

The Return Era

Ezra – Nehemiah – Esther

I. Despair: Destruction from War and Neglect

- Neh. 1:1-3 – Jerusalem was destroyed 70 years earlier and was left in a state of ruin. 70 years of neglect.

1:1-3 “In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

³ They said to me, ‘Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.’”

- At the time of Nehemiah, many Jews had returned to the land of Israel being allowed to go by decree of the previous King Cyrus.
- Nehemiah and Ezra were **contemporaries**
- The Jews were allowed to freely travel through the Persian empire
- The land of Israel was filled with various ethnic groups from the previous empires of Assyria and Babylonia. These empires exiled local residents and transplanted other people groups.
- The destruction of Jerusalem not only destroyed a city and the temple, it destroyed the Jews **way of life and identity**. This is why the current condition of the returning exiles was one of shame.
- There was no Temple complex (in process) sacrificial system, functioning priests, feasts, etc... The religious life described in the OT Law was not being experienced.

II. Temple: Rebuilding the Temple

- Ezra 1-6
- The Persian King Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and build a temple. Ezra 1:1-11

- Notice God’s **provision** for the task. Not only are they allowed to return, God funds the project and even returns 5400 articles of gold and silver that was taken 70 years earlier.
- Lesson: God will always provide for whatever the task is if we are willing to **follow**. We worry about provision too much. Instead, we should concern ourselves with **following**. God can create resources for what He wants from anywhere.
- Approximately 50,000 people return under Zerubbabel when the decree is issued – Ezra 2:64-65 *So a total of 42,360 people returned to Judah, ⁶⁵ in addition to 7,337 servants and 200 singers, both men and women.*”
- Note: Not all the Jews returned. There were many who were assimilated into the culture, had jobs, businesses, were successful...returning meant to give up everything they had. Some **never returned**.
- Just because they were in exile didn’t mean they were **prisoners**. Assimilating foreigners into culture was how these nations prevented revolts.
- The building of the temple took approximately 23 years because local residents complained to Persian Kings after Cyrus who halted the work.
- The temple was finally finished under the Persian King Darius. With the completion came the temple sacrifices, temple worship, roles of the priests and Levites were restored.

III. People: Spiritual Rebuilding

- Ezra 7-10
- King Artaxerxes of Persia commissions Ezra, who was a priest and scribe, to go back to Jerusalem, along with any other Jews, and instruct people in the ways of God’s laws. Ezra 7:6-7
- Lesson: God can use even **pagan rulers** to accomplish His plans. An unbelieving King decrees that God’s law should be taught. God’s heart is always that people know who He is.
- Ezra returns and confronts the people over inter-marrying with pagan nations. Ezra 9:1-2
- Ezra’s response – Ezra 9:3-5 – Calls the people to repentance

“When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. ⁴ Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat

with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice.

⁵ At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the LORD my God.”

- People were commanded to put away (divorce) their foreign wives and children. Can you imagine? This goes directly back to the OT Law and what Moses commanded the people to never do when they occupied the land.
- Thought: What **price** would you pay in order to be obedient and follow Jesus? When we do not follow Jesus, there is always going to be a **high cost** to realign our lives to follow once again.
- Remember the role Israel was to play in the world. They were God’s witness. It’s impossible to be God’s witness when His people look just like the rest of the world.

IV. Walls: Restoration Complete – Nehemiah

- Nehemiah (the cup-bearer of the king) risks his life to talk to the king regarding the state of Jerusalem. Neh. 1-2

2:1-5 “Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. ² So the king asked me, ‘Why are you looking so sad? You don’t look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled.’

Then I was terrified, ³ but I replied, ‘Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.’

⁴ The king asked, ‘Well, how can I help you?’

With a prayer to the God of heaven, ⁵ I replied, ‘If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried.’”

- King Artaxerxes, commissions and funds the project - Neh. 2:4-9
- Nehemiah calls the leaders together to communicate the **vision** for the project. Neh. 2-3
 - Big vision requires **big unity**
- Neighboring groups oppose the building of the wall – Sanballet and Tobia.

Neh. 4:14-18 – Nehemiah’s response to opposition.

Then as I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, 'Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!'

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall.

¹⁶ But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. ¹⁸ All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm."

- There will always be **opposition** to a godly vision. There will always be a Sanballet and Tobia seeking to discourage people or sow seeds of fear so the Kingdom work stops.
- Nehemiah is a book filled with **leadership principals**. It is probably the most studied individual book in the bible for biblical leadership. Nehemiah is a man of faith / vision / risk taker / communicator / overcomes opposition / and models consistency.
- The wall is completed in only 52 days! Neh. 6:15-16
 - There is tremendous power in unity. This is a quality God always **blesse**s
 - When God's people accomplish what others say is impossible, God gets the glory.

V. Esther

- The book of Esther is a **description** of life for Jews living as exiles during this time period. Remember, not all Jews returned.
- God uses Esther to preserve the life of her people.
- Key verse: *Esther 4:13-14 "Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: 'Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. ¹⁴ If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?'"*
- Great book that teaches how God's sovereignty places us in situations for "such a time as this." Esther is a story that illustrates biblical principal of **destiny**.

- This is the story that the Jewish feast of Purim originates from.
- Summarize
- Key Characters: King Ahasuerus -Title Xerxes / Queen Vashti / General Haman / Esther / Mordecai
 - Has God placed you somewhere for “such a time as this?”
 - Has God placed **our church** right here; right now, for “such a time as this?”
 - People often make fun of the idea of destiny, but it is a very clear theme in scripture. Destiny is simply **accepting God’s call** on your life in a specific time and often in a geographic context. (A time and a place) It is walking in obedience to what He has put before you.

Heb. 12:1-2 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ² We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith...”

Eph. 2:10 “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

Discussion Questions

1. What were the conditions like that the Jews returned to in Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity?
2. Why was the fact that they had no temple and the city itself was still destroyed such an object of shame to them as a people?
3. How do these books reveal that God can even use unbelieving leaders to accomplish His plans?
4. What was the cost for some of the Jews to separate themselves from the ungodly people around them?
5. What was Nehemiah’s role in returning to Jerusalem?

6. How do the characters of Tobia and Sanballat represent the opposition the enemy sends our way to discourage us in our destiny?

7. What is the theme of the book of Esther?