylonian kings and then Persian kings surrounded elsewhere in the world by such figures as Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. With all that was going on in the world, who would have thought that the most important events by far involved a few hundred thousand former captives located in a backwater Persian province? But things are not always what they seem. God's plan was at work, and God does not need the might or wisdom of man to accomplish his plans!

Why should we study all of this history? The theme of the Bible is the redemption of man through Jesus Christ and his gospel, but that theme is not just a philosophical idea that is disconnected from daily life. Instead, it is developed within the history of mankind – and much of that history centers on the history of one people, Israel.

Over half of the Bible consists of historical narration in which the inspired writers repeatedly emphasize God's role in that history. Thus, to understand Ezra and Esther, we must understand their historical context. The study of this history will also provide some modern lessons because the Bible teaches us that the way God works with his people in one historical context, such as the Persian Empire, can help us understand how he works in other contexts.

The Persian Empire

At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Babylon had conquered Israel and carried Daniel and his friends into captivity. By the end of that book, Babylon is gone, and the Medes and the Persians are in control. Daniel had prophesied about four earthly kingdoms—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome—that would be followed by the eternal kingdom, the church. Our studies in Ezra and Esther will center on the second earthly kingdom in that list: Medo-Persia. All of the events in Ezra and Esther (and also in Nehemiah) took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

The Book of Kings describes the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Jews were killed, and most of the others were carried off to Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the empire declined rapidly. Amel-marduk (the Evil-merodach who released Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 25:27-30), Nebuchadnezzar's son, reigned for only two years; then his brother-in-law, Nergal-shar-usur, reigned for four years. He left a son whom rebels removed; and Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar became the last kings of Babylon (556-539).

Nabonidus was not very popular in Babylon, especially among the priests of Marduk. He and his mother were devotees of the moon god, Sin, whose religious center was in Haran. Therefore he neglected the Babylonian religious ceremonies centered on the worship of Marduk. Nabonidus spent much of his time in the desert area southeast of Edom and left the affairs of Babylon in the hands of Belshazzar, as we see in Daniel. The internal dissension resulting from Nabonidus's poor leadership made the empire ripe for conquest.

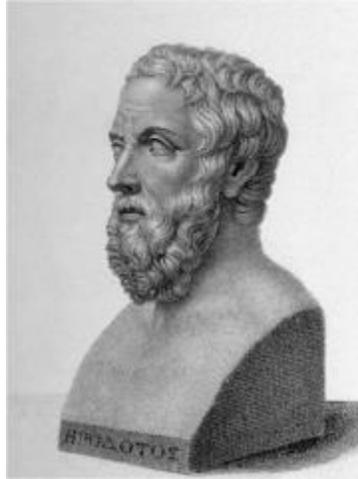
Both the Medes and the Persians were Aryan (Indo-European) tribes who moved south from Russia. First they settled in the northwestern part of Iran but later migrated farther south. The Medes occupied the western part of Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians moved farther to the southeast to part of Iran just north of the Persian Gulf.

The Persian kings were called the "Achaemenids" (a-KEY-muh-nids) after the founder of the dynasty, Achaemenes, who was followed by Teispes (Cispis). We have record of two branches of Teispes' family. One son, Cyrus I, ruled from 640 to 600; and his son, Cambyses I, ruled from 600 to 559. Cambyses was the father of Cyrus the Great. After the reign of Cambyses II, Darius the Great took over the throne. But he was from the other branch of the Achaemenian family, through Teispes' other son, Ariaramnes.

Until the time of Cyrus the Great, the Persians were vassals of the Medes. The Babylonian king Nabonidus rejoiced when Cyrus rebelled against Astyages, the last king of the Median empire, and even helped him at first. By 550 Cyrus had defeated Astyages and taken over the whole Median Empire. The nobles of both Media and Persia gave him their support and named him king of the Medes and Persians.

Babylon had reason to fear the growing empire to the north. Cyrus quickly marched across Upper Mesopotamia, conquering Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia; then he defeated Croesus, king of Lydia, in

547, gaining control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. He then conquered more territory in the east into what is now Afghanistan; so the Persian Empire reached from there to the western shores of Asia Minor. It was only a matter of time before Cyrus would take over Babylon.



In 539 Cyrus ordered Gobryas, one of his officials, to attack Babylon, and the city was quickly taken. Herodotus (pictured above) tells us that the Persians were able to enter Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River, which ran through the city, into an artificial lake, thus lowering the water level enough for the soldiers to enter the city and take the Babylonians by surprise. Daniel described how Belshazzar fell from power suddenly one night while he was banqueting. Xenophon corroborated this; he said the Persians attacked the city during a festival when “all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.” Herodotus wrote: “The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses.”



We know much about Cyrus from the famous Cyrus Cylinder – a clay barrel with a long inscription in cuneiform writing honoring Cyrus. It is mainly concerned with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and apparently was written to influence public opinion in his favor and legitimize his rule over Babylon. It is a long inscription that first tells of the misdeeds of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Then Cyrus continues:

Marduk ... scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him ... to become the ruler of all the world.

The cylinder also tells us how Cyrus treated the gods of the people he conquered:

I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy.

As we will see, the resettlements in Jerusalem came from a similar pronouncement that we will read about in Ezra. One key difference is that, rather than an image, Cyrus returned to the Jerusalem temple the precious vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken.

The Persian Empire now included all of Babylon and Syria-Palestine. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Cyrus's son Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., making the Persian Empire greater than its predecessors.

In 522 Cambyses received bad news from Persia: someone impersonating his brother Smerdis had taken over the Persian government. (Some argue that this was the actual Smerdis.) Cambyses had earlier ordered his brother murdered so this would not happen. Cambyses hurried to return to Persia. But according to Herodotus, on his way through Syria, "as he was springing into the saddle, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh." Whether the story is true (another is that he committed suicide), Cambyses evidently was wounded, gangrene set in, and three weeks later he died.

Meanwhile at Susa the usurpers were killed by a group of seven conspirators. Finally, Darius, one of the conspirators, was named king. This was Darius the Great from the other branch of the Achaemenian family mentioned earlier. Under him the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and most efficient organization.



Darius left many inscriptions telling about his exploits. The longest and most famous is the Behistun Inscription (shown above) carved on a huge rock formation on the principal road that led from Mesopotamia to the Iranian plateau. The inscription was carved on a cliff, 225 feet above the plain. It also includes reliefs of Darius, some officials, and some subjects.

During Darius I's reign, the construction of the temple in Jerusalem was resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6). As we will see in Ezra 4-5, the Jews' work on the temple had been halted because of the opposition of their neighbors. Cambyses apparently had supported the opposition (and isn't it interesting that he died unexpectedly while "springing into the saddle"!)

In Ezra 6 the Jews informed Darius that Cyrus himself had authorized the building of the temple. Darius searched the archives, found that it was true, so he again authorized the construction and commanded the opposition to cease.

At the same time, in 520 B.C., God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who told the people that they should renew the work on the temple. The people responded, God removed the opposition, and the temple was dedicated in 515 (Ezra 6:16-18).

During Darius's reign, the Greek settlements in Asia Minor rebelled against the Persian Empire. They were brought under control, but Darius then attempted to take the Greek mainland. He was defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) had served as viceroy over Babylon for twelve years under his father's rule. His great ambition as king of Persia was to conquer Greece. After quelling revolts in Egypt and Babylon, he began his Greek campaign in the spring of 480 B.C. After initial successes, conquering the northern part of the Greek mainland and burning the acropolis in Athens, Xerxes' forces suffered a naval defeat at Salamis, which led to his withdrawal from Greece. The events of the Book of Esther took place during his reign. Some suggest that the plot by palace officials to assassinate Xerxes, which Mordecai uncovered, may have been a result of Xerxes' humiliating defeat in Greece.

Although Mordecai had saved Xerxes from one palace plot, his reign of twenty years was terminated by another such plot. The captain of his bodyguard plotted to take over the throne and assassinated him in August of 465. Xerxes' oldest son was then murdered by his younger brother, Artaxerxes I, who became the next king of Persia.

The final century of the Persian Empire before its fall to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. was characterized by revolts and economic decline. Increasing taxation and the greed of government officials were factors in the growing impoverishment of the people. According to R. N. Frye, "The traditional explanation of the fall of the empire as the result of abuses of their positions by those in power, the decadence and corruption at court and among the aristocracy, combined with a

fall in the standards of living of the common folk, can be further documented by Babylonian tablets.”

The New Policy of the Persian Kings

Before Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539 B.C., many of the Babylonians looked upon Cyrus as a liberator. They were not happy with the way Nabonidus had neglected their religion. The Jews were also optimistic about the potential political change because of how Cyrus was known to treat his subjected peoples.

The Assyrians had been very cruel. They had harshly suppressed the peoples they conquered; many times they had moved entire populations from one land to another and then replaced them with other conquered peoples. This was the case when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

The Babylonians, although somewhat less cruel, followed much the same policy. Thus when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., many of the Jews were taken captive to Babylon. When the Persians took control, however, Cyrus encouraged the peoples he conquered to develop their own culture and continue their own religion. He and some of his successors even helped support the local priests in conquered nations. After conquering Babylon, he restored the place of Marduk as their principal god and allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands.

Organization and Policy of the Persian Empire

The political organization of the Persian Empire was different from that of Assyria and Babylon. It reached its greatest development during the reign of Darius I. The whole empire was divided into twenty satrapies. Each one was governed by a Persian commissioner or satrap, usually from the Persian noble families. These satraps were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the king. The satrapies were further divided into provinces, which were supervised by a governor, usually a descendant of the local nobility. Thus in Judah we read of Jews such as Zerubbabel and Nehemiah who served as governors.

Palestine belonged to the satrapy “Beyond the River,” which means the region west of the Euphrates. According to Herodotus this was the fifth satrapy. It included Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine to the border of Egypt as well as Cyprus.

The Jews in the Period of Exile

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and the first deportation, which included the exile of King Jehoiachin, are generally considered the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

Although those captured in battle probably were taken to Babylon as slaves, and many of the exiles were poor, the situation of most Jews in Babylon appears to have been good. Only King Jehoiachin and his family, captured in 597 B.C., were confined; and they were released in 562 B.C. The rest of the Jews were free to settle in communities and to engage in normal agriculture or trade.

It should come as no surprise, then, considering conditions in Judah and Babylon, that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many preferred to remain in Mesopotamia.

During the captivity the Jews lived among a foreign population and were naturally influenced by that environment. The most important influence was the Aramaic language. During the captivity, Aramaic became their principal spoken language. Babylonian influence is also seen in names such as Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

The prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel greatly influenced the Jewish captives in Babylon. Before the fall of Jerusalem, few in Israel heeded these prophecies; but when the predictions about Jerusalem's destruction came true, the Jews realized that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were truly prophets sent by God. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted the fall and destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for the Jews' unfaithfulness to God, but they also included messages of hope for the continued purpose of God for his people Israel. This included a return from captivity and the promise of the Messiah. Although Jeremiah's ministry appeared to be a complete failure during his lifetime, his messages became one of the principal reasons for the survival of the Jewish faith.

Ezekiel's preaching also influenced the Jews in Babylon. Three themes appear throughout his book: worship at the temple, the land of Israel, and the Lord's people. This influence took lasting root because these truths are also important in Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezekiel also emphasized the preservation of holiness and taught that purity and justice are the essential marks of God's people. These same themes are seen in Ezra and Nehemiah's concern for the holiness and separation. The messages of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel kept alive the Jews' hope of returning to their own land.

After carrying away captive the best of the population in Judah, the Babylonians did not bring other peoples into Judah as the Assyrians had done in the north after the fall of Samaria. Thus a population vacuum was created in Judah. Archaeological excavations indicate that Judah was sparsely populated in this period. Except for the Negev and along the northern frontier, virtually all the fortified towns in Judah had been destroyed.

Since the time of Joseph, Jews had frequently looked upon Egypt as a place of refuge, although they were repeatedly admonished by the prophets not to attempt to find security there. It is likely that some migrated there following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The Bible tells of a group who left Judah for Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jer. 41:16-18).



This is supported by the Elephantine papyri, our primary evidence of Jews in Egypt in the Persian period. This collection of fifth century B.C. papyri was from a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in the Nile. The site was a frontier outpost on Egypt's southern border occupied by Jewish mercenaries and their families. It was apparently founded sometime in the sixth century, perhaps soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. The papyri, consisting of legal documents and letters, date from the fifth century B.C. and reveal much about the political situation and about Jewish laws and customs there.

The Returns to Jerusalem

Ezra 1-2 describes the happy time in 538 B.C. when the first Jewish exiles were permitted to return to Judah. This was a day that was to have profound significance for the whole subsequent history of God's people. Nevertheless, the group that returned under Sheshbazzar was small. According to Ezra 2:64-65 the number of those returning was 49,897. Later we know about five thousand returned with Ezra (Ezra 8:1-14), and other groups of Jews probably also arrived from Babylonia from time to time.

In Ezra and Nehemiah we read of neighboring enemies of the Jews. Judah was surrounded by other provinces, all part of the fifth satrapy mentioned earlier. Samaria was the province on the north where Sanballat was governor. Ammon-Gilead was the province on the east where Tobiah was governor. Arabia-Idumea was on the south where Geshem was governor. On the west was the province of Ashdod.

Little information is available about subsequent groups of Jews who returned to Judah. More must have come, for at the beginning of the Hellenistic period (331 B.C.) the Jewish community was well established. On the other hand, many Jews stayed in Babylon, and for centuries Babylon remained a center for Jewish studies.

Historical Questions

The Chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah

In Ezra and Nehemiah it appears that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the seventh year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), and Nehemiah arrived thirteen years later in 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1). However, while the traditional date of Nehemiah's arrival has generally been maintained, during the past century many scholars have argued that dating Ezra's arrival *after* Nehemiah's makes more sense of the historical data.

Several apparent historical anomalies have been noted that lead to this conclusion. For example, if Ezra came to Jerusalem to teach God's Law in Israel (Ezra 7:10), why did he wait thirteen years for a public reading of the Law (Neh. 8)? And in view of Ezra's reforms (Ezra 9-10), why did Nehemiah find the situation so deteriorated only a few years later (Neh. 1:3; 5:1-5; 13:1-31)?

The traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem is based on understanding Ezra 7:7-8 as referring to Artaxerxes I. Some have

argued that the king referred to is actually Artaxerxes II, thus dating Ezra's arrival in 398 B.C., allowing no overlap between Nehemiah's ministry and that of Ezra. Others argue that the "the seventh year" in Ezra 7:7-8 should read "the thirty-seventh year," which was 428 B.C. This allows some overlap of the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah but avoids a long interval between Ezra's arrival and his reading of the Law.

Those who maintain the traditional dates, however, have the better argument. As one commentator has noted, "the traditional view makes the most sense of the relationship between Ezra's reforms and those of Nehemiah ... Ezra's juridical role makes more sense as an action that preceded the more directly administrative role of Nehemiah." We will maintain the traditional dating of 458 B.C. for Ezra's return and 445 B.C. for Nehemiah's return.

The Identity of Sheshbazzar

The relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel is not clear. In Ezra 3:8 we read that Zerubbabel and others began the work of building the house of God, and in Hag 1:1 he is called governor of Judah. In Ezra 5:14, however, Sheshbazzar is called governor, and v. 16 says, "This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem."

Some suggest that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person. However, it is preferable to consider them two distinct persons. One commentator suggests there are two possible ways to see their relationship: (1) Sheshbazzar was governor at the beginning, then Zerubbabel became governor and completed the temple; or (2) Sheshbazzar was responsible to the Persian government, officially regarded "by the outside world" as the temple builder, though Zerubbabel really built it.

The most logical conclusion and the one that best explains the biblical data is that Sheshbazzar was the leader and governor when the first group of captives came (Ezra 1:8; 5:14). He disappears from our view quickly, and his nephew Zerubbabel, who accompanied Sheshbazzar to Judah and led in the building project, continued as governor (Ezra 3:2; Neh. 12:1; Hag 1:1).

The Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah

The Continuity of God's Plan and People

One of the chief objectives of Ezra and Nehemiah was to show the Jews that they were the continuation of the chosen Jewish nation prior to the exile. One way that this continuity is emphasized is by allusions to the exodus, with the idea being that the returnees had experienced a new exodus. As soon as the new temple was completed, they celebrated the Passover (Ezra 6:19-22). Later, after reading the Law, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8).

God's providential care is repeatedly emphasized to show that God's redemptive plan was continuing to work through the Jewish people. It was God who was responsible for the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1). He also secured the permission for construction to continue (Ezra 5:5; 6:14; 6:22) and for Ezra and his group to come to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27). He even protected them on the way (Ezra 8:22). It was God who secured Nehemiah's appointment as governor (Neh. 2:8) and guided in all the details of the construction of the wall (Neh. 4:14; 4:20). God frustrated the plans of the Jews' enemies and preserved the Jewish people.

Ezra and Nehemiah emphasize that God can use even foreign rulers to fulfill his purposes for the Jewish community. This is noted in the Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:6), in Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra (7:11-27), and in many details of Nehemiah's assignment (Neh. 1-6). God's sovereignty encompasses the entire world, all nations, to assure the continuation of his redemptive plan through the Jewish people.

This continuation of the people of God also meant the continuation of the covenant. This little community of returned Jewish exiles was receiving the blessings of God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai. The prayers of Ezra 9:6-15; Neh. 1:5-11; and Neh. 9:5-37 demonstrate their deep consciousness of the covenant. "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram . . . and you made a covenant with him. . . . You have kept your promise" (Neh. 9:7-8). Ezra and Nehemiah recognized and confessed that the people broke the covenant and for that reason suffered the captivity. But they appealed to God's covenant mercy and promises for the reestablishment of the covenant community.

In fact, this new situation under foreign rule meant that the Jewish people became again more strictly a covenant community and not a nation as in the monarchy. The community's identity did not now depend on its political institutions and identity as a nation but on its

special covenant relation to God. In God's providence this was a step in the preparation for the New Testament transition to the church under the new covenant in which all believers are one in Christ and where physical, ethnic, political, and geographic distinctions are overcome.

Separation

The emphasis on continuity with the covenant people of God led to a strong emphasis on separation from any form of defilement with the surrounding people. The Jews who returned were a tiny island in a great sea of peoples and religious traditions. It was important that the covenant community remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethical norms.

Ezra's and Nehemiah's actions may seem harsh, but those actions show us how important it was in God's plan that this covenant community continue. As one commentator noted, "Against the backdrop of the Exile, a judgment that had taken place precisely because the covenant nation had abandoned this principle of exclusivity, it is most evident why Ezra and Nehemiah give evidence of such interest in the purity of the post-exile remnant."

This was a crucial point in the history of the Jewish people. Unchecked assimilation would have meant the end of their role in God's plan. Some blame Ezra and Nehemiah for the "legalism gone to seed" that we find in the Jewish community in the time of Jesus, and it is true that later, especially after the life-and-death conflict with Hellenism in the Maccabean period, some of these emphases were exaggerated. Some of the Jews accepted Hellenism and virtually abandoned their Jewish faith, "but it was such conservative and exclusivistic groups that preserved Judaism and led the way toward Christianity."

Scripture

Ezra and Nehemiah affirm the centrality of the Law of God in the life of his people. They teach that Scripture reveals God's will. The revival started with those who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9 and that of the people in Neh. 9 both show a profound understanding of God and his ways as revealed in the Books of Moses. Ezra and Nehemiah call the people back to "the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (Ezra 7:6). It constantly says the people acted "in accordance with what is written" (Ezra 3:2-4; 6:18; Neh. 8:14-15). More than anywhere else in Scripture, these books show the power of God at work through written texts. As Artaxerxes wrote to Ezra (7:25), the

Bible is “the wisdom of your God, which you possess [lit., which is in your hand].”

Worship

Worship is also central in Ezra and Nehemiah. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. Worship was their top priority.

The temple was vital to the Jewish people because it was a symbol of God’s presence and a reminder that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). One of the purposes of these books was to show how God led and provided for the rebuilding of the temple. When the temple was completed, the people celebrated with a large dedication service, where they “offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats” (Ezra 6:17). Soon afterward they celebrated the Passover. Then when the city wall was complete another great celebration was held (Neh. 12:27-13:3). The need to protect the purity of their worship was one of the motives for their emphasis on separation.

Prayer

The importance of prayer is taken for granted throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra’s extensive prayer in Ezra 9 and that of the people in Neh. 9 show their belief that God hears and answers prayer. They praised God, confessed sins, depended on God’s promises, and made requests.

Furthermore, the work of Ezra and Nehemiah was immersed in prayer. Before starting out on the journey to Jerusalem, Ezra proclaimed a fast “so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey” (Ezra 8:21). Nehemiah fasted and prayed “for some days” (Neh. 1:4) before attempting to ask the king’s permission to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah constantly mentions short prayers that he made in moments of crisis (e.g., Neh. 2:4-5). He presents us with an admirable example of combining prayer with action. Several times he asked God to “remember” him (Neh. 5:19; 13:14,22,31). The whole book can teach us a great deal about trusting God in prayer.

Restoration

The people returned with a purpose—to restore the temple. Although it would not possess the splendor it once enjoyed (3:12), both the people and God would be pleased (Hag. 1:4-9). But it was not enough

to restore just the physical, outward forms; hearts must also be restored. Restoring a building is a great undertaking, but restoring the heart is the most difficult task of all. There would be little advantage in having a wall to defend against enemies if the people inside the wall had corrupt hearts. Purity of heart must always be given primary consideration in the restoration process (Mat. 15:18-20).

Faith

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther provide many examples of what faith can accomplish. Through faith the temple was rebuilt. Although there were obstacles, eventually God granted them success.

“Today there are many problems in the Lord’s church. Commitment to truth seems to have diminished among those in whom it once appeared to be strong. Many are saddened at the apostasy of some churches and brethren and the wishy-washy attitude of others. Historically God’s people have endured such challenges and discouragement. The way out is through faith. God is not unaware of the problems or those who often feel alone in upholding His ways. If faithful churches and brethren focus only on the problems, it will result in shrinkage and more loss. In addition to meeting the challenges that false brethren pose, we must continue preaching the Gospel to all the world, restoring the pattern, and trusting in God’s providence. As those of Nehemiah’s day, we need to use one hand to hold a sword (to defend against error) and use the other hand to build the wall of the church (each new convert being a living stone). God will grant success.”