

## CHAPTER 8

### PERSIAN KINGS SEND EZRA AND NEHEMIAH TO JERUSALEM

What's a temple without a priest, or a crew without a foreman? Certainly the temple had priests and the work projects of Jerusalem had overseers before Ezra or Nehemiah came on the scene. The stories of these two uniquely gifted men, however, are stories that commemorate a new era in the rebuilding of the city of God.

Ezra was a priest who led a group of Jewish families to Jerusalem with permission of Ardashir. This was the second exodus out of Babylon. Under Cyrus more than 42,000 Jews had returned to rebuild the city and the temple, which was finally completed in 515 B.C. That was during the reign of Darius and is recorded in Ezra 6:22. In the Book of Ezra there is a span of thirty-seven years between Ezra 6:24 and Ezra 7:1. We know that Darius reigned over the Persian Kingdom for 30 more years before he was succeeded by his son, Khashayarshah, the husband of Queen Esther in 465 B.C. We also know that within this time span Queen Esther and her cousin, Mordecai, saved the Jewish people who remained in Persia. Among them was Ezra. Then King Ardashir came to the throne.

Ezra went to Jerusalem in the seventh year of the reign of Ardashir (Ezra 7:1-7). Our lesson will cover Persia and the Jews' return to Palestine.

#### A.      THE KING'S BLESSING

1. Notice the favor Ardashir gave Ezra!
  - a. All Jews desiring so could return to Jerusalem.  
"Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go." Ezra 7:13
  - b. Ardashir gave gifts of gold and silver.  
"Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem." Ezra 7:15-16
  - c. Grants of silver, wheat, wine, oil, and salt were made available (Ezra 7:21-22).
  - d. Tax exemption was given to religious workers. (In the United States ministers' housing allowances are not subject to federal tax. I wonder if this was based on the old Bible principle in Nehemiah: tax exemption for religious workers.)

“You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God.” Ezra 7:24

- e. There was religious freedom for those who taught God’s Word.  
“And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them.” Ezra 7:25
2. Notice the good reputation Ezra and the Jews had concerning their relationship with the government and king. (Ezra 6:10; 7:23) God’s people, the Jews, were known as people who prayed for the political rulers of the land. Both King Darius and King Ardashir asked the Jews to pray for them. We as Christians are exhorted to pray for kings as well as for all who are in authority. “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” (I Timothy 2:1-2) Do you pray for the government leaders of Iran, the government leaders of the country where you are now living, and even those governments that may persecute Christians in authority over you even if you disagree with their policies and morals? We are asked to pray in I Timothy, so that we as believers “may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” Ezra had a bold faith. He not only trusted God for safety, but publicly declared to King Ardashir that he did not need a king’s escort to protect the people and the stuff they were carrying. He told the king, “the gracious hand of our God is to everyone that looks to Him, but His great anger is against all who forsake Him.” Ezra 8:22

## **B. EZRA, A MAN WITH A MISSION**

1. Ezra was a son of a priest, who could trace his ancestry back to Aaron, the first high priest. He was a scribe in the law of Moses. One Bible dictionary says, “It would seem probable that Ezra held a position in Persia similar to the Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs. His task was to enforce uniform observance of the Jewish law, and to this end he had authority to make appointments within the Jewish State”.  
“This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given.” Ezra 7:6
2. Ezra’s goal in life was threefold. In Ezra 7:10, first, he prepared his heart to seek the Lord. Second, he desired to do God’s will; and third, he taught it to others. What an example for us!
3. The list of Jewish families returning numbers 1,495 people, probably heads of families. This means that about 7,000 people returned as compared to the 42,360 who returned more than 80 years earlier under Cyrus’ decree in Ezra 1:64.

4. Notice that the trip took four months (Ezra 7:9). This gives us a rough idea of how long the Magi (wise men) took 500 years later when they visited the new-born Savior, Jesus. (Ezra's travels probably took longer since his was with a large group of over 7,000 people as compared to the small group of Magi.)
5. Notice how Ezra and his group prepared for the journey (Ezra 8:21-23). God's people fasted, prayed, and asked for God's blessing. They publicly proclaimed that they were trusting in God to deliver them. Ezra did not ask King Ardashir for soldiers for protection.
6. Notice the recurring phrase, "the gracious hand of our God," showing that God's grace was the source of their blessings (Ezra 7:6,9,28; 8:18,22).

### **C. NEHEMIAH, FROM CUP-BEARER TO FOREMAN**

Nehemiah, under King Ardashir, traveled from Persia to Jerusalem 5 years after Ezra returned (Ezra 7:7; Nehemiah 2:1) in order to oversee construction of the walls around Jerusalem. We will examine the portion of the book of Nehemiah which relates to Persia.

1. Nehemiah made his request to King Ardashir in the Citadel of Susa (Nehemiah 1:1). (Susa is most commonly known as Shushan the Palace. This city is located in southwestern Iran near Andimeshk. It is the same city where Queen Esther pleaded for her countrymen, the Jews, to be saved from annihilation.
2. Nehemiah was a government official whose initial responsibility was "cupbearer" to the king (Nehemiah 1:1). He tasted the food and drinks for King Ardashir to make sure nothing was poisoned. Nehemiah must have been highly trusted. Perhaps his status as a Jew qualified him more highly than another who might have a motive to overthrow the king.
3. Nehemiah was later appointed by Ardashir to be governor of Judah (Nehemiah 5:14; 8:9; 10:1; 13:6).

### **D. THE BURDEN OF NEHEMIAH**

1. Usually, God gives us burdens based on information. Nehemiah probably rejoiced when nearly 7,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem under Ezra. He became burdened when he heard that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down, the gates still burned from fire, and that his people were in great trouble and disgrace. "Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah 1:2-3

2. Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Notice that throughout the Book of Nehemiah, he prayed both long and short prayers. He trusted God to work through him (Nehemiah 1:4-11; 2:4; 4:4; 5:19; 6-9; 6:14). Evidently, Nehemiah prayed four months before he mentioned his concerns to the king. (The period from the month of Chislev to Nisan was four months--Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1).
3. Have you thought about why Jerusalem needed walls and gates? Modern cities don't have them. Walls protected people from invading enemies and wild animals. In addition to security, walls helped nurture a common identity. Gates provided a way to regulate those entering and leaving the city. Most villages in Iran today still have walls around them. Tehran, Iran, though now a modern city, retains landmarks of the past: "gate to Gazvin," the "gate to Shemiran," and the "gate to Dolate." In early times Tehran had a wall around it with twelve different gates.
4. Some might think Nehemiah was being presumptuous when he asked for timber from the king's forest to build the gates and walls as well as soldiers to protect him. No, Nehemiah was not presumptuous. He had spent months in prayer. His confidence was not in his ability to make a request, but in the God who heard his prayer.

#### **E. A GLIMPSE AT THE REST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The first few sentences in most of the prophetic books usually say, "The words of so and so in the days of king..." (See Isaiah 1:1; Jeremiah 1:1-3; Ezekiel 1:1-3; Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1). These were the current kings of Israel during the time of the prophets.

However, the last prophets listed in the Old Testament were Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who were often called post-captivity prophets. They brought messages from God to the Jewish people after they were freed from the Babylonian captivity by Cyrus and had returned to Palestine.

Notice that, these books are no longer dated by the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah, but the by the reign of the Persian King, Darius.

"In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest." Haggai 1:1

"In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo." Zechariah 1:1

#### **F. MAKING A PERSONAL APPLICATION**

1. Think about how God prepared three individuals in Persia for His service. For Esther (see Chapter 7), God used circumstances. For Ezra, He used his life goal and background of being brought up in a religious family. For Nehemiah, He used his god-given gift of administration and leadership. How has God been preparing you? Are you cooperating with God's work in your life? Perhaps like Nehemiah, God may use you to bring your Iranian family and friends to salvation.

2. Part of maintaining our spiritual lives is learning about what concerns God - that His glory would be known and that He would be worshiped by all peoples. Perhaps God has led you to this booklet to pray for His work among Iranians including ethnic groups in Iran which have never heard the gospel. Other ways to become involved include giving money to help fund radio broadcasts going into Iran and perhaps taking Bibles, New Testaments and literature into Iran to share the good news about salvation in Jesus Christ when you visit your family and friends. You could even fax, e-mail, or telephone portions of the Bible, or chapters from books like this.
3. How would you compare Nehemiah and Ezra? Ezra and Nehemiah were both men of God, but each was led differently. For instance, Ezra did not want king Ardashir's protection on the journey yet Nehemiah, accepted the protection of the king's soldiers (Ezra 8:21-23 and Nehemiah 2:9). However, this was not an indication that Ezra trusted God more than Nehemiah. The Bible states that "the hand of God" was on both Ezra and Nehemiah. Further, we can learn something from the differences in the faith approaches of both men.
  - a. As fallible humans, we sometimes try to make formulas out of the procedures that godly men use to accomplish great things. Nehemiah differed from Ezra in how he got things done—yet, his prayer life was indicative of his trust in God. While the Word, character, and will of God never change, the methods of serving Him and applying Scriptural principles may vary for different Christians, churches, and cultures.
  - b. God calls people to serve in different functions. Ezra was the religious leader. He did the preaching in Nehemiah 8 and a great revival took place. Nehemiah was the administrator. He understood how to motivate men and the walls of Jerusalem were built.

#### **F. DIG DEEPER**

1. Often Nehemiah is cited as an example of a man who used modern management and leadership principles to build the wall. Make a list of these principles and how they would apply in a business situation today. What relationship do you see between Nehemiah's administrative ability and his prayer life?
2. Those of you who have the gift of administration may relate to a classic book entitled, Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership by Cyril J. Barber, published by the Loreinez Publication House. It is out of print, but copies usually can be found on the internet. As an administrator, I have appreciated the biblical principles and their application as they relate to my area of ministry.