

# Bible Stories

## RETURN from EXILE

Ezra 1:1-3

April 15, 2023

Today we are combining the books of Ezra and Nehemiah into 1 story – Return from Exile

The 70 years were up. It was now time for God to act. He moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to allow the Jews to return home.

The Exiles returned to Judea in 3 separate waves over a period of 93 years:

- **537 BC** - 1<sup>st</sup> wave led by "**Sheshbazzar**" {Zerubbabel} and "**Jeshua**" {Joshua} – {2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4}.
- **457 BC** – 2<sup>nd</sup> wave is led by Ezra – {Ezra 7:6-9}.
- **444 BC** – Nehemiah was a part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave – {Neh. 2:1-10}.

### Wave 1 – 537 BC – led by Zerubbabel and Joshua

These 2 leaders were called upon to be the political and religious leaders of the first wave of returning exiles - {49,897}.

Together, they were tasked with the monumental responsibility of rebuilding the Temple and restoring the sacrificial system.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the 1<sup>st</sup> year, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem. Despite fearing the people that surrounded them, they rebuilt the altar of burnt offering and offered morning and evening sacrifices to Yahweh.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, builders laid the foundation of the temple. The crowd shouted for joy, but some who had seen and remembered Solomon's Temple, wept. The Levites led the congregation in praise and thanksgiving to Yahweh saying, "**For He is good and His love to Israel endures forever.**"

At this time the other people groups living in the region approached Zerubbabel with an offer:

- **Ezra 4:2** - Let us build with you. Like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him from the days of Esarhaddon the king of Assyria who brought us up here.

These were the descendants of the co-mingling between the remnant of Israel and the nations who were resettled in the land by Assyria after 722 BC.

Zerubbabel and Joshua, said, "**No thanks**".

This was the beginning of the animosity between the Jews and this group - later known as the **Samaritans**.

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

Even though the Temple had been rebuilt and worship restored, the people were not living in obedience to the Law. The political and religious leadership in Judea were corrupt and the walls of Jerusalem remained in ruins.

After the Temple was rebuilt 58 years went by.....

During the reign of **Artaxerxes I** (465-425 BC) the opposition made an unsubstantiated charge of rebellion against the Jews. They did so hoping to prevent the walls of Jerusalem being rebuilt. They were successful. Artaxerxes ordered construction on the wall to stop and a military force was sent from Samaria to Jerusalem to enforce the decree.

## Wave 2 – 457 BC – led by Ezra

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}.

12 families – 1560 men {5-6 thousand total} joined him.

The journey of nearly 1000 miles, took 4 months. Ezra chose to trust God and did not ask for a military escort. Upon arrival at Jerusalem he declared, *“The hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way. .... 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}

Some time went by..... Ezra was told of a serious problem: Some of the men of Israel, including the leadership, 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 that he fell to the ground, tore his clothes and pulled out his own hair – there he remained 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 confession and repentance and a call was made for a renewal of the covenant.

A court of investigation was set up and after several months, the guilty men were named {Ezra 10:18-43}.

## Wave 3 – 444 BC – Nehemiah

93 years had passed since Cyrus' decree allowing the Jews to return home. A spiritual revival had occurred, but the walls of Jerusalem remained in ruins.

Enter Nehemiah – cupbearer to Artaxerxes I {Nehemiah 1:11}.

When Nehemiah was made aware that Jerusalem remained in ruins, he became so depressed that even the king noticed. The king asked what was wrong and how he could help. Nehemiah, ever the planner, was ready with a response:

*“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.

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; Arabs, Ammonites and Ashdodites, joined together in trying to stop construction on the walls. 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 Yahweh 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.

52 days later, the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, was completed.

- **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.

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 into slavery in order to pay off their debt. In predictable fashion, Nehemiah called a meeting, called out the offenders and demanded things be set right.

As a result of all Nehemiah's "*interfering*," he was not popular in some circles and several attempts were made on his life – without success.

He spent 12 years in Judea before returning to Persia, but 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 was so mad that he rebuked them, cursed them, smacked some of them around and pulled out their hair! One of the offenders was the grandson of the high priest --- Nehemiah threw him out of Jerusalem!!

### **What do we do with this story?**

God had promised to preserve a Remnant and bring them back to their land. Ezra tells us how God fulfilled that promise.

More than that, this story is about 2 men who were tasked with re-establishing the chosen people – not simply re-establishing them in the Land of Promise, but more importantly, re-establishing their connection to Yahweh.

**Ezra was a scribe and priest --- Nehemiah was a layman:**

- They were devout
- They were resourceful
- They had an unwavering trust in God
- They had active prayer lives
- They were humble and yet bold and decisive
- They stood for truth
- They aligned themselves with the plans and purposes of God

**Ezra was:**

- Relentless in his study and practice of the Law of God = he walked the walk.
- Deeply concerned with the spiritual health of Israel and he led the nation in spiritual revival.

Ezra was the right man for the job.

**Nehemiah was:**

- Fearless and unwavering and forceful when he needed to be.
- He led by example.
- He was an encourager.
- He had tremendous administrative skills.

Nehemiah was the right man for the job.

If there had only been an Ezra, only part of the job would have gotten done. If there had only been a Nehemiah, only part of the job would have gotten done. God needed both men to accomplish the goal.

You have a job to do for the kingdom of Heaven. A job that only you can do – a job that won't get done if you don't do it.

You might not be an Ezra or a Nehemiah but you are a Josh, an Amy, a John, a Lisa, a Victor..... And God has something for you to do.