

My Favorite Thing About ESTHER, EZRA and NEHEMIAH

Esther 4:14

May 15, 2021

Today we are discussing 3 more books of the Bible - **Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah**.

My Favorite Thing About each book is the revelation that God chooses to use ordinary people to accomplish extra ordinary things and they, in turn, choose to cooperate: **Zerubbabel** and **Joshua** were just ordinary men, **Esther** was a young queen hiding a secret. **Ezra** was a simple scribe/priest. **Nehemiah** was a cupbearer to the king of Persia.

All 3 books fit within the reigns of the following Persian Kings:

- **Cyrus the Great** – 553/550-530 BC {he did not conquer Babylon until 539 BC}
 - **537 BC** - Cyrus decrees that the Jews were free to return to their homeland and a group led by “*Sheshbazzar*” {Zerubbabel} and “*Jeshua*” {Joshua} return to Judea. {2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4}
- **Cambyses** – 530-522 BC
- **Darius I** – 522-486 BC
- **Ahasuerus {Xerxes I}** – 486-465 BC
 - The story of Esther occurs during this time.
- **Artaxerxes I** – 465-425 BC
 - **457 BC** – Ezra is a part of the 2nd wave {Ezra 7:6-9}
 - **444 BC** – Nehemiah is a part of the 3rd wave {Nehemiah 2:1-10}

Zerubbabel and Joshua

These 2 leaders were called upon to be the political and religious leaders of the first wave of returning exiles in **537 BC**.

Zerubbabel was appointed governor of Judea - perhaps because he was the grandson of King Jehoiachin.

Joshua, as a descendent of Aaron, was appointed High Priest.

Together, they were tasked with the monumental responsibility of rebuilding the Temple and restoring the sacrificial system – a Temple they had never seen in a place they had never been.

Ezra 3:8-12 - In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, Joshua, son of Jozadak and the rest of the people began the work.... When the builders laid the foundation of the temple, the priests and Levites led the congregation in praise and thanksgiving: **“The LORD is good; his love to Israel endures forever.”**

There was a lot of drama surrounding the construction of the Temple. The locals did everything in their power to discourage, harass and otherwise prevent the Jews from rebuilding and for a period of 14 years construction on the Temple stopped. Haggai and Zechariah arrived and with their help and encouragement, construction began again and the Temple was completed in **515 BC**.

Ezra 5:2 - Then Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel and Joshua, son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

Haggai 2:4 - But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty.

2 ordinary men.... An extra ordinary task.... **“For such a time as this”**

Esther

Hadassah’s family, like many Jewish families, chose not to return to Judea. She was raised by her cousin, Mordecai, a prominent lawyer in **Susa** and was among the many young women taken to the king’s palace after Vashti’s banishment {**Esther 2:8**}. Before being taken away, Mordecai instructed her to tell no one she was a Jew.

Hadassah, now Esther, was chosen queen. Around that same time trouble began to stir and his name was Haman, the Agagite. His hatred for Mordecai festered until it became hatred for all Jews. So, Haman hatched a plan, *"The Final Solution"* of 473 BC.

Ahasuerus, didn't ask questions when Haman brought a report of potential rebellion from *"a group of people who don't keep your laws."* And when he offered to pay the bounty from his own pocket, {10,000 talents of silver}, the king agreed, *"...do with them as you see fit."* {Esther 3:11-13}

The decree ordering the destruction of the Jews was sent to all corners of the empire, from Egypt to India, but Esther didn't know anything about it.

A request accompanied the copy Mordecai sent her ---- *"go before the king and plead for your people."*

What a horrible moment. Esther had not seen the king for a month AND no one was allowed, by law, to go into his presence without being summoned. To do so might result in her death, but silence would mean the absolute annihilation of her people. She was just a woman, one of many. What could she possibly do? The law was the law and it couldn't be undone AND no one knew who she really was!!! If she just kept quiet... *"There is nothing I can do."* She replied.

Mordecai persisted --- *"Don't think for a moment that living in the king's palace is going to protect you. If you remain silent, deliverance will come from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows.... maybe you have become queen for such a time as this?"* {Esther 4:13-14}

Deep breath.... *"Assemble all the Jews in Susa and fast for me for 3 days. I and my female servants will do the same. Then I will go to the king, which I am not allowed to do; and if I perish, I perish."* {Esther 4:16}

Because of Esther's willingness and courage, the Jews were granted the right to defend themselves.

Esther 8:16-17 - For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. ¹⁷ In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

An ordinary girl.... An extra ordinary task.... *"For such a time as this"*

Ezra

Artaxerxes I {465-425 BC} was now king of Persia and Zerubbabel and Joshua, were long dead. Nearly 60 years had passed since the completion of the Temple. Worship had been restored, but the people were not living in obedience to the Law and the political and religious leadership in Judea was on the downward spiral.

Artaxerxes had ordered construction on the walls of Jerusalem to stop due to an unsubstantiated charge of rebellion made by the locals against the Jews **{Ezra 4:11-16}**.

Enter Ezra..... Scribe / Priest / Student / Teacher. His knowledge **OF** and passion **FOR** scripture was an invaluable resource and he was tasked with bringing the people back into a knowledge of the Law of God and a relationship with Him **{Ezra 7:10}**.

Ezra requested to be allowed to go to Judea and Artaxerxes said yes and gave him a huge sum of money --- 650 talents of Silver, 100 talents of Silver Articles, 100 talents of Gold, 20 gold bowels and 2 polished bronze bowls --- to be used upon his arrival at Jerusalem **{Ezra 7:12-26}**.

The long journey, nearly 1000 miles, would take months and raiding parties were not uncommon. Ezra had a dilemma and a choice to make -- ask the king for protection or trust God for His protection. He chose to trust God and did not ask for a military escort. 4 months later.... *"The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. So, we arrived in Jerusalem.... Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time.... They also delivered the king's orders to the royal satraps and to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, who then gave assistance to the people and to the house of God."* {Ezra 8:22-36}

Now we come to the heart of the problem ---- It was reported to Ezra that some of the men of Israel had married women from the surrounding nations. As a matter of fact, the leaders and rulers, *"lead the way in this unfaithfulness."* {Ezra 9:1-2}

Ezra was so distraught by the ingratitude of the people after all God had done for them that he fell to the ground, tore his clothes and pulled out his own hair -- there he sat until time for the evening sacrifice then he prayed:

Ezra 9:6-15 - O my God, I am too ashamed to lift up my face to you, because **our** guilt has reached to the heavens. Because of **our** sins, we have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings. Lord, You have been gracious in leaving us a remnant. You have not deserted us, instead You have shown us kindness in the sight of the king of Persia. He allowed us to

rebuild Your house and he has given us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. Lord, what can we say? **We** have disregarded the commands You gave us long ago regarding the surrounding nations. **Our** situation is the result of **our** evil deeds and **our** great guilt, and yet, Lord, You have punished us less than we deserve. **We** have once again broken Your command and intermarried with the people of the land. I imagine You are angry enough with us to destroy us completely! Lord God, You are righteous! **We** are guilty and not one of **us** can stand in Your presence.

Ezra's confession and public display of shame moved the nation to repentance and a call for a renewal of the covenant {Ezra 10:18-43}.

An ordinary priest.... An extra ordinary task.... **"For such a time as this"**

Nehemiah

Nehemiah served in the court of Artaxerxes I as a cupbearer {Nehemiah 1:11} - an important and trusted position.

93 years had passed since Cyrus' decree allowing the Jews to return to Judea and the walls of Jerusalem were still not restored.

When Nehemiah was made aware of this, he became so depressed that even the king noticed he was out of sorts. Nehemiah must have been well liked because the king asked what was wrong and how he could help.

Nehemiah responded, *"I'm sad because the city of my ancestors is still a pile of rubble"* and *"I'd like to return to Judea and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem."*

This was a bold request considering it was THIS king who had previously ordered all construction on Jerusalem to stop.

Nehemiah asked for many things and the king said **YES** to every request.

Nehemiah 2:8 - because the gracious hand of my God was upon me...

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he was met with mockery and threats and efforts to discourage his work, but he kept at it and in no time the wall was rebuilt to ½ its original height.

It wasn't long before other groups; the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites, joined in to try and stop construction. Undeterred, Nehemiah set a guard along portions of the wall including whole families with swords, spears and bows.

Nehemiah 4:14 - Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome! Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses!

½ the men worked – a shovel in one hand a knife in the other – and ½ the men were prepared for battle. They were spread very thin along the wall, so Nehemiah went around encouraging them: *"... whenever you hear the trumpet, come running. OUR GOD WILL FIGHT FOR US!!!"* {Nehemiah 4:20}

Outside interference was not the only problem Nehemiah had to deal with. Wealthy Jews were financially oppressing their fellow Jews to the point that some were forced to sell themselves. In predictable fashion, Nehemiah called a meeting, called out the offenders and demanded things be set right.

As you can imagine, Nehemiah was not popular in some circles:

- Hoping to kill him, Sanballat and Tobiah, invited him to a meeting --- He declined.
- They sent him a letter threatening to ruin his reputation --- He ignored the letter and kept working.
- They enlisted the help of Shemaiah, the *"Prophet"* to help convince Nehemiah that he was in danger and needed to go to the Temple for safety. Nehemiah understood that this was just another attempt to scare him enough into sinning against God and discredit him before the people --- He didn't go to the Temple

Nehemiah was the right man for the job and exactly who God needed to accomplish the goal of rebuilding Jerusalem. This seemingly impossible task, that had been sidelined for 93 years, took just 52 days to complete.

Nehemiah 6:15-16 - ... When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Nehemiah spent 12 years in Judea before returning to his *"real"* job as cup bearer to the king. But alas, his work in Judea was not over..... Upon his return, he discovered:

- A man, who was not priests, had been given living accommodation in the Temple --- Nehemiah threw him out.
- The Levites weren't getting their Temple wages and had to find other forms of employment --- Nehemiah restored their Temple jobs.
- People were working on the Sabbath and foreigners were allowed to sell their wares in Jerusalem on Sabbath --- Nehemiah rebuked the leaders and instructed the city gates be closed from Friday sundown to Sunday morning. He even told the foreign merchants to leave or he'd use force.
- Some of the men had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab --- Nehemiah rebuked them and was so mad he pulled out their hair!
One of the offenders was the grandson of Eliashib, the high priest --- Nehemiah threw him out of Jerusalem!!

An ordinary royal servant.... An extra ordinary task.... **“For such a time as this”**

Noah - Genesis 6:5-14

Abraham - Genesis 12

Moses - Exodus 3

The 12 – Matthew 4:19

Saul - Acts 9:1-16

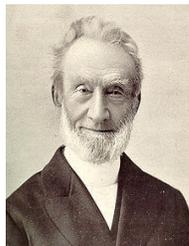
JOHN & CHARLES WESLEY: Where chosen by God to bring a sweeping revival to England.



ELLEN WHITE: A feeble, uneducated 17-year-old girl, was chosen by God to give evidence of His continued guidance after the Great Disappointment of 1844. Her ministry would last until her death in 1915.



GEORGE MÜLLER: Was chosen by God to build orphanages and provide for the needs of thousands of children in England. When he died, 1898, his worldly possessions totaled only 8 hundred dollars, but during his lifetime, he had distributed more than 8 million dollars.



YOU!!!



Ordinary people.... Extra ordinary tasks..... “For such a time as this”

That's my favorite thing about Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah.