

## Lesson 37: Home for the Holidays; Returning to the Promised Land

The Jews of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC had a hard time being optimistic. And who could blame them? Less than a century earlier, their beloved Judah, their capital city, Jerusalem, and their pride and joy, God's Temple, had all been destroyed by the Babylonians. Now in exile, their culture lay in danger of disappearing through assimilation. Theologically, they struggled with issues, asking questions as to why did God allow these terrible things to happen to us?

So often we look at what's going on all around us, or in our own personal lives and we ask the question, "Why?" Why God? Why is this happening? Why is all the turmoil going on in the world?

The Bible's answer to the question of "Why?" was that God hadn't abandoned His people, but that they had abandoned Him through their continual disregard for His commandments. But things didn't have to stay that way. If they would turn back to God and mend their ways, God would restore them to their Promised Land. And this is exactly what happens here in today's lesson.

Thanks in large part to a Persian king named Cyrus the Great, who issues a decree allowing those in exile to return to their ancestral home, and thanks to those brave souls who took him up on his offer, Jerusalem and its Temple are eventually rebuilt, and the Jews find themselves again in their homeland.

As in our last lesson, I want to let you know that some of the material for today's lesson comes from **The Bible for Dummies** by Jeffrey Geoghegan, professor of Biblical Theology at Boston College, and Dr. Michael Homan, Professor of Biblical studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, and published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Their book, "**The Bible for Dummies**" is an excellent resource to give you a better understanding of the Bible. They explain everything in plain English along with some great illustrations and of course, their dose of humor and wit. So if you want to get a better overall understanding of the Bible as you are going through this Firm Foundation series, go to Amazon or Barnes and Noble and order this outstanding resource: **The Bible for Dummies**.

Now, let's review our last **Lesson 36: Strangers in a Strange Land**:

### Questions for Review:

1. What year were the Jews in Judah attacked by Babylon? a. 430 BC; b. 560BC; c. 586BC; or d. 742BC? **c. 586BC**
2. What year were Daniel and the Jews deported from Jerusalem to Babylon? **605 BC**
3. Why did God allow Judah to be invaded? **Because Israel had ignored God's covenant.**
4. Besides ignoring the Sabbath, what else did the Jews ignore in terms of violating God's covenant? **They ignored the Sabbatical year, allowing the land to rest every seventh year.**
5. What did Daniel's diet consist of? **Vegetables and water.**
6. Was it the diet that made Daniel and his friends healthier and stronger? **No, it was God.**
7. When they were forced to enroll in Babylon University, what was one of the first things that was forced on Daniel and his 3 friends alerting them that they were now engaged in a great cultural battle? **They were all given names of Babylonian gods.**

8. How did Daniel and his three friends gain all their knowledge and wisdom while studying at Babylonian U.? **God gave it to them.**
9. Why were Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, thrown into the fiery furnace? **Because they refused to bow down and worship the 90-ft gold statue.**
10. What happens to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego while they are in the fiery furnace? **They are not touched by the fire, with not even the smell of smoke on their clothing and a fourth person like the Son of Man or Messiah is in there with them.**
11. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream where he saw a tree and an angel said to cut down the tree but leave the stump and the roots in the ground and let him live with the animals of the field for 7 yrs. What did Daniel tell Nebuchadnezzar would happen? **God caused the king to go insane, because of his pride. He lived like a wild animal with his nails as long as eagles claws and his hair as long as bird's feathers, and he ate grass for 7 yrs.**
12. Why did God cause this to happen to Nebuchadnezzar? **Because of his pride.**
13. Does God keep His word? **Yes.**
14. Daniel is called in to interpret the handwriting on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. What was the interpretation given by Daniel? **You've been weighed on God's moral scales and have been found wanting and tonight your kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.**
15. Did God do what Daniel said? **Yes. God did exactly what the handwriting on the wall said.**
16. How many times a day did Daniel pray? **Three.**
17. For those who say that my religion is a private thing between me and God, what did Daniel do to let everyone know that He worshiped the Almighty God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? **He threw open his window and prayed in front of the window 3 times daily so that he could be seen by all.**
18. Daniel refused to pray to King Darius and what happens to him as a result of his convictions? **He is thrown into a den of lions.**
19. What does King Darius do when he notices that Daniel has spent the night with the lions and is unharmed? **He orders that those who enticed him into making this stupid, evil law be thrown into the lions' den along with their families, and they are eaten alive before their bodies even hit the floor.**

## A. Cyrus the Great's Great Idea

**Theme: God is loving, merciful, and gracious. He always keeps his promises.**

**Theme: God is all-knowing and all-powerful.**

**The book of Ezra reveals two main issues faced by the returning exiles:**

**(1) The struggle to restore the temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22) and**

**(2) The need for spiritual reformation (7:1–10:44).** Both were necessary in order for the people to renew their relationship with the Lord.

**On this timeline, notice the sequence of events on the timeline:**

- **June-Aug, 605 BC—The First Siege of Israel.** I've put a red arrow pointing at this date on the timeline. Now, at this point, Israel is no longer a sovereign nation and the Jews including Daniel are taken captive to Babylon.
- **Dec – 598 to March 16, 597 BC.** I've put a purple arrow pointing to this date on the timeline. **This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Siege** where numerous Jews are taken captive including the prophet Ezekiel.

- **Jan 15, 588 BC to July 16, 586 BC. I've marked this date with a yellow arrow on the timeline. This is the Third Siege.** Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed on August 19, 586 BC. Numerous Jews are taken captive including the prophet Jeremiah.

Cyrus the Great not only overthrows the unpopular Babylonian Empire in 539 BC—**Notice the green area pointing to that year on this timeline.** But Cyrus also encourages his new subjects to go back to their homelands and revive their former way of life. The Jews were no exception to Cyrus' rule. So in 538 BC—**notice the blue arrow on the timeline**—This points to 538 BC when King Cyrus releases Israel from captivity and allow them and even encourages them with the money and support to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. .

This timeline depicts the 70 yrs of Babylonian captivity that was prophesied by Jeremiah, and this 70 yrs of punishment in exile is about to come to an end. Cyrus permits any Jews who so desire to return to Judah and rebuild God's Temple.

### Let's read Ezra chapter 1:

#### **Ezra 1:1-11 (GW)**

<sup>1</sup> The promise the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah was about to come true in Cyrus' first year as king of Persia. The LORD inspired the king to make this announcement throughout his whole kingdom and then to put it in writing.

<sup>2</sup> This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: The LORD God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the world. Then he ordered me to build a temple for him in Jerusalem (which is in Judah).

<sup>3</sup> May God be with all of you who are his people. You may go to Jerusalem (which is in Judah) and build a temple for the LORD God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> All who {choose to} remain behind, wherever they may be living, should provide the people who are leaving with silver, gold, supplies, livestock, and freewill offerings to be used in God's temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>5</sup> Then the heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, the priests, and the Levites—everyone God had inspired—came forward to rebuild the LORD'S temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>6</sup> All their neighbors {who were remaining behind} provided them with articles made from silver and gold, supplies, livestock, and valuable gifts besides everything that was freely offered.

<sup>7</sup> King Cyrus brought out the utensils belonging to the LORD'S temple. Nebuchadnezzar had taken these utensils from Jerusalem and put them in the temple of his own god.

<sup>8</sup> King Cyrus of Persia put the treasurer Mithredath in charge of bringing them out. So Mithredath made a list of them for Prince Sheshbazzar of Judah.

<sup>9</sup> This is the inventory: gold dishes— 30 silver dishes— 1,000 knives— 29

<sup>10</sup> gold bowls— 30 other silver bowls— 410 other utensils— 1,000

<sup>11</sup> The gold and silver utensils totaled 5,400. Sheshbazzar took all these utensils with him when the exiles left Babylon to go to Jerusalem.

The Babylonians had captured Judah in either 607 or 586 BC. –There is some disagreement over the which year it actually occurred. The exile of Judah lasted just as the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied to the exact year. The exile ended just as God had promised and now this was the first of three deportations or returns to Jerusalem.

We are told that the Lord inspired or stirred the heart of King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their homeland. Once again, we see the providence of God, the Invisible Hand of God. God is Lord over all and he can influence the heart and mind of anyone, any ruler, anyone in authority. When you look at history, you need to realize that people make decisions and judgments without any thought or regard for God, but God's Invisible Hand is moving them like chess pieces. God is in control. History is His Story, and He is still at work today. He's writing His story in your life and mine.

Cyrus's proclamation sounds as if he too worships Jehovah, but he may have just been an accommodating kind of ruler and his profession of faith may have only been "skin-deep." A great many conquerors were religious men, but we are left to wonder whether or not he really knew Jehovah as the one true God.

## **B. There's No Place Like Home: The Jews Who Returned Home to Judea**

**Theme: God is faithful; He never changes. He always keeps his promises.**

The essence of the proclamation is a permission to return for anyone who wished to do so, a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple, and an order to the native inhabitants to render help in money, goods, and beasts. A further contribution towards the building was suggested as 'a free-will offering.' The return, then, was not to be at the expense of the king, nor was any tax laid on for it; but neighborly goodwill, born of seventy years of association, was invoked, and, as we find, not in vain. God had given the people favor in the eyes of those who had carried them captive.

But after the long years of residence in Babylon, many Israelites had settled in and made a home there in Babylon and they were well-connected with family and friends so that they had lost some of their homesickness. One reason is frankly given by the historian Josephus: 'Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their possessions behind them.' But just as God had stirred the heart of King Cyrus to make this proclamation, so also God stirred the hearts of some of the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. Those who stayed behind were held back by love of an easy life, or fear of the journey, or love of money and possessions.

How many of us have had great opportunities offered for service, which we have let slip in like manner! To have doors opened which we are too lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the tragedy and the crime of many in life. It is easier to live among the low levels of the plain of Babylon, than to take to the dangers and privations of the weary tramp across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem are a much less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which have to be left. Those who are practical would say, 'Be content where you are, and let other people take the trouble of such mad schemes like rebuilding the Temple.'

We can come up with a thousand excuses ringing in our ears for not doing what God wants us to do and the rest of our life will be empty as a result--Neglected opportunities, unheeded calls to do God's will is all we have in our lives. The saddest of all words is, 'It might have been.' How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring souls that rose to the occasion, and cast a life of ease, wealth, possessions and even family and friends behind them because they heard the divine call of God and they responded by saying, 'Here am I; send me'!

One other point to be made about this passage is the inventory of the Temple vessels returned by Cyrus. Here's what I find amazing about this inventory of all the utensils and items that had been taken from the Temple in Jerusalem—they totaled 5,400 in number and they were very valuable, and King Cyrus decides to give them up so they can be returned to their rightful owners, the Jews, and returned to the rightful home in Jerusalem in a rebuilt Temple. This is amazing!

Also, we see that those who take up the call to return to Jerusalem are generously given gold, silver, livestock by their neighbors, as a free-will offering. In other words, no one forced them to do this—they wanted to give towards this effort. This is often what we are doing when we send out a missionary family to another country. Churches will take up offerings and people will freely give to help the missionary family move and get settled and to provide for their ongoing work abroad.

Another reason why there is this enumeration of all these items totaling 5400 in number is that there was a pride and joy in the writer of the book of Ezra that these items like bowls and knives were being returned to Jerusalem as a pledge towards the re-establishment of the Temple and worship in the Temple.

We are told that those returning from Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem numbered 49,897 which included 7,337 servants as well as 200 male and female singers. We are told that they were carrying 1,030 pounds of gold, 5740 pounds of silver, and 100 robes for the priests. And, everything arrived safely in Jerusalem and was accounted for. Not one ounce of gold or silver was missing. Nothing was stolen. And here's what is so amazing. On a journey like this, there were always bandits, robbers, thieves hiding up in the hills who would come down and rob travelers. I believe that God's hand of protection kept any robbers away from these returning Jews.

It seems that Sheshbazzar and his fellow returnees began laying the foundations of the Temple, but for some unknown reason, they were unable to complete the task.

### **C. The Second Temple**

Eighteen years after the initial return of the exiles under Sheshbazzar, work begins anew on the Temple. But this time, the returnees are led by a man named Zerubbabel.

#### **In Ezra 3:7-8 (GW) we read:**

<sup>7</sup> So they gave money to the stonemasons and carpenters. Then they gave food, drink, and olive oil to the men from Sidon and Tyre in exchange for cedar, which the men would bring by sea from Lebanon to Joppa as King Cyrus of Persia had authorized them to do.

<sup>8</sup> Zerubbabel (who was Shealtiel's son), Jeshua (who was Jozadak's son), and the rest of the Jews, (the priests, Levites, and all the others who had come back from exile to Jerusalem) began to rebuild the temple. This happened in the second month of the second year following their return to {the site} of God's house in Jerusalem. They began by appointing the Levites who were at least 20 years old to direct the work on the LORD'S house.

They begin where the first wave of returnees left off: rebuilding the Temple. They start by rebuilding the central altar, which allows them to offer sacrifices to God. Then they begin work on the Temple itself. When the foundation is laid, most of the people shout for joy. However, when those familiar with the first Temple see the diminished size of the new foundation, they weep, realizing that the Temple will in

no way compare to Solomon's glorious structure. Despite these mixed emotions, the people busy themselves with the construction of the new Temple.

#### D. **Ezra the Priest**

**Theme: Man can come to God only according to God's will and plan.**

In Ezra 4-6, we find that the Samaritans are trying to interfere in the building of the Temple. Now you might remember that the Samaritans consisted of people resettled by the Assyrians from southern Mesopotamia. They weren't legitimate Israelites. The returning Israelites consider them intruders who were trying to hinder the work of rebuilding the Temple.

Years pass and the Temple remains unfinished. Realizing the people need a little motivation, God calls the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to do their stuff. Haggai plays the role of the "bad cop," as it were, chastising the people for fixing up their own homes while neglecting the house of God. Zechariah plays "the good cop," envisioning a day when the Judean monarchy will be restored. Motivated by the prophets' preaching, the people again begin rebuilding the Temple.

About 50 yrs after Zerubbabel's return and rebuilding of the Temple, Ezra arrives on the scene. Ezra is sent by the Persian king, Artaxerxes, to find out how things are going in Judea. Ezra has a letter from the king in his possession which grants Ezra the authority to use money from the Persian treasury to tend to any unfinished business in rebuilding the Israelite's lives in their homeland.

When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem around 458 BC, he discovers that the people are not well informed about their religious heritage. Kind of like today. As a people here in America, we are not well-informed of our heritage as a nation and there are many who still believe that the separation of church and state is in the Constitution when it's not. We need someone like Ezra today, to call us as a people back to God.

Well Ezra begins to teach the people about the Law of Moses, and he implements religious and civil reforms to ensure that they're following God's laws as recorded in the Bible. Ezra is effectively made the leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem by a Persian royal commission.

Shortly after Ezra arrives in Judea to enact religious reforms, a large group of people approach Ezra and confess:

#### **Ezra 10:2-3 (GW)**

"We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women who came from the people around us. However, there is still hope for Israel.

<sup>3</sup> So we must now make a promise to our God to get rid of all foreign women and the children born from them, as my lord {Ezra} and the others who tremble at the commandments of our God have advised us to do. We must do what Moses' Teachings tell us."

Ezra is very disturbed to learn of the interfaith marriages, and forces the priests who have married local women to take an oath to immediately divorce their wives and families. Then, Ezra summons all the returned exiles to assemble within three days in Jerusalem. Heavy rains increase the drama, as the people gather and are drenched as they hear that they must abandon their families. According to Ezra,

some priests and laymen oppose the plan, but in the end, all are forced to divorce their wives and children.

Ezra's insistence that these men divorce their foreign wives and their children may strike you as peculiar. To explain, divorce is largely discouraged, if not condemned in the Bible. Secondly, other biblical authors seem to be more tolerant of intermarriage between neighboring peoples. For example, all the kings of Judah, as descendants of King David, stem from the Intermarriage of the Moabite woman Ruth and her Israelite husband. Nevertheless, in Ezra's defense, it's quite possible that such interfaith marriages would have destroyed the Jews' religious identity due to assimilation. So he insists that the men get divorced.

## **E. Nehemiah the Builder: Can We Fix It? Yes We Can!**

**Theme: Man must have faith in order to please God and be saved.**

Let's read Nehemiah, chapter 1

### **Nehemiah 1:1-11 (GW)**

<sup>1</sup> These are the words of Nehemiah, son of Hacaliah: During the month of Chislev, in Artaxerxes' twentieth year as king, while I was in the fortress at Susa,

<sup>2</sup> one of my brothers, Hanani, arrived with some men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had survived captivity and about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> They told me, "Those who survived captivity are in the province. They are enduring serious troubles and being insulted. The wall of Jerusalem has been broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."

<sup>4</sup> When I heard this, I sat down and cried. I mourned for days. I continued to fast and pray to the God of heaven.

<sup>5</sup> I said, "LORD God of heaven, great and awe-inspiring God, you faithfully keep your promise and show mercy to those who love you and obey your commandments.

<sup>6</sup> Open your eyes, and pay close attention with your ears to what I, your servant, am praying. I am praying to you day and night about your servants the Israelites. I confess the sins that we Israelites have committed against you as well as the sins that my father's family and I have committed.

<sup>7</sup> We have done you a great wrong. We haven't obeyed the commandments, laws, or regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup> Please remember what you told us through your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.

<sup>9</sup> But if you return to me and continue to obey my commandments, though your people may be driven to the most distant point on the horizon, I will come and get you from there and bring you to the place where I chose to put my name.'

<sup>10</sup> These are your servants and your people whom you have saved by your great power and your strong hand.

<sup>11</sup> Lord, please pay attention to my prayer and to the prayers of all your other servants who want to worship your name. Please give me success today and make this man, King Artaxerxes, show me compassion." I was cupbearer to the king at this time.

Nehemiah is the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, which meant he would daily come before the king and his role was a deadly one. He was charged with the responsibility of tasting the King's drink before the King would touch it so that if it was poisoned in any way, the one who would die would be Nehemiah.

These cupbearers in some cases also tested the food to make sure it was not seasoned with some poison as well.

Nehemiah gets word that the Jews in Jerusalem are being insulted and are in serious trouble. And to add insult to injury, the walls surrounding the city are broken down in great disrepair. In a sense the walls provide a visual image of the Jewish people there in Jerusalem. They need some help and encouragement. Nehemiah is so distressed that he sits down and cries, and then he fasts and is in a state of mourning for days. He then calls out to God and intercedes on behalf of his people, asking God to forgive Israel for all the sins that they have committed including Nehemiah himself and his family. He states that they as God's people have not obeyed his commandments or laws given through Moses. He finally asks God to give him success as he approaches the king with this matter. He asks God to work on the king's heart so that he will have compassion on the Israelites there in Judea.

Even though the Jews had been back in their homeland for nearly a hundred years, the walls of Jerusalem still lay in ruins. Because walls were a city's primary means of defense, Nehemiah knew that the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls was essential for the protection of the Jews against their enemies. The broken down walls were a picture of the Jews there in Jerusalem. For the past 100 yrs., they were still broken and hurting. Even as Nehemiah needed to shore up the walls of Jerusalem, he was also being called to shore up the remnant that had returned to Jerusalem.

Not only does the king give Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem, he gives Nehemiah an armed escort, as well as permission to use the empire's resources to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. So Nehemiah's prayer was most definitely answered by Jehovah God. He gave Nehemiah great favor with King Artaxerxes.

## F. Rebuilding Jerusalem's walls (Nehemiah 3-4)

**Theme: God is our Shield and Defender. Our Ever-Present Help in Time of Trouble.**

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he surveys the damage to the walls and begins to organize the people for work. Nehemiah wisely decides to have the people work on the walls by family groups, and near the location of their houses. Nehemiah's strategy ensures that the people remain motivated in their work, because rebuilding the walls means protection for their own homes.

However, once word gets out that the Jews are rebuilding the walls, the Samaritans raise opposition, and even threaten violence. The threat of attack requires that the Jews work on the wall with a tool in one hand and a sword in the other. There are even several attempts on Nehemiah's life. Let's read about some of what Nehemiah encountered:

### **Nehemiah 4:4-20 (GW)**

<sup>4</sup> {Nehemiah prayed,} "Our God, hear us. We are despised. Turn their insults back on them, and let them be robbed in the land where they are prisoners.

<sup>5</sup> Don't ignore their guilt, and don't let their sins disappear from your records. They have insulted you in front of these builders."

<sup>6</sup> So we rebuilt the wall, which was rebuilt to about half its {original} height. The people worked with determination.

<sup>7</sup> When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people from Ashdod heard that the repair



work on the walls of Jerusalem was making progress and that the gaps were being filled in, they became furious.

<sup>8</sup> All of them plotted to attack Jerusalem to create confusion.

<sup>9</sup> But we prayed to our God and set guards to protect us day and night.

<sup>10</sup> Then the people of Judah said, “The work crews are worn out, and there is too much rubble. We can't continue to rebuild the wall.”

<sup>11</sup> Our enemies said, “Before they know what is happening or see a thing, we will be right in the middle of them. We'll kill them and bring the work to an end.”

<sup>12</sup> Jews who were living near our enemies warned us ten times that our enemies would attack us from every direction.

<sup>13</sup> That is why I positioned people by their families behind the wall where it was lowest and most exposed. The people were armed with swords, spears, and bows.

<sup>14</sup> I looked them over and proceeded to tell the nobles, the leaders, and the rest of the people, “Don't be afraid of our enemies. Remember how great and awe-inspiring the LORD is. Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that we knew about their plots and that God had prevented their plans from being successful, we all went back to the work on the wall. Each person performed his own job.

<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my men worked on the wall, and the other half were wearing body armor and holding spears, shields, and bows. The leaders stood behind all the Judeans

<sup>17</sup> who were rebuilding the wall. The workers who were carrying loads did the work with one hand and held their weapons with the other,

<sup>18</sup> and each builder had his sword fastened to his side. The man who was supposed to sound the trumpet alarm was with me.

<sup>19</sup> I told the nobles, the leaders, and the rest of the people, “So much work has to be done in different places that we are widely separated from one another on the wall.

<sup>20</sup> When you hear the trumpet, assemble around me. Our God will fight for us!”

### **Here are some principles that we can learn from Nehemiah:**

**Principle #1: When You Pray, Expect Answers.** In Nehemiah 2:2, the King asks Nehemiah, “What do you want?” And here's what Nehemiah does:

So I prayed to the God of heaven,

<sup>5</sup> and I asked the king, “If it pleases Your Majesty, and you are willing to grant my request, let me go to Judah, to the city where my ancestors are buried, so that I can rebuild it.”

<sup>6</sup> Then, while the queen was sitting beside him, the king asked me, “How long will you be gone, and when will you come back?” When I gave him a specific date, he was willing to let me go.

<sup>7</sup> I also asked the king, “If it pleases Your Majesty, let me have letters addressed to the governors {of the province} west of the Euphrates River. In the letters tell them to grant me safe conduct until I arrive in Judah.

<sup>8</sup> Also, let me have a letter addressed to Asaph, the supervisor of Your Majesty's forest. In the letter order him to give me wood for the gates of the fortress near the temple, for the city wall, and for the house I'll move into.” (The king let me have the letters, because God was guiding me.)

**Principle 2: Seek the Welfare of Israel.** When Nehemiah arrived in the land of his fathers, and delivered the king's letters to the rulers of the land, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, they were unhappy.

Their response offers an important insight into what was in Nehemiah's heart, and what he hoped to accomplish in the Promised Land.

### **Nehemiah 2:10 (GW)**

<sup>10</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, they were very upset that someone had come to give the people of Israel so much assistance.

Nehemiah's intent was not simply a construction project nor an effort to restore Jerusalem to a portion of her former glory. He had heard about the sorrow and suffering of his brethren in the land and he sought the welfare of Israel.

I believe the Lord will always assist us in our endeavors and respond to our prayers when our desire is to seek the welfare of his people. This would be true in home and visiting teaching and in presiding and in our family history endeavors, and in our efforts to hasten the work of salvation.

**Principle 3: Involve Others.** After his arrival, Nehemiah spent 3 days surveying the city and contemplating the work that would need to be done. He rode around the city by night but gave no indication to his people of his purposes in Jerusalem until he had a clear understanding of the nature of the work before him.

The king of Persia had made Nehemiah governor over the land of Judea but he knew he could not do the required work alone. He therefore spoke to the priests, the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the remnant (see Neh. 2:16). At the conclusion of those three days, here's what Nehemiah said.

### **Nehemiah 2:17-18 (GW)**

<sup>17</sup> Then I told them, "You see the trouble we're in. Jerusalem is in ruins, and its gates are burned down. Let's rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be insulted."

<sup>18</sup> Then I told them that my God had been guiding me and what the king had told me. They replied, "Let's begin to rebuild." So they encouraged one another to begin this God-pleasing work.

There were those who opposed the work, of course, the non-Israelite inhabitants of the land laughed them to scorn and despised them, But the people were not deterred.

### **Nehemiah 2:20 (GW)**

<sup>20</sup> "The God of heaven will give us success," I answered them. "We, his servants, are going to rebuild. You have no property or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

"The Israelites were determined to "rise up and build" and so "they strengthened their hands for this good work."

**Principle #4: Do Your Part.** The purpose of the walls of the city was to protect Jerusalem from the encroachment of enemies. Thus every section, every wall, indeed every stone was crucial to the safety of those within the walls. What would happen if one portion of the walls was left in ruin and an enemy attacked? Like the arrow that killed King Ahab in 1 Kings 22:34, a tiny gap might give an implacable enemy all the space needed to enter and destroy.

Chapter 3 teaches us that we must all do our part in building the walls of protection around the people we love and serve--our families, our neighbors, and those in our church family.

**Principle #5: Expect Opposition.** This hostility to the work of building the kingdom is nearly continuous, in Nehemiah's day, and in ours. The report of this antagonism to the work of Nehemiah's people is interesting:

**Sanballat "spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said,** "What do these miserable Jews think they're doing? Can they rebuild it by themselves? Are they going to offer sacrifices? Can they finish it in a day? Will they get the stones out of the rubbish heaps, burned as these stones are, and give them new strength?"

<sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside Sanballat, said, "Even a fox would make their stone wall collapse if it walked on top of what they're building!"

**The work continued but....**

<sup>7</sup> When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people from Ashdod heard that the repair work on the walls of Jerusalem was making progress and that the gaps were being filled in, they became furious.

**Nehemiah counseled his builders. He said,**

<sup>14</sup> I looked them over and proceeded to tell the nobles, the leaders, and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of our enemies. Remember how great and awe-inspiring the LORD is. Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

**After a little speech, Nehemiah tells us:**

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that we knew about their plots and that God had prevented their plans from being successful, we all went back to the work on the wall. Each person performed his own job.

**Nehemiah 4:16 (GW)**

<sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my men worked on the wall, and the other half were wearing body armor and holding spears, shields, and bows. The leaders stood behind all the Judeans

**One other verse explains a wonderful way to confront opposition.**

<sup>9</sup> But we prayed to our God and set guards to protect us day and night.

**Principle #6: Don't Come Down.** The walls of Jerusalem were completed in an amazing fifty-two days! The final rocks and logs caused a renewed effort from the enemies of Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that no gaps had been left in it (although at that time I had not yet hung the doors in the city gates).

<sup>2</sup> Then Sanballat and Geshem sent this message to me: "Let's meet in Hakkephirim on the plain of Ono." They were planning to harm me.

<sup>3</sup> I sent messengers to tell them, "I'm working on an important project and can't get away. Why should the work stop while I leave to meet with you?"

<sup>4</sup> They sent the same message to me four times, and I answered them the same way.

All of the disciples of the Lord are doing a great work. Lucifer would love to have us set the work aside and come down for a while, so he could do us a mischief. He would be delighted to have us spend some time in the plain of Ono. Another way to write this principle might be to say, “Stay away from the plain of Oh No!”

The repeated attempts of the enemies of the work to convince Nehemiah to come down must speak to us in our own stewardships. When Lucifer sees us zealously building the walls of our stewardships, he will always try to impede our efforts. He will try to entice us to come down from the walls and engage in less fruitful activities.

Well, despite these many obstacles, Nehemiah and his co-workers succeed in rebuilding the walls—and in record time: a mere 52 days. Now, with the walls completed, there is just one thing left to do—they dedicate themselves and their newly fortified city to God.

### **G. Rediscovering the Torah**

**Theme: God communicates with man.**

Ezra’s water gate is the name of one of the main portals in Jerusalem’s walls, seemingly located by the fresh-water spring just southeast of the city. Near the Water Gate, at a public square, the former exiles gather in 445BC to hear Ezra read the Law of Moses. Many of them are hearing these laws for the first time, and several of them no longer understand biblical Hebrew. As a result, while Ezra reads, others in Israel’s ancient legal code mingle among the crowd and answer any questions the people might have. Many of them weep as they hear of their ancestral heritage and laws that they had long ago abandoned. Ezra consoles them and instructs them that they shouldn’t mourn, but should celebrate the joyous occasion.

### **H. The People Celebrate Sukkot: It’s Time to Party On!**

The following day, the people’s leaders come to Ezra to study the words of the Torah more closely. And to their amazement, they discover that according to the biblical calendar, it is the holiday of Booths (also called Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles). It’s time to party!

The Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot is the seventh and final feast given to Israel. It is observed in the fall. During this time, many Jewish families construct a hastily built hut in which meals are eaten throughout the festival. The Feast of Tabernacles is used to remember the sukkot or huts that Israel lived in during their 40-yr sojourn in the desert after they came out of Egypt.

Later, after Israel entered the land of promise, Sukkot was associated with the fall harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot is celebrated for eight days in Israel.

### **Questions for Review:**

1. What Persian king issued a decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem?

### King Cyrus

2. What was the date that Cyrus issued this decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland? A. 496 BC; B. 538 BC; c. 562 BC. Answer: **B, 538 BC.**
3. How many deportations or returns were there to Judah? **3**
4. What prompted King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to their homeland? **God stirred his heart.**
5. According to Jeremiah's prophesy, how long had the Jews been captive in Babylon? **70 yrs.**
6. Did all the Jews leave Babylon to move back to their homeland in Judah? **No, only 5400. Most stayed behind in Babylon.**
7. Why did the Jews stay behind in Babylon and not jump at the opportunity to return to their homeland? **They had settled in, built homes, businesses, established connections with friends and family and were living comfortable lives.**
8. Shortly after Ezra arrives in Judea, a large group of people approach him. What do they confess? **"We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women who came from the people around us."**
9. What does Ezra tell the men to do? **Divorce their wives and children.**
10. Why does God want them to divorce their families? **Because intermarriage and assimilation will cause the Hebrew people (Israelites) to lose their identity and purity as Jews, God's holy people—set apart for His special purpose.**
11. When Nehemiah, the cupbearer for the king, gets word that the Jews in Jerusalem are being insulted, threatened and that the walls have been broken down by fire, what does he do? **He cries, mourns for days, fasts, and prays to God.**
12. How often did Nehemiah pray to God about this matter? **Day and night.**
13. What did he ask God to give him regarding King Artaxerxes? **Success as he approached the king asking for permission to return to Jerusalem to help rebuild the walls.**
14. Does God answer Nehemiah's prayer? **Yes, most definitely. The King gives him permission as well as an armed escort and permission to use the empire's resources to rebuild the walls.**
15. When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, how does he wisely organize the people to rebuild the walls? **According to their families and he puts them to work on portions of the wall that are near their homes so that they would have a vested interest in completing this work.**
16. When Nehemiah gets word that their enemies are plotting to attack them while they are rebuilding the wall, what practical steps does Nehemiah take? **We prayed to our God and set guards to protect us day and night.**
17. The walls were rebuilt in how many days? **52**
18. How do the Israelites celebrate the completion of this work? **By entering into the Feast of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles, where they build huts and meals are eaten for eight days.**
19. How do they learn about the Feast of Sukkot or Feast of Tabernacles? **From Ezra who brings out the Torah and reads it to the people, many who are hearing the Word of God for the first time in their lives.**

### **Next Lesson 38: Crazy for God: The Prophets**

