

GREAT EVENTS IN

JUDAH'S

POST-EXILE HISTORY

By  
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The earlier part of Old Testament history is so much better known than the latter part. Who doesn't know about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the great characters Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and many others of the earlier history? But what happened after the Jews were taken to Babylon as exiles? Beyond the interesting stories in the book of Daniel (Daniel in the lions' den, the fiery furnace experience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the handwriting on the palace wall), the rest of the Old Testament story is an uninvestigated history by too many church people.

Before we get into a study of these matters, it would be good to get a few dates in mind:

606 B.C. - Nebuchadnezzar's first invasion of Judah. Jehoiakim was king. Daniel and his 3 friends went in this captivity.

597 B.C. - Nebuchadnezzar's second invasion of Judah. Jehoiachin was king. Ezekiel went in this captivity.

586 B.C. - Nebuchadnezzar's final invasion of Judah. Zedekiah was king. Jeremiah was a persecuted prophet in Jerusalem because he had predicted this calamity that befell Judah; destruction of the temple, burning of the city, and Judah deported to Babylon.

538 B.C. - Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians just as the handwriting on Belshazzar's wall had said.

536 B.C. - Zerubbabel and Joshua return to Jerusalem with 50,000 to rebuild the temple and to resettle the land.

520 B.C. - The temple rebuilding that had been stopped for awhile was resumed under the prophesying of Haggai and Zachariah.

516 B.C. - The temple was completed.

478 B.C. - Esther became queen in Persia.

457 B.C. - Ezra led a smaller group back to Jerusalem where he conducted needed reforms.

444 B.C. - Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, rebuilt its walls, and governed the returned Jews.

Let us first of all take a look at the Jews during those Babylonian Captivity years.

After they departed in chains for Babylon, following a series of tragedies (the temple destroyed, the walls beaten down, Jerusalem burned, King Zedekiah's sons killed before his very eyes and his own eyes then put out, etc.), the great prophet Jeremiah, who was permitted to remain in the land instead of being made to go to Babylon, gives us this description of Jerusalem in the opening verses of his book Lamentations: "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become a widow! she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!...Judah is gone into captivity...she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest...The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate...her children are gone into captivity before the enemy...Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed...Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger...Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her" (Lam. 1:1-17).

And Psa. 137:1-4 gives us a snapshot of those taken to Babylon: "By the rivers of

Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

The prophet Jeremiah had not only told them they were going into Babylonian Captivity but that it would be for a long, long time--even 70 years: "This whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years" (Jer. 25:11); "Thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place" (Jer. 29:10).

But before this restoration to their homeland could take place, the mighty power of Babylon had to be broken.

1. What were the dates of the three invasions of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar?
2. In what year did Babylon fall?
3. In what year did Zerubbabel begin rebuilding the temple?
4. After the rebuilding was stopped, what was the date when the project was resumed?
5. In what year was the temple rebuilding completed?
6. In what year did Esther become queen of Persia?
7. In what year did Ezra arrive at Jerusalem?
8. In what year did Nehemiah arrive at Jerusalem?
9. What prophet was left in the land of

Judah to lament the sorrows that had come upon it?

10. How does the 137th Psalm describe Judah's sadness in Babylon?

11. How long did Jeremiah say the Babylonian Captivity would last?

### **BABYLON FELL**

Before the Jews were ever conquered by Babylon because of their idolatrous sins, God had told, had assured, the prophet Habakkuk that after He had used Babylon to punish Judah, He would then turn around and punish the more-wicked Babylon for its heinous sins. But why was Babylon spared for 70 years before God brought the ax of judgment down upon it? Because He had decreed that Babylon would hold the Jews hostage for 70 years. And why 70 years? Moses gave this divine warning back in Lev. 26:33-35: "I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. Then shall the land enjoy her sabbaths, as long as it lieth desolate, and ye be in your enemies' land...because it did not rest in your sabbaths, when ye dwelt upon it." From II Chron. 36:21 we conclude that God totaled up the sabbaths the Jews had cheated Him out of while they were in the land (from Joshua's day to Jeremiah's), and it came to a total of 70 years--thus the length of their captivity in Babylon.

Medo-Persia would be the power that God would use to overthrow the scepter of Babylon. This military combine of the Medes and Persians was the breast and arms of "silver" in Dan. 2:32. Daniel predicted that Medo-Persia would be inferior as an empire to the powerful Babylon (Dan. 2:39). This new empire was also predicted in Dan. 7:5 as

the "bear" that would arise and "devour much flesh". And in interpreting the "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" on Belshazzar's palace wall, Daniel said the latter word meant that "thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:28).

Daniel went on to say, "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about three score and two years old."

This two-power empire is again pictured in Dan. 8:3 as a "ram which had two horns". It is noteworthy that this verse goes on to say the two horns were not equal in size, and that the latter horn was the higher. The earlier ruling power was Median and the latter Persian. The Persians were stronger rulers than the Median. Thus the Darius of the book of Daniel, the king who could not sleep because his good man Daniel was in the lions' den (Dan. 6:18-24), ruled first. This was in the year 538.

Daniel himself had been among the first Jewish captives to go to Babylon (that was in the King Jehoiakim captivity back in 606 B.C.). Now listen to Dan. 9:1-4: "In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes, which was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans; in the first year of his reign Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: and I prayed unto the Lord my God." Since Jeremiah had said the Babylonian Captivity would last 70 years, and it began in 606 B.C., Daniel realized in 538 B.C. that they were nearing the

captivity's end--only 2 more years to go! This explains why he began praying to God about the matter.

1. What had the prophet Habakkuk assured Judah about Babylon?

2. Why did God establish seventy years as the length of Judah's captivity in Babylon?

3. What power would overthrow Babylon?

4. Was this power represented by the silver or the gold in Dan. 2's prediction?

5. Was this power represented by the lion, bear, or leopard in Dan. 7's prediction?

6. What did "Upharsin" in the handwriting on the wall mean?

7. Was this power represented by the ram from the east or the goat from the west?

8. Which king of this power was ruling when Daniel was put into the lions' den?

9. In which of Judah's three captivities was Daniel taken to Babylon?

10. In the year that Babylon fell, Daniel knew it would be only how many more years of captivity?

### **CYRUS AND THE JEWS**

For many years Cyrus had headed the great conquering machine of the Medes and Persians. Following Darius the Mede he came into direct contact with the captive Jews of Babylon when he began ruling from Babylon in 536. No doubt the Jews (especially Daniel) showed him that their prophet Isaiah had recorded some prophecies concerning his rise and victories. Imagine the effect that his reading of the following Jewish Scriptures had upon his mind toward the Jews and their God Jehovah: "Thus saith the Lord...that confirmeth the word of his servant, and

performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof...that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord (Jehovah--ASV), which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name. I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me. I am the Lord (Jehovah--ASV), and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me" (Isa. 44:24--45:5).

As a result, the book of Ezra opens with this thrilling historical report: "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia" (536 B.C--exactly 70 years after the first captives went to Babylon), "that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah" (Jer. 25:11; Jer. 29:10), "might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

THUS SAITH CYRUS KING OF PERSIA, THE LORD GOD OF HEAVEN HATH GIVEN ME ALL THE

KINGDOMS OF THE EARTH: AND HE HATH CHARGED ME TO BUILD HIM AN HOUSE AT JERUSALEM, WHICH IS IN JUDAH. WHO IS THERE AMONG YOU OF ALL HIS PEOPLE? HIS GOD BE WITH HIM, AND LET HIM GO UP TO JERUSALEM WHICH IS IN JUDAH, AND BUILD THE HOUSE OF THE LORD OF ISRAEL, (HE IS THE GOD,) WHICH IS IN JERUSALEM. AND WHOSOEVER REMAINETH IN ANY PLACE WHERE HE SOJOURNETH, LET THE MEN OF HIS PLACE HELP HIM WITH SILVER, AND WITH GOLD, AND WITH GOODS, AND WITH BEASTS, BESIDE THE FREEWILL-OFFERING FOR THE HOUSE OF GOD THAT IS IN JERUSALEM" (Ezra 1:2-4).

This was the beginning of the return movement to Palestine some 500 years before Christ that began the serious repopulating of Palestine with Jews among whom Jesus would later be born.

Cyrus's proclamation brought the following results: "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods" (Ezra 1:5-7). These were the vessels Belshazzar had sacrilegiously used in his wine-feast in Dan. 5:3,4 which caused God to send the hand that wrote, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" (Dan. 5:5,25). They were going to be sent back to Jerusalem to be put in the temple after it was rebuilt.

Ezra 2 gives us a run-down of those who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild--around

50,000 people altogether. Their governor who headed the temple-rebuilding was Zerubbabel. From the meaning of his name (begotten in Babylon) we conclude that he had never before seen the land of his fathers. The Jews' other leader was the priest Joshua.

Before they began on the temple itself, which took several years to complete, they erected the altar so they could offer sacrifices to the Lord and have His blessing throughout their project (Ezra 3:1-3). They observed the Feast of Tabernacles and restored the Mosaic system of feasts and offerings (Ezra 3:4,5). Let us note here that these whose divine religious practices had been suspended for a long period of time and who came back and restored those practices "as it is written in the law" left us an example that shows that our religious predecessors (the Campbells, Stone, Scott, and others) who broke away from denominational practices, names, and organizations in their zeal for New Testament Christianity were right in so doing.

1. In what year did Cyrus begin ruling in Babylon?

2. What had the prophet Isaiah predicted about Cyrus?

3. As a result of Isaiah's prophecy, what did Cyrus do?

4. About how many thousand went back to Palestine with Zerubbabel?

### **REBUILDING THE TEMPLE**

You may recall that when Solomon built the original temple, he obtained cedar-of-Lebanon logs from the Lebanon Mountains in Phoenicia, which were floated down the coastline to Joppa after which they were hauled up to the building site at Jerusalem

(II Chron. 2:16). It is interesting to note that the process was repeated in the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 3:7). Chronologically this was 400 years after Solomon's temple.

It was a great day when they began laying the foundation for the new temple. In conjunction with the foundation laying there was much music and rejoicing (Ezra 3:8-11). The joyful shouts of the masses were intermingled with weeping and loud wailing by some of the older men who could still remember Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:12,13). Ezra's account does not explain their weeping. We might settle for sentimental weeping were it not for some parallel material in Hag. 2:3: "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" The limited resources of the returning Jews did not match the wealth of Solomon in erecting his beautiful temple. Imagine a beautiful hewn-stone courthouse erected in the center of a beautifully landscaped block. It was built when everything in the country was thriving. Its city continued to be the county seat even after the economy fell upon hard times. Fire roared through that building one night while its citizens slept, and they awoke to see it a raging inferno. Their beautiful building was gone, but the business of the county went on. They erected another courthouse, but this time their resources were very limited. They were forced to erect a courthouse of cement blocks with a little ornamentation here and there. Could they still transact county business in the cement block structure? Yes, but it just wasn't as fine as the former seat of county government. Even so the returning Jews would be able to perform every religious rite and

ceremony in the new temple as they had in Solomon's--it just wasn't as ornate and as beautiful.

The Samaritans lived just north of Judah and occupied the land formerly held by the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom. They had a little of the Mosaic religion mixed in with their own religion. When they came and offered to assist in the construction of the temple, saying, "We seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither" (Ezra 4:2), Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the other Jewish leaders refused their help (Ezra 3:3). This explains why the Jews and Samaritans had no favorable spirit even into Jesus' day (John 9:51-53) and why the Samaritan woman was surprised that Jesus would ask drink of her (John 4:9).

This refusal on the part of Zerubbabel enraged the Samaritans so that they began lobbying against the project to Cyrus and his successors (Ezra 4:5). It was either in the days of Cyrus's successor or his successor's successor that they succeeded in obtaining a royal decree against the continuance of the project. Read their letter to the ruler (Ezra 4:11-16) and the ruler's letter to them (Ezra 4:17-22). When the Samaritans obtained this letter from the ruling monarch, they lost no time getting to Jerusalem and forcing them to stop the project (Ezra 4:23,24). And it ceased "unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (this is a different Darius than Darius the Mede of the book of Daniel).

How long was this work-interruption? If it was stopped during Cyrus's successor, the interruption was for 16 years. If it was stopped during Cyrus's successor's successor, the interruption was much shorter (possibly 2 years). It is difficult to

determine just which it was.

1. Where did Solomon obtain logs for building his temple?

2. Where did these returning Jews obtain logs for rebuilding the temple?

3. Why did the older men weep when the foundation for the new temple was laid?

4. Who offered to help the Jews rebuild the temple?

5. Was their help accepted or not?

6. What caused the rebuilding project to stop?

### TEMPLE PROJECT RESUMED

The idled workers decided to utilize the time constructing houses for themselves.

Why had God allowed this worthy project to come to a standstill? Was it altogether through the manipulations of their enemies, or was something wrong that displeased God? A careful study of Haggai's third speech (the part in Hag. 2:11-14) might be the explanation. They had evidently come back from the defiling connections of Babylon without properly purifying themselves and in their eagerness to get started on the project had not done as the law of Moses said they should. Their condition before God both before and after taking care of the matter is probably set forth in Zechariah's vision of the high priest Joshua in Zech. 3:1-5.

Who was this Darius the Persian under whose reign the project resumed, and what got the project started once more? He was the most powerful Persian ruler since the days of Cyrus and along with Cyrus was among the greatest of the Persian monarchs. Archaeologically he was the Persian ruler who recorded some of his military history on

the smoothed face of Behistin Mountain (see "Halley's Handbook" under "Behistin Mountain"). And that which got the project started again was the preaching and prophesying of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1,2).

When we turn to the opening verses of the book of Haggai, we find that it was the "second year of Darius" when Haggai was sent to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people with this message: "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." By this we can see the people's thoughts as to why the king's decree had been against them. But the prophet continued: "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?" (Hag. 1:4). He pointed out God's shutting off blessing because of their work stoppage: "Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6). Haggai, speaking for God, said, "Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of host. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house" (Hag. 1:9-11).

Possibly some place right in here was where the ceremonial cleansing referred to above fit in.

In conjunction with the above rebukes, Haggai promised them if they would resume their labors, God would be pleased (Hag. 1:8).

The leaders and the people responded to the message of God and began anew on their

temple. But what about the difficulties facing the resumption of the project? Zechariah raised the question, "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain" (Zech. 4:7). He went on to say, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it" (Zech. 4:9). And how was all this to be brought about? "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). And the ensuing event showed that when they did what God commanded them, He was truly with them in a providential way to bring the desired project to completion.

When the enemies learned that the Jews were working again, they came with the question, "Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall?" (Ezra 5:3). Verse 5 says, "The eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they could not cause them to cease." So the enemies sent a letter to Darius to get it stopped once more. In their letter to Darius they reported the Jews as saying Cyrus had made a decree to have the building rebuilt. Of course, they didn't believe that Cyrus had, but when Darius searched the archives of Cyrus's day, guess what? He found it--Cyrus had decreed it! That settled it. Immediately Darius (in his second year) dispatched a letter to the Jews' enemies to leave them alone, that the project was to go on, and that the tribute money should be given them to help on the project. Read Ezra 6:1-13.

What a turn of events! God was indeed with them and blessing all the way. He used the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 6:14) to stir them up, and then He cleared the way in the court of Darius to see that the work was allowed.

The second year of Darius was 520 B.C. Ezra 6:15 says the temple was finished 4 years later. This was the temple that would stand on Jerusalem's east hill until the reign of Herod the Great, who just prior to Jesus' time would rebuild this inferior temple structure into a temple which would again be the pride of every Jew (John 2:20; Mark 13:1; and Luke 21:5).

1. How did the idled workers utilize their time off?

2. What two prophets did God raise up to get the project underway again?

3. Who was the Persian ruler at the time?

4. How had the Jews' economy been while the project was dormant?

5. The completing of the temple would be accomplished "not by \_\_\_\_\_, nor by \_\_\_\_\_" but by God's \_\_\_\_\_.

6. Tell how the Samaritans' effort to restop the project backfired against them.

7. After the temple project was resumed, how long did it take to complete the project?

### **PERSIAN ATTEMPTS ON ATHENS THWARTED**

So far we have been following the history recorded in the first 6 chapters of Ezra supplemented with related material from the predictions of the earlier prophets (Isaiah, Daniel, etc.) and from contemporary coverage in later prophetic books (Haggai and Zechariah). Now let us look at something else.

Under Cyrus, Persia had spread west and controlled all of Western Asia. Later under Darius, Persia desired to spread into Europe particularly wanting to overthrow the

wealthy and powerful city Athens. (This was the Darius we studied about who authorized the construction of the temple in Jerusalem.)

Darius and his army landed on an island just off the European mainland. This island appealed to Athens for help. Realizing the Persians' intentions against Athens, they decided to send help. But before they could get to the island, they learned that another Persian army had landed on the mainland. They changed their course and approached the army on the Plain of Marathon northeast of Athens. Being outnumbered 2 to 1 (20,000 to 10,000) the Athenians hesitated to attack, but when they learned the island had fallen to the other Persian army and its people killed and taken captive, they had but one choice--to attack this army so they could get back to Athens before the other Persian army found it undefended.

The Athenian leader Miltiades conceived the then-unique military strategy of making the center of his attacking line weak so it would be pushed back by the Persians, allowing the two strong ends of his line to encircle around and enclose the Persians. The Athenians with their long spears and armor-covered bodies ran through a storm of Persian arrows as they began the attack. The two Athenian flanks proceeded forward in the fighting while the middle of the line gave before the Persians--and the Persians found themselves enclosed and trapped! The fierce fighting that day cost Persia 6,400 soldiers while Athens lost only 200. One of the Athenian soldiers (Pheidippides) ran all the way to Athens yet that day to break the good news: "Rejoicing--we conquer!" The exhausting run after the fierce fighting was too much--upon saying these words Pheidippides dropped dead. The same number

of miles he ran from the Battle at Marathon to Athens that day in 490 B.C. are still run in Marathon races today in memory of his famous run.

In time the other Persian army sailed to Athens only to learn of the defeat of their comrades at Marathon and to find Athens heavily guarded and awaiting their coming. Disappointed, they withdrew without attacking and sailed back to Persia.

But that was not the end of the matter. Darius was determined to attack again, this time with such a large army that Athens would bite the dust. But death cut short Darius's career, and it was up to his famous son Xerxes I to carry out his plans. This brings us to the book of Esther, for this Xerxes I was King Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. ("Xerxes" is of Greek derivation while "Ahasuerus" is of Persian.) Secular history books normally use "Xerxes"; in our coverage we will use his Bible name "Ahasuerus".

Ahasuerus succeeded his father in 486 B.C. He first put down an uprising in Egypt and then began assembling ships and soldiers from all quarters of his vast empire. "World Book Encyclopedia" says he organized the largest army that had ever been assembled up to that time. It was while this vast army was being assembled and readied for the Greek campaign in the third year of his reign that the great feast of Esth. 1 took place as a "send-off" to the battle. And what a feast it was (actually 2 feasts involving more than 6 months of time)!

The large fleet of ships was used to form a pontoon bridge across the Hellespont (strait between Asia and Europe). History shows that while sitting on a marble throne on a bluff, Ahasuerus proudly watched his vast fleet make this impressive crossing.

From that crossing the foot-soldiers on land and the ships in the Aegean Sea paralleled each other west and then south toward Athens. The Persians were met at the narrow pass of Thermopylae a number of miles north of Athens by an army that Persia defeated. As the Persians came toward Athens, the Athenians under Themistocles decided to abandon land-fighting, let the Persians have Athens (at least temporarily), and engage Persia in a sea-battle. It was a great gamble, but it paid off. The abandoned Athens was entered and burned. Themistocles sent a faithful slave to the Persians to tell them they were going to retreat from Salamis Bay in fear, so the Persians divided their ships to guard both ends of the bay and keep them in. This was exactly what Themistocles wanted. Instead of retreating the Athenians with their smaller, more maneuverable ships engaged the more cumbersome Persian ships in a naval battle in the narrows of Salamis Bay. Ahasuerus was watching from his chosen spot and could not believe his eyes as his ships were rammed, broken, and captured. This was the day he had looked forward to, but Sept. 23, 480 B.C.'s Battle of Salamis just west of Athens turned victory into tragedy for this king of the book of Esther. Humiliated and disheartened he abandoned his western hopes and returned to Persia. The detachment of soldiers he left in Greece under Mardonius was defeated in 479 B.C. at the Battle of Plataea. This marked the end of Persia's attempt to subjugate the land we today know as Greece, which at that time was a land of various city-states (Athens, Sparta, and others). More than a century later Phillip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great would bring all this territory and city-states together into the new Greek nation

and turn things around, conquering their way east until Alexander defeated the Persians in 331 B.C. at the Battle of Arbela.

1. Under Cyrus, Persia had extended itself as far west as \_\_\_\_\_.

2. Darius wanted to extend it farther west by conquering the city of \_\_\_\_\_.

3. In the Battle of Marathon the Persians lost \_\_\_\_\_ soldiers and Athens only \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Tell of Pheidippides.

5. What famous race today is run in his memory?

6. What was Darius's son Xerxes I called in the book of Esther?

7. What was likely the occasion of the two Persian feasts involving more than six months recorded in the book of Esther?

8. Tell of Ahasuerus's military campaign in Greece.

9. Did he return to Persia a conqueror?

### **AHASUERUS AND THE JEWS**

As we turn to Esth. 2, the "after these things" and "when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased" and "he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her" of v. 1 all seem to point to the passing of time between chapters 1 and 2. We take that time-lapse to be the time Ahasuerus was away in the battle with the Greeks. History shows that after his crushing defeat at the Battle of Salamis, he gave up his conquering, returned home, and spent the rest of his years with his harem.

First order of business after he returned home was to select a new queen

(replacing the deposed Vashti). As you can see not all Jews left their exile-land when Zerubbabel went to Jerusalem in 536 B. C. to rebuild the temple and begin repopulating the land. Read Esth. 2:2-20 and see how Esther, a Jewess, was elevated to become the queen of Persia!

The recording of her cousin Mordecai's reporting a plot against King Ahasuerus's life, resulting in the execution of the would-be assassins, seemed like a detached bit of information, but it had significant results later.

Our history next introduces us to Haman, who became shall-we-say "Prime Minister" under Ahasuerus (Esth. 3:1). Haman enjoyed the position and honor that went with the position until the matter of Mordecai came before him. Mordecai did not bow and do him reverence as everybody else did. The Bible gives no explanation, but there was something about the situation that made it wrong for a Jew like Mordecai to bow before Haman. Jewish captives frequently found political situations in their exile-land contrary to their religion--to eat the king's diet would have been defiling to Daniel (Dan. 1:8); Shadrach, Meshach, and abednego could not bow down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (Dan. 3:10-12); Daniel would not cease his daily prayer-periods made illegal by King Darius's decree (Dan. 6:10). Likely Mordecai's situation fit into this same religious mould.

Because it was a Jewish objection and not something personal between Haman and Mordecai, Haman's wrath was sky-high against all Jews. When he offered King Ahasuerus 10,000 talents of silver if he would set a day of national execution of all Jews in his empire (Esth. 3:8,9), the king was willing.

The likely meaning of Esth. 3:11 is that Haman could exterminate the Jews and then lay claim to their possessions like Ahab did concerning Naboth's vineyard. Messengers were dispatched through Ahasuerus's vast empire that on the 13th day of the 12th month of that year every Jew whether young or old, child or woman, was to be killed (Esth. 3:13). If this had been carried out, there would not have been a Jew left on the face of the earth, not even those out in the Jerusalem area, for that was also a part of the Persian Empire. But that never happened, for God kept His word to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that of their seed would all nations of the earth be blessed (Gen. 22:18), and He would keep His word to David ("When thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom...I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" II Sam. 7:12,13).

But as this news against the Jews spread, the Jews were not thinking of God's promise but of the doom planned for them. From there on was a marvelous story of the providential workings of God to save the descendants of Abraham and of David. (Note--The word "God" is nowhere found in the entire book of Esther, but there is not a greater book in all the Bible that demonstrates His providential workings more than this book. In J. W. McGarvey's famous book of "Sermons" are two sermons on "God's Providence"--one is the case of Joseph, and the other is the story of the book of Esther!)

The mourning Mordecai persuaded Queen Esther to go into the king and beg for the life of herself and her people (Esth. 4:1-14). (Ahasuerus passed the decree without

knowing that his queen was a Jewess.) Three days of prayer and fasting on the part of all Jews connected with the palace preceded her taking matters into her own hands to seek admittance to the king when not summoned by him (Esth. 4:15-17).

God caused her to be accepted though not summoned. Listen: "When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre...Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? IT SHALL BE EVEN GIVEN THEE TO THE HALF OF THE KINGDOM" (Esth. 5:2,3). God did more than merely have her accepted--He opened the way for the request she had on her heart.

Instead of coming right out with her request, she invited him and Haman to a banquet that day (Esth. 5:4,5). At the banquet something told her not to make her request yet but to invite them to another banquet the next day (Esth. 5:6-8).

Haman, dining exclusively with the king and queen and to do so again the next day, was elated--until he saw the non-bowing Mordecai on his way home (Esth. 5:9-13). Haman's wife Zeresh and other friends suggested that he build gallows and speak to the king about hanging Mordecai thereon. And the gallows were built (Esth. 5:14). But Mordecai was not hanged. God interfered to preserve that faithful Jew.

That night the king had trouble sleeping (divine providence). Somehow he wanted some of the kingdom archives read to him that night (divine providence again). And what happened (?) to be the material read? about that time when Mordecai reported the plot against the king's life (more divine providence). The king, of course,

remembered the event, but he couldn't recall any reward given Mordecai for it. He asked his reader, "What honor and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" The reader reported that nothing was in the record about any reward.

The king wanted to reward Mordecai, and he wanted it to be something really great. When Haman came in (likely in the morning), he had his gallows all ready for Mordecai and was coming to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged! Wasn't it providential that he didn't come the day before?

Before Haman spoke, the king asked him a serious question: "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor?" Haman's egotism interpreted the king's question in only one way--Haman himself must be the man whom the king was wanting to honor. So Haman came forth with something that appealed to him: "Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: and let his apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honor, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor."

As great as this thought was, it was no greater than the king thought should be done for Mordecai, so he stunned Haman with these words: "Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew" (Esth. 6:10).

That day at the banquet the king asked the queen for her request. She told him that she and her people were not decreed to

become slaves but to be wiped out completely. Not knowing she was a Jewess and not associating what she was saying with Haman's plot against the Jews, the king was startled and asked, "Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?" (Esth. 7:5). And she said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman" (Esth. 7:6). The king then knew what she was talking about. He was infuriated and went out into the palace garden upset over the matter.

While he was gone, Haman pleaded with Esther for his life, and he had no sooner stretched himself upon the bed where Esther was to beg her mercy when the king returned and saw this. Misinterpreting Haman's intentions, the king said, "Will he force the queen also before me in the house?"

Haman was doomed, and when one of the king's chamberlains reported the gallows Haman made on which to hang Mordecai, the king said of Haman, "Hang him thereon!"

The Jews' enemy was now out of the way, but what about the decree that still authorized their extermination? Ahasuerus could not set aside a Medes-and-Persians decree, but he could issue a counter decree authorizing the Jews to fight back, and this he did (Esth. 8:7-14). Even before the day the decrees were to be carried out, Mordecai became an honored man, and many people identified themselves with the Jewish people (Esth. 8:15-17). And when that day came, the Jews triumphed over everyone who hated them (Esth. 9:1-17). Mordecai, who had replaced Haman as the highest ranking officer next to the king (Esth. 10:1-3), and the Jews immediately ordained the annual Feast of Purim to commemorate the divine deliverance of the Jews from their enemy Haman who sought their annihilation.

On my first trip to Bible lands, as we were coming into Bethshan (up near Mt. Gilboa, not far from the south end of the Sea of Galilee), we saw school children all dressed up in hilarious costumes, and some of the little girls dressed up like queens. The children had fireworks and were having a joyous time. We asked our guide what it all meant. He said, "They are celebrating Purim. You know--the feast in the book of Esther." And he went on to explain that during Purim whenever somebody mentions the name "Haman," they all say, "Haman," together, and they then make disdainful mouth-sounds. Truly his name has become a "hissing" and a "by-word" in Israel.

1. Who became Ahasuerus's queen after his return from Greece?

2. Who was her cousin?

3. What did this cousin refuse to do for Haman?

4. Why was Haman's wrath as a result against all Jews and not just against Mordecai?

5. What decree did Haman get passed?

6. Why was Esther reluctant to go before the king?

7. What unusually generous offer did the king make to Esther?

8. Whom did Esther invite to a feast?

9. Tell of the reading from the archives.

10. What did Haman have built?

11. Whom did Haman think the king was wanting to honor?

12. What suggestion did Haman make to the king?

13. Tell of Esther's second feast for the king and Haman.

14. What happened to Haman?

15. How did the king overcome the decree that Haman had earlier gotten him to make?

16. What feast of the Jews commemorates this deliverance of the Jews?

### **EZRA'S OWN RETURN**

We have already studied the first 6 chapters of the book of Ezra, that part that deals with Zerubbabel and Joshua and 50,000 returning from Babylon to rebuild the temple and begin resettling the land. The penman Ezra was not a part of that history as he will be of the history that we are now ready to consider (contained in the latter part of his book), but he was God's inspired historian to record the history of the rebuilding of the temple.

The temple was finished in 516 B.C. It was 59 years later (457 B.C.) that Ezra 7 opens in the reign of an Artaxerxes (this Artaxerxes was the son of the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther) by introducing Ezra to us. This "priest" (7:12) was a descendant of Aaron (7:1-5). This godly man had "prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (7:10). It was his desire to be given leave from Babylon that he might return to Jerusalem to instruct those resettling the land. God was with him in causing the king to grant his request (7:6). Joining him were numerous people, priests, Levites, singers, porters, and Nethinim (temple servants) (7:7). Figures within the book itself add up to nearly 1,500 who made this return with him.

The reigning Persian monarch was directly and wholeheartedly behind this return even as Darius was Zerubbabel's return. He equipped Ezra with an all

important letter granting him the right to lead back any who wished to accompany him, silver and gold for purchasing animals for offerings, vessels for the temple, and the right to obtain from the king's treasures beyond the Jordan whatever he might need (7:11-23). The letter also exempted the priests, Levites, singers, porters, and Nethinim from having to pay toll, tribute, or custom (7:24) and authorized Ezra to appoint magistrates and judges to see that the law of God was carried out (7:25). The letter closed by appointing penalties in 4 categories for disobedience: (1) death (execution); (2) banishment; (3) confiscation of goods (fines); and imprisonment.

Ezra was elated over the king's remarkable cooperation, and he credited God's providence for it: "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem: and hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes" (7:27,28). Ezra was made stronger because of this experience (8:28).

But in the excitement of everything Ezra forgot to ask the king for a military escort to accompany them. This was considered necessary because of the treasure they would be transporting and because of robbers lurking along the way. But Ezra had so boasted of Jehovah before the king that he was ashamed to ask the king for any assistance. Instead he proclaimed a fast and received assurance from God that all would go well (8:21-23).

Twelve priests were chosen to bear the responsibility of seeing that the silver, gold, and vessels leaving Babylon were also

accounted for when the group checked in at Jerusalem (8:24-30).

The long, arduous trip from Babylon to Jerusalem was reported in these few words: "Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. And we came to Jerusalem" (8:31,32).

After arriving, the treasure was checked in, due sacrifices were offered, and the king's letter was delivered to the rulers west of the Jordan (8:33-36).

From what Ezra next recorded (chapters 9,10), it is evident he was indeed needed. He learned that the Jews in the land had not been obeying the law of God, for many of them had married foreign wives, even some of the rulers of the Jews (9:1,2). How did he feel when he learned this? He wrote, "When I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished (appalled)". Those who feared as he did gathered around him (9:4). When the time came to offer the evening sacrifice, as priest he fell upon his knees, stretched out his hands to God, and prayed a great priestly prayer (9:5-15). Please read that prayer.

After his prayer and weeping and confessing the sins of the people, it was a great assembly of men, women, and children who assembled to him with bitter weeping (10:1). Shechaniah joined him in confessing the sinfulness of the situation and led with how they could right themselves with God. He said, "There is hope in Israel concerning this thing" (10:2). What was it? Would it be easy or difficult? It was assuredly not

going to be easy: "Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my Lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law" (10:3); and speaking to Ezra he said, "Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee; we also will be with thee; be of good courage, and do it" (10:4).

As you can see, it was not a matter of how much they loved their wives and of how much they loved their children. They had violated God's commandment not to marry them. To please God they had to put them away. To complicate matters, it was the rainy season (December) as they stood in a great assembly and listened to Ezra issue the order: "Make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers, and do his pleasure; and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives" (10:11). Because it was rainy and because there were so many cases of mixed-marriage to dissolve, it was decided that the elders and judges of each city should process the cases in their jurisdiction (10:12-14). Some who had to put away wives were even sons of priests (10:18), and their names are listed in vs. 18-22. The guilty Levites are named in v. 23, the singers in v. 24, and those of the people in vs. 25-43.

We will pick up more about the work of this great man Ezra when Nehemiah returns in 444 B.C. to rebuild the wall and to institute reforms (for example, see chapter 8 of Neh.).

One thing we must not overlook before concluding Ezra's return is its relationship with the fulfillment of Daniel's 70-weeks prophecy in Dan. 9:24-27. If we begin the "70 Weeks" with Ezra's 457 B.C. date,

everything about the Messiah makes a perfect fulfillment. It doesn't, though, if we begin with Zerubbabel's 538 B.C. date or Nehemiah's 444 B.C. date. (Your author discusses Daniel's 70-weeks prophecy in his book, "The Unfolded Plan of God," in the chapter, "The Prophets Foresaw the Mesianic Age".) We raise this point in the conclusion of this study for two purposes: (1) to show the importance of Ezra's project since that important prophecy is dated from it; and (2) from the wording of the prophecy in Dan. 9, there must have been considerable "rebuilding of the city" either in connection with Ezra's return or simultaneous with it that is nowhere mentioned in the book of Ezra.

1. Being a descendant of Aaron, Ezra was a \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Why did he want to go to Jerusalem?
3. What four civil penalties were mentioned in the book of Ezra?
4. What had Ezra forgotten to ask the king?
5. What did he do instead of asking the king for it?
6. After his arrival what sin did Ezra find among the Jews?
7. What did he do about the matter?

### **JERUSALEM'S WALL REBUILT**

Our studies in the Jews' Post-Exile history have taken us forward to around 444 B.C. The first Jews to return during this restoration period came back in 536 B.C. under Zerubbabel. That was 92 years before 444 B.C. They came to rebuild the temple, and it was completed in 516 B.C. That was 76 years before our present date. Ezra came

back in 457 B.C. to teach the law of God. That was 13 years before 444 B.C. (and he is still on the job as we come to the book of Nehemiah).

As our study opens, the Jew Nehemiah was comfortably fixed--he was cupbearer to the king of Persia. As such he was not having to work manually. He was not having to work outside in all kinds of weather. His place of service was in the beautiful Persian palace. As cupbearer he wore nice clothes. His income was both adequate and assured.

But all this became secondary when he heard of the existing condition of Jerusalem: "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach; the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire" (Neh. 1:3).

Less devoted people might have responded, "We're sorry to hear that; that is too bad," and then proceeded with their lives without personal involvement. But not Nehemiah. He recorded his feelings for us: "When I heard these words...I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). After confessing the sins of his people that caused them to be carried away to Babylon (Neh. 1:6,7), he pleaded the promise made through Moses that if the nation returned to God, He would restore them to their former state (Neh. 1:8-10). His final petition of that prayer: "O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer" (Neh. 1:11).

Unless you observe the time-notations in Neh. 1:1 (the month Chisleu) and Neh. 2:1 (the month Nisan), you might suppose the grief of chapter 1 is the same grief of 2:1, and that the events of chapter 2 are the immediate answer to his petition and the events of chapter 2. We see great character in Nehemiah as he has patiently waited for the Lord to work things out. Remember Psa. 35:7: "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him." Well, God worked things out as we shall see.

One day as Nehemiah was before the king, the burden of his heart was too great to conceal. It was written on his countenance. The monarch noticed it and asked, "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart" (Neh. 2:2). Nehemiah's fear in the matter (2:2) showed that he was not supposed to appear in the king's presence with sadness.

Nehemiah did not lie nor shrug it off by saying, "I'm all right;" or, "I'm not feeling the best today;" etc. He was an honest man and leveled with the king (for better or for worse): "Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchers, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" God caused this explanation to be acceptable to the king.

Obviously Nehemiah wanted to do something about the situation, so the king asked, "For what dost thou make request?" Oh, how God was leading to answer Nehemiah's prayer of 4 months before!

Before stating his request, it says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Likely he paused in the king's presence as if in deep thought when in reality he was praying

in his heart to his God. Then he spoke: "If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favor in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchers, that I may build it" (2:5). This was no small request. But Nehemiah had prayed, so we are not surprised that it pleased the king to send him, and a time was agreed on for him to be away from his palace-duties. Just as Paul said that though he was free from all men, he had made himself a servant of all (I Cor. 9:19), even so Nehemiah was not obligated to such a project, yet he committed himself to it--except that each person is obligated to carry out those duties that God has laid on his heart. May I say that this is the difference between truly consecrated people and those who aren't--and of what the one group accomplishes for God in contrast to what the other group does not. Concerned people get more and more involved as life rolls on while other people keep on in their unconcerned ways.

The king supplied him with letters to the governors between Persia and Palestine so they would let him pass through their provinces. He also had a letter to Asaph, the one in charge of the king's forest, to supply him with all beams he needed. He was to be escorted by army-captains and horsemen. In all this, Nehemiah traced the providential hand of God. His words: "The king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me" (2:8).

What God wants, and what some people want are different. From God's standpoint it was good that one of His servants wanted Jerusalem to have a wall around it again, but "when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, heard of it, it grieved them exceedingly that there was come

a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel" (2:10)--and we will be hearing more about their opposition later.

Nothing is mentioned of the long trip itself, but 2:11 takes note of his arrival at Jerusalem.

After resting three days from the trip, his first move was to invite a few men to accompany him on a secret, night-inspection of the walls: "I arose in the night, I and some few men with me; neither was there any beast with me, save the beast that I rode upon. And I went out by night by the gate of the valley, even before the dragon well, and to the dung port, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates thereof were consumed with fire. Then I went on to the gate of the fountain, and the king's pool: but there was no place for the beast that was under me to pass. Then went I up in the night by the brook, and viewed the wall, and turned back, and entered by the gate of the valley, and so returned" (2:12-15). I visualize this as a moonlit night when they could see without any artificial light. The places mentioned above show it was the south wall and east wall ruins that they were inspecting.

It is generally supposed that these wall ruins were from the time of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction. If so, they had been in that condition 144 years. That seems like a long time for them not to have been rebuilt, but don't forget that it is easy for people to get accustomed to status quo. In contrast to the above in Zerubbabel's day (in the 530's B.C.), in the enemies' letter to the Persian king we note these words: "The Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the

foundations" (Ezra 4:12). If their report was true, then some later conqueror (of whom we know absolutely nothing) came and battered them down again--and these would be the ruins found by Nehemiah. Since we have no record of any such later destruction, some think the enemies' report to be exaggerated for their own political ends (enemies are capable of doing this). Or could it be the walls and gates of the temple itself that they were mentioning?

But regardless of how long they had been in ruinous heaps, it was not until one person got a burden on his heart that anything was done about it. This is what makes leadership! Leaders are ordinary people with an extraordinary burden or an extraordinary vision or an extraordinary determination. This project may have begun in one man's heart, but one man was not going to rebuild Jerusalem's wall (or any other great project). Nehemiah laid the matter before the inspection group. Notice his use of "we" and "us"--identifying himself with them and the problem and at the same time including them with him in the solution: "Ye see the distress that we are in, how that Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach" (2:11). And to assure them of God's approval and the king's approval, he spoke to them: "Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; as also the king's words that he had spoken unto me" (2:18).

To look over the ruins first, to talk about it next, then to propose the project, and finally to show that it was backed by both God and the king of Persia was wise--it was a night well spent. They respond: "Let us rise up and build" (2:18).

Naturally word got out about the project, and Nehemiah's enemies came again, only the two enemies have added a third one (Gesham the Arabian): "When Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and Gesham the Arabian, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us, and said, What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?" (2:19). Being laughed at and being scorned was a form of opposition. It was meant to dishearten those who were laughed at and to encourage the ego of those who did the laughing. It tested the determination of the victims. Here we see the dauntlessness of that great man Nehemiah: "Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build" (2:20). Don't let people laugh you out of your Bible-based convictions of right-and-wrong, truth-and-error. When you are doing right, don't be defeated by people's prophesying failure to the work you are doing. "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10)!

In your through-the-Bible reading, don't fret when you find yourself reading Nehemiah's third chapter. It goes into the details of what group built "this" and which group built "that". For us there is a great lesson in this information. We will find later that it took only 52 days to rebuild the entire wall. We wonder how they did it in so short a time. Here is the answer: each group was assigned a specific job--a gate, a portion of the wall, or a tower in the wall. All that each group had to do was its own job. While "this" group was working, so was "that" group. Theoretically when the first group had its gate finished, the other groups had their towers and their portions

of the wall completed--and all was done! We evangelists and elders need to take a lesson from this chapter. Great things can be done if we involve many people in the work. Much less can be done if we have to do it all ourselves, or if we get only a handful of people to work.

In 3:5 we notice a few shirkers in the Tekoah group: "The Tekoites repaired; but their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord." Just expect that every project will have this element. They are either "too busy" with their own things, the work is "too hard", or something. The probability is they are not as spiritually-minded as those who do the work.

When the project was about half completed, the enemies got even more worked up: "When Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall" (4:1-3).

What did Nehemiah do about their taunts? He took his burden to the Lord and left it there--he prayed and kept working: "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6).

The following quotation shows they enlisted another enemy (the Ashdodites) and the development of things: "When Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that

the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, and conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it" (4:7,8). This threat was met with prayer and setting a guard day and night (4:9).

By this time fatigue set in on the workers (4:10)--they were letting the threat of the opposition get to them (4:11). In the absence of an army, Nehemiah stationed the living quarters by families at strategic locations behind the wall (4:13), and he told the people, "Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses" (4:14). This encouraged the workmen and disheartened the enemies (4:15).

In the final stages of the project, Nehemiah made half his men workers and the other half guards, and those who worked also had weapons with them in the event of attack (4:16-18).

Nehemiah took a trumpeter with him to alert the people in case of attack, and all slept in their clothes (4:18-20,23).

Truly the wall was being built in "troubulous times" as Dan. 9:25 foresaw.

The enemies decided not to fight. Instead they wanted to get Nehemiah out of Jerusalem and kill him--anything to stop the project. They invited him to meet them in the plain of Ono (near present-day Tel Aviv). He said, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (6:3). When doing what is right, every person should believe in what he is doing and should not stop it for any reason. It is said that a horse cannot pull and kick at the same time.

This was followed by a "smear campaign" against Nehemiah through an open letter to the people that misrepresented him. The letter said: "It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu (Geshem) saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together" (6:6,7).

Nehemiah was quick to deny this: "There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart" (6:8).

The enemies were very persistent. Their next move was to hire a Jew who proposed to Nehemiah: "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple: for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night will they come to slay thee" (6:10). This infraction of divine law (one not a priest going into the sacred compartment of the temple) would bring God's wrath upon Nehemiah. He answered, "I will not go in," and he realized God had not sent him (6:11,12).

But all these efforts to discredit Nehemiah and discourage the people did not work: "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days" (6:15). It is a story of God's providence working through dedicated people.

Another role for Nehemiah was yet to come.

1. What was Nehemiah's work in the Persian palace?

2. What report broke Nehemiah's heart?
3. Was the Persian king willing to let him go to Jerusalem?
4. When he told the Jews his desires in coming to Jerusalem, what was their response?
5. What are the names of the men who opposed Nehemiah's project?
6. How could Nehemiah get such a vast project done in only fifty-two days?

### NEHEMIAH AS CONTINUING GOVERNOR

Nehemiah is known mostly for rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. But we should not overlook that he was also governor of Judea (Neh. 5:14), and that after the wall-project was complete he stayed on as one of history's most godly governors!

With the wall complete (Neh. 7:1), Nehemiah was able to devote attention to the city of Jerusalem itself. The first thing he did was put his brother Hanani and a man named Hananiah, described as a "faithful man" who "feared God above many", in charge of Jerusalem itself (Neh. 7:2).

Judah's enemies, who had tried to hinder the wall-rebuilding, were still active and lived nearby. In addition to a city having walls, it had to be careful about its gates and had to maintain watches (guards). Nehemiah told the two men in charge of the city, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun be hot" (Neh. 7:13)--not at sunrise when gates would normally be opened. By the time the sun was "hot" everybody would be stirring and into the day. And similar precautions were taken about closing them at evening as well as appointing watches: "While they stand by, let them shut the doors, and bar them: and

appoint watches of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, every one in his watch, and every one to be over against his house" (Neh. 7:3). This was necessary because for the size of the city, it was not heavily populated (Neh. 7:4). Later something had to be done about this: "The rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities. And the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem" (Neh. 11:1-2).

In the earlier chapters of the book of Neh. no mention of Ezra occurred. But he was still in Jerusalem, and he was a useful helper to the godly governor. It was during the seventh month of that year that "all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses." He stood upon a speaker's platform built for the occasion (Neh. 8:4). When he opened the book of the law, the people all stood, Ezra blessed God, and the people said, "Amen, Amen" (Neh. 8:5,6). With him on the platform were several godly men who helped the people understand what was being read (Neh. 8:7). What they did on that day is exactly what preachers and teachers are to do today: "They read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Neh. 8:8).

As they read, they came to the instruction concerning a feast in the seventh month (the very month they were in): the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:14). Immediately they set out to observe it, a feast that had fallen into disuse ever since

the days of Joshua (Neh. 8:16,18). Every day through the week-long feast Ezra read out of the law to the people (Neh. 8:18).

The fruit of this Bible-reading was not only in what they began to do that God had commanded, but they began to "separate themselves from all strangers (foreigners), and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers" (Neh. 9:2). They "read in the book of the law of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the Lord their God" (Neh. 9:3). Beginning with the next verse the Levites led the people in praising God, in recalling His leadership in their past history, pointing out their father's sins at various times and that God had been righteous in the judgments He had brought on them as a nation, and they repledged themselves in covenant-fashion to be obedient to God.

And finally we come to that great final chapter in the book--chapter 13. In it we really see the godliness of Nehemiah, his desire to do things God's way, his courage as a leader to see that things were done right, etc. Let's look at that chapter.

Verse 1 shows they were reading Deut. 23:3-5. Since neither the Moabite nor the Ammonite were to be proselyted into Israel, they removed all Moabites and Ammonites from them. This removed Tobiah, the Ammonite (Neh. 2:10), friend of priest Eliashib (Neh. 13:4-9), as well as many others in Judah (Neh. 6:17,18). Some of this evil developed while Nehemiah had returned to Persia. You will recall that when he first came to Jerusalem, he had agreed on the time to be away from Persia (Neh. 2:6). Evidently that time had run out, and he returned to Persia and was successful in getting another commission to return as governor of Judah.

Josephus says he ruled from Jerusalem the rest of his life.

Back to the 13th chapter. Nehemiah learned that the tithes had not been given to the Levites and the singers. They were working their fields also, resulting in God's work being neglected. (That is probably how Nehemiah first learned what was going on.) Nehemiah was able to get everybody to bring the tithes to the temple, and he appointed treasurers over the treasures to see that proper distribution was made of the money. When this was successfully done, Nehemiah prayed, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and for the office thereof" (13:14).

Next came sabbath-reform. Jews were working and selling on the sabbath. And merchants from Tyre were also operating their businesses on the sabbath. Nehemiah's report of his reform: "Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands of you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse

themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day" (13:17-22). Afterwards he prayed again, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy" (13:22).

Mixed marriages among the Jews next bothered Nehemiah: "In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives? And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites" (13:23-29).

And so the book of our coverage of this great man comes to a close. We can but admire him--willing to give up his plush job in Persia to give himself to the hardships and misunderstandings of the work of God. Nobody else had ever gotten the wall rebuilt, yet within 52 days it was all up! As a reforming governor he allied himself

with the godly priest and scribe Ezra, and between them and with the help of others and the blessing of God an unbelievable good was done.

The great book of Malachi (whose date is difficult to settle precisely) may have been contemporary with Nehemiah. If so, we can get fuller insight from Malachi's account of the apostasy that Nehemiah had to deal with. If Malachi was not a contemporary, then he would have been later than Nehemiah.

Our Post-Exile studies began with the year 536 B.C. when Cyrus, king of Persia, decreed the rebuilding of the temple, and we have carried it on down through the great career of Nehemiah to somewhere before the years 400 B.C. when the 400 years of "silence" of the Inter-Testament Period set in.

1. How many people were to live in Jerusalem in comparison to those who lived elsewhere in the land?

2. Who stood upon a speaker's platform and read from the law of Moses to the assembled people?

3. What great feast was reinstated?

4. Since neither \_\_\_\_\_ nor \_\_\_\_\_ could be proselyted into Israel, Nehemiah had them removed from the congregation.

5. Who were working fields because the tithe had not been given to them?

6. What sacred day were the Jews not observing?

7. Who was father-in-law to Sanaballat?

8. What is the last book of the Old Testament?

