

## Ezra-Nehemiah

By Joelee Chamberlain

Do you remember when I told you how Nebuchadnezzar had carried the people of Judah away as captives to Babylon? And the Babylonian army, Nebuchadnezzar's army, had knocked down the whole city of Jerusalem, even the wall around the city? And Nebuchadnezzar's army had even knocked down the beautiful temple of God that Solomon had built many years before, hadn't he? And do you remember why God had let this happen to His special people, the Jews? That's right, because they were being very wicked and worshipping idols and doing all sorts of evil things. God was punishing them to teach them that those idols couldn't do anything, that they weren't God, and to bring them back to Him, the only God, and make them be good. God loved them and wanted them to trust Him and learn to be good. And do you remember how long God had said they would be away from Jerusalem? Yes, God through His prophets had said they would be captives in Babylon for 70 years. But the prophets had also said that at the end of the 70 years many of them would be able to go back to the destroyed city of Jerusalem and build another temple for the Lord God and build the city back up again. Well, today I thought I'd tell you a little about when the Jews were able to go back and rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. Do you think you'd like to hear that? All right, then. What I'm going to tell you is from two books of the Bible, the book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah.

Well, then. Remember that I told you another time that the Babylonians had conquered Israel and lots of the rest of the world? Well then later the Medes and the Persians captured Babylon and took their empire away from them. The Persians became more important than the Medes, so soon the Persians were ruling all over the world. Well, there was a Persian king named Cyrus. About 100 years before Cyrus's time, though, the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah that a man named Cyrus would let the Jews go back to Jerusalem and build it up. Well, whatever God says, always happens, doesn't it? And now was that time. A man named Cyrus became the king of the Persian empire, and the very first year that Cyrus was king, he made a proclamation, that is, he said something for everyone to hear and even had it written down. Cyrus said, "The Lord God of Heaven has give me this great, big kingdom, and He has told me to build a temple for Him in Jerusalem." (I don't know how the Lord told Cyrus this. Maybe he had read the book of Isaiah or maybe some way the Lord had just let him know. We aren't told how. But Cyrus knew it.)

Then Cyrus proclaimed, "Who is there of the Lord God's people? Whoever of you wants to can go back to Jerusalem in the land of Judah and build a house for the Lord God of Israel (He is the God). If you don't want to go but want to stay here, then you help whoever does go. Give them money and animals and whatever they need." (By the way, Daniel was still alive at this time! You remember Daniel, don't you? He's the one who was thrown into the lions' den. Daniel was an old man at the time of Cyrus, the king of Persia, and was still being a prophet of the Lord. Remember how Daniel had read about the 70 years and had prayed about it, and God had sent the angel Gabriel to explain things to Daniel?)

Now, do you remember when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had destroyed the temple of the Lord 70 years earlier, how Nebuchadnezzar had taken all of the beautiful golden things out of the temple of the Lord and had carried them back to Babylon? Well, now Cyrus, the king of Persia, took those same things and gave them back to the Jews so they could take them for the temple they were going to build for the Lord in Jerusalem! There were hundreds of golden and silver dishes and other things that had been used in the temple, and now Cyrus gave them back to the Jews!

Then the leaders of the Jews and the priests and Levites and temple singers and lots of others got up and got ready to go to Jerusalem to build a temple to the Lord there. And those who didn't want to go gave them silver and gold and animals and all sorts of other things. They wanted to help, too, even though they themselves weren't going back.

A man named Zerubbabel was the leader of the Jews who went back to Jerusalem. That's a funny sounding name, isn't it! Zer-ub-ba-bel. But Zerubbabel was the great-great-great-grandson of good king Josiah. Zerubbabel wasn't a king; Cyrus, the Persian king, was their king, but Zerubbabel was now the leader of the Jews who were going to go back to Jerusalem. You can imagine how happy they were! Thousands of the Jews went back with Zerubbabel.

So the people went back to the land of Judah and to the cities where their grandfathers had lived before being carried away as captives to Babylon. Then after they were all settled down, they all went to Jerusalem to start rebuilding. And the first thing they did there was to build an altar to the Lord God of Israel and offer sacrifices to the Lord. They knew that the people who were living around them might be their enemies, and they wanted the Lord to protect them. And they offered the sacrifices the way that had been written in the law that the Lord had given to Moses hundreds of years before. They did this even though there wasn't a temple yet.

Then they began paying people to bring them big logs so they could start rebuilding the Lord's temple. And finally they were able to begin working on the temple. They made the foundation of the temple and sang many songs praising the Lord for His mercy to them. And everyone shouted and praised the Lord, because the foundation of the temple had been laid. That means that they were starting on rebuilding the temple. They were happy. But there were many of the priests and Levites and leaders who were very old and who could remember Solomon's beautiful temple, and they began to cry when they thought of the beautiful temple that had been destroyed. So there was lots of noise! People shouting and being happy and people crying!

Now, there were other people living around there, and they weren't Jews. They heard that the children of Israel were going to build a temple for the Lord, and they came to Zerubbabel and asked him if they could help build it. But Zerubbabel said, "No, we want to do it ourselves just as Cyrus, king of Persia, told us to do."

So the other people began causing a lot of trouble for the Jews, making it hard for them to work on the temple. This went on all the time Cyrus was king of Persia and then later when other

men became the kings of Persia. These bad men even wrote letters with lies to the man who was king of Persia after King Cyrus died. They told terrible lies about the Jews so that the man who was then king of Persia told them to stop rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple. So the Jews stopped rebuilding the temple then.

Finally, after some years two of the Lord's prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, prophesied to the Jews about building the temple and encouraged them. So Zerubbabel and the other leaders began working on the temple of the Lord there in Jerusalem again, and the 2 prophets helped them. (We have books in the Bible that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah wrote, don't we?)

Well, the enemies of the Jews came to them and said, "Who told you that you could build this temple?!" They were trying to make them stop working on it. But the Lord helped the Jews so that they kept right on working on the temple.

Well, as I just said, King Cyrus was dead by this time, and the Persian governor of part of the land of Israel went to the Jews and said to them, "Why they were doing this building?"

The Jews explained to this governor that quite a few years before that King Cyrus had told them they could, and Cyrus had even given them the golden things from the temple to take with them. So the Persian governor wrote a letter to the man who was the king of Persia then. The letter said, "The Jews say that King Cyrus told them to build this house for their God. Why don't you check on that and let us know if this is true or not?"

Well, the king of Persia did check on it, and he found out that what the Jews had said was true. The king sent a letter back to the governor and told him that it was all true. Now, the laws of the Medes and Persians couldn't be changed, so the king also said, "Leave them alone and let them work on the temple for their God. Also, give them some money to help them and give them animals and other thing to sacrifice to the God of Heaven and tell them to pray for me and my sons. No one is to try to change this law that I've made. If they do, I'll kill him and tear his house down and make a trash heap out of it!"

So the Persian governor helped the Jews after that, and they finished the temple for the Lord God, and they had a big celebration to dedicate the temple. The Jews offered many sacrifices to the Lord and then they had a big feast. They were able to do all of this because the Lord had made the king want to help them! (Right around this time is when the beautiful Jewish young woman named Esther was married to the king of Persia. I'll tell you about her another time.)

All right, time went by, and more of the Jews wanted to leave Babylon and go to back to Jerusalem. So now a Jewish priest named Ezra led a group of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. The king of Persia let any of the Jews who wanted to, to go to Jerusalem, and the king sent lots of money with them and he sent beautiful gold and silver things for the temple in Jerusalem. It took them 5 months to make this trip! Almost half a year! With all of this gold and silver, you might think that Ezra would be afraid people would try to steal from them as they traveled. You might

think Ezra would want soldiers to protect them from bandits, wouldn't you? But no. Before they started on their long journey, Ezra had everyone fast and pray to the Lord for protection. Ezra trusted the Lord to protect them, and the Lord did protect them. They didn't have any trouble on their long trip.

Ezra was going to Jerusalem specifically to teach the Jews there what the laws of God were.

The king of Persia told Ezra to find men to be judges and rulers over the Jews there in Israel, and that Ezra was to teach them God's law, and anyone who didn't obey the law of God was to be killed.

Ezra said, "Blessed by the Lord God who has made the king do these things!"

But when Ezra got to Jerusalem, he found out that quite a few of the Jews had forgotten what they were supposed to do, and they were forgetting the Lord! Just imagine! And some of them were marrying women who worshipped idols! Ezra was very unhappy and upset! Ezra tore his clothes to show how upset he was. Ezra fell on his knees and prayed to the Lord. Ezra told the Lord how very bad they were and how good the Lord was to them. Ezra was praying and crying and throwing himself onto the ground in front of the temple. The people realized how bad they were being, and lots of the people came to where Ezra was. Finally some of the Jewish leaders promised Ezra that they would stop being so wicked and would do whatever Ezra said. So Ezra got up, but Ezra was still mourning and Ezra said for the people to all come to Jerusalem. So they did. They all gathered together in Jerusalem, and they were very upset. And it was even raining a whole lot. And Ezra stood up and told them how wicked they were being, and everyone promised to stop being so bad. And they did stop, and they began obeying the Lord. And that is the end of the book of Ezra. But we will hear about Ezra again in the next book of the Bible, the book of Nehemiah, which we're going to talk about now.

Well, the temple was rebuilt, and many Jews were living in their homes around the land of Judah, but the city of Jerusalem itself was still all broken down, just as it had been when Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed it many years before.

Well, back in the Persian kingdom, there was a Jewish man named Nehemiah. Nehemiah worked for the king of Persia. One day someone came from Jerusalem and came and talked to Nehemiah. Nehemiah said, "How are the Jews who went back to the land of Judah, and how are things going in Jerusalem?"

They said to Nehemiah, "Well, the city of Jerusalem itself is still broken down. Even the gates are still burned up."

This news made Nehemiah very upset. Now why do you think Nehemiah would be so sad about Jerusalem? Well, we need to remember that Jerusalem was not only the main city of the Jews and where the temple of the Lord God was, but the Lord had often said that His name was on the city of Jerusalem. Now, that doesn't mean that the Lord's name was actually written on the city itself. But it means that Jerusalem was very, very special to the Lord, and this means that it was

very, very special to all of the Jews. So the city of Jerusalem should be taken care of. So when Nehemiah heard that the city was still all knocked down and burned up, Nehemiah sat down and cried and mourned and didn't eat. And Nehemiah prayed to the Lord.

Nehemiah said, "O Lord God of heaven, you are very great and merciful. Please listen to me as I pray. I know that the children of Israel had been very wicked and hadn't obeyed you, and that is why we became captives in Babylon. But we are sorry for that, and you have let many of us go back. But now, O Lord, please listen to me. Please have the king do what I will ask him."

Well, Nehemiah's job was to bring the king of Persia a cup of wine with his dinner. Now, it was against the law for anyone to be with the king of Persia and look sad! Isn't that a funny law?! So even though Nehemiah was very sad about Jerusalem, Nehemiah hadn't been looking sad. But after praying to the Lord and asking for His mercy, one day when Nehemiah brought the cup of wine to the king, Nehemiah looked sad. The king noticed this, but the Lord made it so that the king was not mad about it. Instead, the king said to Nehemiah, "Why are you looking so sad? I know you aren't sick, so you must be very unhappy about something."

This made Nehemiah very afraid, but he said to the king, "O king, why shouldn't I be sad when Jerusalem, the city of my fathers, is still all broken down and the gates are still all burned up?"

The king of Persia said, "What do you want me to do about it?"

So Nehemiah quickly prayed and then he said, "If you don't mind, O king, and if you like me, please send me to Jerusalem to build up the city again."

The king said, "How long would you be gone, and when would you be back?"

So the king was going to let Nehemiah go to Jerusalem! Nehemiah told him about how long he would be gone, and then Nehemiah said, "Please give me letters to take with me so that people will help me as I go. And please give me a letter to the man who is in charge of your forests so that I can get wood and boards to build up the city of Jerusalem and the walls of the city." And the king did! And the king sent soldiers to go with Nehemiah.

When Nehemiah got to Jerusalem, one night he secretly went out by himself on his horse and looked over the whole city of Jerusalem to see how very broken down it was. After that he called the leaders of the Jews together and said to them, "You see how terribly broken down the city of Jerusalem is. Let's build it up again." And Nehemiah told them how the king of Persia was helping him.

So the leaders all said, "Yes, let's rebuild the city of Jerusalem."

But there were some bad men near there who didn't like the Jews. One of these bad men

was named Sanballat. Sanballat didn't want anyone to help the Jews and he didn't want the city of Jerusalem built up again.

Well, the Jews began working on the walls of the city. And when Sanballat heard that they were rebuilding the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem, he was very angry, and he began making fun of the Jews. He said, "Huh, do those weak Jews think they can take those heaps of trash and make walls!" And Sanballat and other men began planning to stop the Jews from building the walls of Jerusalem.

But Nehemiah prayed to the Lord and asked the Lord God to see how bad Sanballat was being to them. And the Jews just kept building the walls of Jerusalem.

Well, Sanballat heard that the Jews were still building the walls, and he was really mad about this, and he decided to fight against the Jews. He figured fighting them would make them stop. And it did make the Jews sort of afraid. They didn't know when their enemies would come and fight them as they worked.

But do you know what Nehemiah did? He said to the people who were doing the building, "Don't be afraid. Remember that the Lord is very strong. So you fight for your families." And then all of the Jews who worked on the walls began wearing weapons as they worked! And they took turns doing the building. The ones doing the work would wear a sword as they worked. And the others would stand guard with spears and shields and bows and arrows and armor. And there would be a man with a trumpet. If bad Sanballat's men came to fight, then the man would blow the trumpet, and all the Jews would come fight. So they took turns working and guarding, and they worked on the wall. And even at night they guarded the wall in case any enemies came.

Sanballat even tried to trick Nehemiah to meet with him so that he could kill him, but Nehemiah knew it was a trick and wouldn't go.

Well, finally the wall around the city of Jerusalem was finished, and the gates were put up. Sanballat and the other enemies were unhappy about that, and they realized that the Lord God was helping the Jews.

Then Nehemiah ordered that there were to be guards at the gates of the city and that the gates were to be closed during the night.

Then all of the Jews gathered at Jerusalem and talked to Ezra. Remember the priest Ezra? He was still living there. Do you remember the main reason why Ezra had gone to Jerusalem? Yes, it was to teach the people about God's laws. And now the people talked to Ezra and asked Ezra to read them the laws that the Lord had given to Moses a long time before. So he did. Ezra read the whole law of God to them. It took all morning long to read it. And everyone listened carefully all the time Ezra was reading the law of God, and Ezra explained it to them. When he was finished, Ezra blessed all of the people, and they bowed and worshipped the Lord.

Then the people realized that it was the time that in the law it said they were to celebrate one of the great feasts of the Lord. It was called the feast of tabernacles. It was a feast that was to remember when the Lord, many, many years before then had brought them out of Egypt with Moses as their leader and they had lived in the wilderness in tents. (Tabernacles means tents.) So they had a great feast for 7 days just as the law said. And each day Ezra would read the book of the law of God to them. And everyone was very happy. And they talked about when the Lord had taken their ancestors out of Egypt and had taken care of them in the wilderness. And they all said that they would follow the Lord now and would not pay any attention to people who worshipped idols nor marry any of them, but instead they would follow the law of the Lord carefully.

By the way, Jews still keep the feast of tabernacles today, did you know that? And many, many years after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when Jesus was here on earth, He kept the feast of tabernacles too, and one time at that feast He told people that they should trust Him.

So those are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Jerusalem was now rebuilt and many people were again living there. And the temple was rebuilt, and the Jews never worshipped idols again. And the people were following the Lord God, and the Lord was blessing them.

And we must always follow what the Lord tells us to do, too, right? Whether it's doing good things or trusting Him to take care of us. And what is the most important thing that we should do? Yes, we should trust the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, to save us from our sins.

Jesus loves us so much that He died for us so that if we trusted in Him, we could go be with Him forever someday. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it?

