

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK

WINTER 2022-23



**COURAGE
IN CRISIS**

The Books of
Ezra, Nehemiah,
Esther



Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

STUDY BOOK WINTER 2022-23

For use with *Understanding the Bible's Study Book*.

COURAGE IN CRISIS

The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE—A quarterly series of Bible book studies that will help you understand the Word of God and apply it to your life.



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UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

is organized according to a systematic, sensible plan that will take you through every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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Next quarter:
Revelation

Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

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The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

These three short books, tucked in between 2 Chronicles and Job, are unfamiliar to many Christians. However, these books offer an abundant reward to all who turn to them. They are filled with exciting stories, intriguing characters, and rich spiritual insights.

Ezra and Nehemiah go together, but they make an odd couple. Both books narrate events in Jerusalem after a remnant of Judah returned from the Babylonian captivity. Ezra was a meditative scribe who led reforms by means of teaching and holiness of character. Nehemiah was an official in the Persian government who led reforms by means of bold plans and force of character. The personality differences between these two are significant. For example, when Ezra heard that some of the Jewish men had taken foreign wives, he tore out his own hair; when Nehemiah confronted the same problem, he tore out the hair of the offenders!

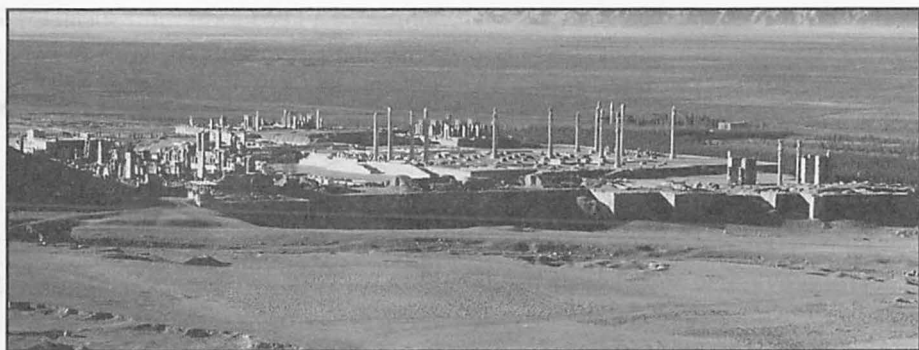
Esther records some significant things that happened in the community of Jews just prior to their return from captivity. The book tells the story of a humble Jewish girl who became the queen of Persia. In this position she was used by the Lord to prevent the genocide of His people. Without mentioning God, the Law, the temple, or Jerusalem, the Book of Esther teaches how the Lord remains sovereign over every nation, no matter how godless it may become.

Ezra and Nehemiah were originally placed together as one book. In the Hebrew Bible it preceded Chronicles, which was the last of the historical books. Esther was grouped with Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes—five small books that are read annually on Jewish holidays. The Song of Songs belongs to the Passover observance, Ruth to Pentecost, Ecclesiastes to the Feast of Tabernacles, Lamentations to the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem, and Esther to Purim.

Author, Date, and Background

Ancient Jewish and the oldest Christian traditions assigned the authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah to Ezra. Many contemporary scholars continue to support the view that Ezra also wrote the books of Chron-

icles. Included in the evidence that supports this view is the fact that the last two verses of 2 Chronicles and the first two verses of Ezra are virtually identical. Ezra may have done this to make a smooth chrono-



The ruins of Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of Persia. Of this city the Persian emperor Darius wrote, "I built it secure and beautiful."

logical flow between the two books. Some scholars have suggested that a "Chronicler," perhaps a disciple of Ezra, brought together the memoirs of Judah's kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah to compose 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

Ezra traveled from Babylon to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7:8). Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem from Susa, one of the Persian capitals, in 445 B.C. (Neh. 2:1). Both accounts appear to have been written soon after the

occurrence of the events they describe. The Book of Ezra may date from about 440 B.C., and the Book of Nehemiah from about 430 B.C.

The Book of Esther is a third-person account of the events involving Esther and her older cousin Mordecai. No indication of the writer's identity appears in the book. The author's familiarity with Persia suggests Esther was written in Persia probably around 460 B.C., just before Ezra returned to Jerusalem.

Theme and Purpose

The first half of Ezra narrates the initial return of Jewish exiles from Babylon and their struggles to establish their homes and rebuild the temple. The second half of Ezra deals with the spiritual reforms that the scribe himself initiated throughout the land of Judah. The book, as a whole, emphasizes the importance of the Word of God and genuine worship while living in a hostile world.

The Book of Nehemiah records Nehemiah's determination to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and renew the commitment of its people to the Lord. This brisk, forceful book emphasizes the importance of faithfulness to God and perseverance in trials.

The Book of Esther tells about the courageous attempt of Esther and Mordecai to head off a Persian official's plot to eradicate the Jewish race.

Some think the book was written simply to explain the Jewish holiday of Purim. However, Esther is also a tale about the way God uses His

people, of all economic and social statuses, to accomplish His purposes. In particular, a woman is the “hero” of this narrative.

How to Use the *Study Book*

The *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible opened beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the “Ask Yourself”

questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

Note: Just because some passages are treated “in brief” does not mean that they are unimportant or that you don’t need to read them in your Bible as part of your study of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

1

The Exiles Take Root

Ezra 1—3

a The Exiles Prepare to Leave Babylon (1:1-11)

The family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. —Ezra 1:5

God had predicted 70 years of captivity for His people because they had persisted, for centuries, in faithlessness to His covenant (see Jer. 25:11, 12; 29:10). Jerusalem had suffered minor deportations in 605 and 597 B.C. before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city and temple and carried away all the leading families in 586 B.C. Then in 539 B.C., Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon, and the Lord began the gracious work of restoring His chosen people to the land of promise.

The first full year of Cyrus's reign was 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1). The

Persian emperor instituted a policy of resettling captive peoples in their homelands and promoting native religions in order to gain the favor of every god everywhere. Cyrus thought he was helping himself, but all the time it was the Lord moving the heart of the Persian emperor to fulfill the restoration promises of Israelite prophets.

The emperor sent heralds to shout his proclamations in the language of each major city of the Persian Empire, which stretched from Egypt and Asia Minor to India. Printed versions followed later, worded in Aramaic, the



This 10-inch baked clay cylinder records Cyrus's conquest of Babylon and his policy of restoring native peoples and their religions. It was discovered in an archaeological excavation of Babylon and is currently housed in the British Museum.

language of international affairs, to be posted and stored in archives. The version in Ezra 1:2-4 is worded in Hebrew; the version quoted in 6:3-5 is written in Aramaic.

Cyrus worded his religious tolerance decrees in the language of the particular faith involved. He identified the Lord as “the God of heaven” (1:2), which had become a popular title among the Jews of the exile as they realized that the Lord controlled much more than the land of Israel. Jewish tradition says that prominent Babylonian Jews showed Cyrus the prophecies of Isaiah, which named him as the shepherd of Israel in captivity (see Isa. 44:28; 45:1). In any case, the emperor was correct when he said that the God of heaven had appointed him a role in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Cyrus granted every follower of the Lord, in any part of his empire, the right to return to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding the Lord’s temple (Ezra 1:3). The emperor’s statement of blessing on the Jews who would return identified God by name (“the LORD”) and connected Him to all the people of Israel—not just the tribe of Judah, in whose territory was Jerusalem, the city of God’s temple.

Finally, Cyrus’s proclamation invited all his subjects throughout his realm to participate in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple by giving those who would return contributions of money, goods, and livestock (vs. 4). When the emperor called those who were returning

“survivors,” he introduced the prophets’ term for a “remnant” into his decree (see Isa. 10:20-22; Zeph. 3:13).

Just as the Lord had stirred up the heart of Cyrus to decree the return from exile, so He stirred the hearts of many families from Judah and Benjamin and from the priests and Levites to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:5). Probably most Jews remained in their long-established homes in Babylon and other Persian provinces, but they made generous freewill gifts of precious metals, goods, and livestock to the returning exiles (vs. 6).

Only the eyes and ears of faith can detect the Lord at work, stirring the hearts of believers and unbelievers alike. Sometimes He moves the hearts of Christians to risk their security and comfort. Sometimes He motivates them to support others with prayers and gifts.

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time the Lord wanted me to step out of my “comfort zone”?*

The emperor also restored to the party of returning exiles all the utensils and service vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon’s temple and warehoused in the temple of Marduk in Babylon (Ezra 1:7; see II Kings 24:13; 25:13-15; Dan. 5:1, 2). Cyrus’s treasurer, Mithredath, handed over the temple treasures along with a detailed inventory to Sheshbazzar, “the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8).

This particular title “prince” does not necessarily imply descent from

royalty. Sheshbazzar probably was a Jewish deputy of the governor of the Persian province of Samaria, from which a new province, Judah, was being carved to accommodate the returning exiles. The partial inventory of Ezra 1:9-10 likely lists the most significant temple items restored to the exiles. The number of special items adds up to 2,499 out of the total of 5,400 returned temple articles (vs. 11). Sheshbazzar personally took responsibility for delivering the temple treasures to Jerusalem.

Ezra 2:1-63 in Brief

This list of exiles who returned appears again in Nehemiah 7:6-65 with some variations in the names and slight differences in the numbers. The party of exiles who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon consisted of leaders, ordinary people, and temple personnel. Among the ordinary people, some could trace their genealogy back to a particular clan, while others could prove their connection to a hometown. Some unfortunate people and priests could not verify their genealogies.

While this portion of Ezra may read like a dull page of unpronounceable names, "these were living portions of Israel, roots and all, [prepared] for replanting" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, InterVarsity Press).



The Exiles Reach Jerusalem (2:64-70)

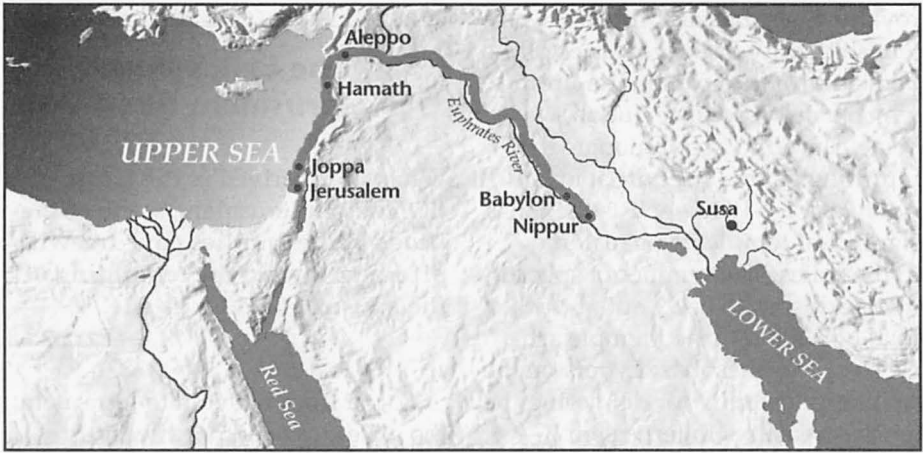
When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site.

—Ezra 2:68

To get from Babylon to Jerusalem, the exiles traveled northwest up the Euphrates River to the vicinity of Aleppo, crossed west to the Orontes Valley, and then followed the Orontes south to its headwaters. From there they passed through the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon into northern Samaria, followed the coastal highway south to Joppa, and turned eastward for the final ascent to Jerusalem. Eighty years later Ezra would take four months to cover the same 900 miles with a party of about 1,500 (see Ezra 7:8-9). Probably it took longer for the 50,000 who accompanied Sheshbazzar and the temple treasures.

The original group of returning exiles appears to have been wealthy. The ratio of one slave to every six free persons, the presence of horses, mules, and camels, and the presence of secular singers imply a high standard of living (Ezra 2:64-67). Family heads made lavish donations to the temple project as an expression of gratitude to God for a successful journey (vss. 68, 69).

Sixty-one thousand drachmas of gold converts to roughly 1,100



The route that the Jewish Exiles took from the area of Nippur to Jerusalem. The distance from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles as the crow flies, but it was 900 miles along the caravan and military routes following the Fertile Crescent.

pounds, while 5,000 minas of silver was about 6,000 pounds, or three tons (vs. 69). Eighteen years later the prophet Haggai would preach to these same people in a time of destitution, saying that their wealth had vanished in a series of bad harvests because they had given up and left the temple in ruins (see Hag. 1:5-10).

Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48b). It was reasonable of God to expect the families who had been entrusted with great wealth to contribute generously and joyously to the temple fund. It is still reasonable for Him to expect those gifted materially and spiritually to give of themselves

liberally to spread the Gospel and expand the Church of Jesus Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I recently used my resources or spiritual gifts to build up the Body of Christ?*

Flush with their initial enthusiasm over God's intervention through the Persian emperor Cyrus and His blessing on their journey, the returned exiles filled the temple treasury with money and priestly garments. Then they began the business of finding their ancestral inheritances in the villages and towns around Jerusalem (Ezra 2:70). Priests and Levites did not inherit open farmland, but certain towns were assigned to them as home bases when they were not on duty at the temple (see Num. 35:1-5; Josh. 21:9-19). Later Nehemiah would find it necessary to move people by lottery into Jerusalem to repopulate the capital fully (see Neh. 11:1-2).

The province of Judah that Cyrus established for the exiles was small. From north to south, Judah mea-

sured about 25 miles; from east to west, about 30 miles. The exiles had about 800 square miles to call their own, and some of that was wasteland. North of them was Samaria. Idumeans, descendants of Esau (Edom), had been forced by wandering tribes into southern land once part of Judah. Phoenicians occupied the Mediterranean coast where the Philistines had lived. It was reasonable for the exiles to fear for their safety, and they were wise to respond to their fear by initiating the daily morning and evening burnt offerings to the Lord (see Ezra 3:3).

C The Exiles Build the Altar (3:1-6)

Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

—Ezra 3:3

Like wise believers of every age, the returned exiles gave top priority to worship. Before launching the temple project that Cyrus had commissioned them to undertake, they built the altar of burnt offering on its historic site amid the ruins of Solomon's temple. Even as Abraham and Joshua before them, the exiles marked their entrance into the promised land with the construction of an altar to the Lord (see Gen. 12:7; Josh. 8:30-31).

CHARACTER STUDY:

ZERUBBABEL

Authority Model

Zerubbabel is credited with leading the exiles to rebuild the temple in 537 B.C. Though Sheshbazzar was the Persian-appointed leader of the Jews, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the high priest, were considered the true leaders of the remnant. Some scholars have speculated that Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar were the same person, but this is highly improbable.

Zerubbabel was likely born during Judah's exile in Babylon. He was a grandson of Jehoiachin, one of the last Davidic kings, who had died in Babylon (I Chron. 3:17-19). Jehoiachin had been honored in exile (II Kings 25:27-30), and it was natural that his descendant would be highly respected in the Jewish community.

Through the mouth of the Old Testament prophet Haggai, the Lord said, "I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel . . . and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you," declares the LORD Almighty" (Hag. 2:23). On the basis of this prophecy, some scholars have speculated that the Jews attempted to make Zerubbabel king. There is no evidence of this happening, however, one way or the other.

The seventh month marked the beginning of the civil year for the exiles (Ezra 3:1). This lunar month Tishri falls during parts of September-October. Its first day was Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Day), the tenth was Yom Kippur (the day of Atonement), and the fifteenth to the twenty-second was the Feast of Tabernacles (see Lev. 23:23-43). It was only natural that the newly settled exiles would gather in the holy city to celebrate these holy days on the site of Solomon's temple.

In preparation for the holidays, Jeshua the high priest led the other priests, and Zerubbabel led the elders of the people, in preparing an altar of burnt offering (Ezra 3:2). Sheshbazzar, who was the governor of Judah at this time in the eyes of the Persians (see 1:8, 11), did not act as the popular leader of the exiles. Zerubbabel regularly filled that role until, at some point, he replaced Sheshbazzar as the official governor (see Hag. 1:1; 2:2).

In the Law, Moses had directed Israel to build its altar of burnt offering of earth or uncut stones at the place God would designate (see Exod. 20:24-25; Deut. 27:5). Since this was a formal altar, the exiles probably built it of native stones. The Feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated the exodus from Egypt, must have had great significance to the exiles who had just experienced a second exodus from a second bondage to carve out a home amid hostile neighbors (Ezra 3:3, 4).

From the first day of Tishri in 538 B.C., the community of returned

Jewish exiles in and around Jerusalem carefully observed the schedule of sacrifices and festivals outlined in the law of Moses (vss. 5-6). Even though they had no temple yet, they worshiped the God of heaven whom even Solomon had declared at his temple dedication cannot be contained in a building made with hands (see I Kings 8:27).

Though we don't offer morning and evening animal sacrifices to the Lord on a stone altar, our heavenly Father expects many "spiritual sacrifices" from us (I Pet. 2:5). These include sacrifices of praise, or "the fruit of lips that openly profess his name" (Heb. 13:15). The greatest sacrifice we give Him is our bodies as "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom. 12:1).

Ask Yourself . . . *What sacrifice can I offer to the Lord this week?*

d The Exiles Begin to Build the Temple (3:7-13)

In the second month of the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, Zerubbabel . . . began the work. They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the building of the house of the LORD. —Ezra 3:8

Worship often leads to action. Our sacrifices of praise often lead to acts of service. As living sacrifices,

we worship God by means of the days we dedicate to doing His will. For the returned exiles, building the altar of burnt offerings was the first action step in constructing the temple Cyrus commissioned at their hands.

As soon as the holiday season of the seventh month was over, Jeshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the popular leader of the exiles commissioned builders in stone and wood to get started on the temple. They had a commission from Cyrus and generous funding from people in Babylon and from the exiles themselves. The preparations for building by the exiles parallel Solomon's preparations for the first temple.

The finest wood in the ancient world was secured from Lebanon through the mediation of Phoenician

merchants from Tyre and Sidon and paid for with agricultural products (vs. 7; compare II Chron. 2). The cedar logs were bound into ocean-going rafts and floated down the Mediterranean coast from Byblos in Lebanon to Joppa, which served as the port for Jerusalem.

While Jeshua the high priest took priority over Zerubbabel in matters of worship (see Ezra 3:2), Zerubbabel played the greater role in supervising the first round of temple construction (vs. 8). The leaders waited until the second month in the spring (536 B.C.) following their huge worship celebration to start activity on the temple site. This corresponded with the timing of Solomon's groundbreaking in 966 B.C., some 430 years earlier (see II Chron. 3:1-2).

The plan for rebuilding the temple was highly organized in advance, and its individual parts were entrusted to the supervision of Levites over the age of 20. In earlier situations 30 and 25 had been the minimum ages for Levitical activity (see Num. 4:3; 8:24). The exilic band did

not include an abundance of Levites.

The supervising Levites fell into three groups. The clans of Jeshua and Kadmiel were mentioned in the roster of exiles (see Ezra 2:40).



Some of the famous cedars of Lebanon. Zerubbabel obtained cedars from Lebanon, as Solomon did, to build the temple.

The descendants of Henadad are also included among the Levites in Nehemiah's time who built the wall of Jerusalem and sealed the covenant (3:9; see Neh. 3:18, 24; 10:9).

While the builders laid the foundation for the temple, the priests and Levites dressed in their liturgical robes and praised the Lord with instruments and psalms (Ezra 3:10, 11). This followed both the pattern of worship established for the Levites by King David and the precedent set by Solomon when he dedicated his completed temple (see I Chron. 6:31-49; II Chron. 5:13).

The Levitical choirs sang of the everlasting love and faithfulness of the Lord (Ezra 3:11). The assembled exiles gave a great shout because the temple foundation was laid. But amid all the joy, some voices of sorrow were heard. The few ancient

priests, Levites, and family heads who remembered Solomon's temple in its glory wept at the relative humbleness of this one (vs. 12). Both Haggai (Hag. 2:3) and Zechariah would find themselves addressing a segment of the population discouraged by "the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10).

But in the second month of 536 B.C., the dominant mood among the returned exiles still was great joy (Ezra 3:13). Even people at a great distance could hear the resounding noise of a community of people who dared take the Lord at His word and risk everything they had to go to ruined towns and farms and trust Him to take a remnant, plant them, and grow a nation.

Ask Yourself . . . *Does the Lord want me to attempt a new beginning in some area of my life?*

2

The Exiles Build God's Temple

Ezra 4—6

a Enemies Oppose the Exiles (4:1-16)

The peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building.

—Ezra 4:4

Those who attempt to do the will of God inevitably meet with resistance from a sinful world. When the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, they came because God had commanded it. They had a royal decree and a divine mandate to rebuild the temple of God in the city of God. But just as Christians face spiritual opposition when they set their minds to obey God, so the exiles found themselves surrounded by powerful enemies when they began to rebuild Jerusalem.

From the outset, the writer identified as “enemies” those who approached the newly returned exiles and offered to help them build the temple. The reason is implied in the way the exiles viewed the temple. It was “a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel” (vs. 1). “The LORD” was His covenant

name, signifying a unique relationship with those who entered into and kept that covenant. An earlier generation had gone into captivity for persistent covenant violation; the present generation was committed to observing that covenant.

The residents of the Persian province of Samaria posed a special problem for the returned exiles. Their populace had resulted from intermarriage between Israelites left when the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes and the Mesopotamian peoples who had resettled there (see II Kings 17:24-41). They claimed to be worshipers of the Lord (Ezra 4:2), but they indulged in many deviations from what was revealed to the Jews. We might even call these people Samaritans, residents of Samaria, rather than Samaritans, a religious sect that developed later in Samaria as a rival to Judaism.

Jeshua the high priest and Zerubabel the popular leader of the exiles realized that they could not compromise the spiritual integrity of their mission by incorporating Samaritan leaders and builders who were not true believers (vs. 3). They could

readily hire foreign craftsmen to provide necessary specialized labor (see 3:7) because they made no spiritual claims about knowing the Lord and asserted no claim on the temple.

Jeshua and Zerubbabel fended off their pushy neighbors with Cyrus's decree. This mandate named the exiles alone as the ones authorized to build the temple of the Lord. At that point the Samaritans showed that they had been more interested in power than in worship. They set out to frustrate Jewish attempts to gather materials and hire workers, to frighten and demoralize the exilic community, and to revoke the imperial permission to build (4:4, 5).

As Christians we may face different kinds of opposition from people who want little to do with Christ and yet use His name to achieve their own social or political goals. At times it takes keen discernment to distinguish when we should accept certain offers of help and when we should politely decline.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I evaluate offers of help?*

During the era of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, five Persian emperors reigned: Cyrus (539–529 B.C.), Cambyses (529–522 B.C.), Darius I (521–486 B.C.), Xerxes (485–465 B.C.), and Artaxerxes I (464–424

SOMETHING LIKE HEBREW

Aramaic was a Semitic language, similar to Hebrew, that became the common language of trade along the caravan routes of the ancient Middle East. By extension it became the language of international diplomacy (II Kings 18:26). By the time the exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, Aramaic probably had replaced Hebrew as the everyday spoken tongue, and Hebrew had become the classical language of the Scriptures.

Ezra had to employ a group of scribes to explain or translate the Law when he read it in Hebrew to the assembled people at Jerusalem (Neh. 8:7, 8). When Jesus said, "Talitha kum!" (Mark 5:41) and "Ephphatha!" (7:34), He was speaking in the common Aramaic. By the time Aramaic became the common language of the Jews, it had adopted the Phoenician block alphabet. In turn, Hebrew adopted the Aramaic alphabet.

B.C.). Cambyses played no role in the biblical events. The temple was begun during the reign of Cyrus and was completed while Darius I ruled. Esther was one of Xerxes' wives. Ezra taught the Law and Nehemiah built the walls of Jerusalem during the time of Artaxerxes I.

Samarian opposition to temple construction lasted about 16 years from the reign of Cyrus to the reign of Darius I (vs. 5). But the opposition of the enemies of God and His remnant didn't stop when the temple was built. As soon as Xerxes succeeded Darius I, the governor of Samaria fired off a communiqué detailing all he thought was wrong in Judah and its capital (vs. 6). When Artaxerxes I followed Xerxes, he too received a warning about the Jews (vs. 7). It came in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the Persian Empire, from three otherwise unknown men and their associates.

Ezra included another Samarian communication to Artaxerxes as an example of the half-truths that caused the exilic community so much trouble through this whole period (vss. 8-16). The language of the Book of Ezra shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic at this point. This Aramaic portion extends to Ezra 6:18. Ezra 7:12-26 is also in Aramaic. These two sections faithfully reproduce decrees and correspondence in their original text.

Rehum the commander probably dictated this warning to his secretary Shimshai (4:8). They claimed to represent all the officials of Samaria (vs. 9). They also attempted to con-

nect themselves historically to Mesopotamia and Persia by alluding to their historical resettlement from Mesopotamian cities by the Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal (vs. 10). "Trans-Euphrates" (literally "Beyond the River") was a large Persian territory of which Samaria and Judah were little provinces.

The two Samaritans represented themselves as the voice of all those who lived in the Trans-Euphrates. They jumped right into accusations against the most recent party of exiles who had arrived in Jerusalem (vss. 11, 12). This would have been Ezra's group, who made the trip in 458 B.C. Rehum and Shimshai were almost frantic because the Jews were beginning to refortify Jerusalem.

The Samaritans charged that the Jews would never pay taxes again if Jerusalem became a fortress on its hill. Rehum and Shimshai portrayed themselves as loyal subjects of Artaxerxes who felt obligated to warn the emperor and preserve his honor. They urged Artaxerxes to authorize a research mission in the royal archives to find out what kind of track record Jerusalem had as a center of rebellion against Assyrian and Babylonian overlords (vss. 13-15).

There was a germ of historical truth in what the Samaritans wrote to Artaxerxes about Jerusalem. From that seed, they projected that a fortified Jerusalem would result in the rebellion of the entire territory of Trans-Euphrates against Persia (vs. 16). It's clear from this later development why the enemies

had wanted to “help” rebuild the temple 75 years earlier. They had wanted a foothold inside Jerusalem so they could influence the city’s relationship with the day’s superpower.



Opposition Halts the Rebuilding (4:17-24)

As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop. —Ezra 4:23

Momentum is an important part of any venture, including major spiritual enterprises. Momentum can be lost when an outside force interferes with the progress of a venture and the workers have to start again from a standstill. In Jerusalem, both in the days of Cyrus and in the days of Artaxerxes, opponents broke the momentum of the exiles at work rebuilding their community.

Rehum and Shimshai had tried to pass themselves off as representatives of all of Trans-Euphrates (see vs. 11). Artaxerxes’ response shows, however, that he wasn’t fooled (vs. 17). He knew they spoke for Samaria and maybe for a few others in the vicinity.

Many of the Persian emperors were illiterate, depending on pro-

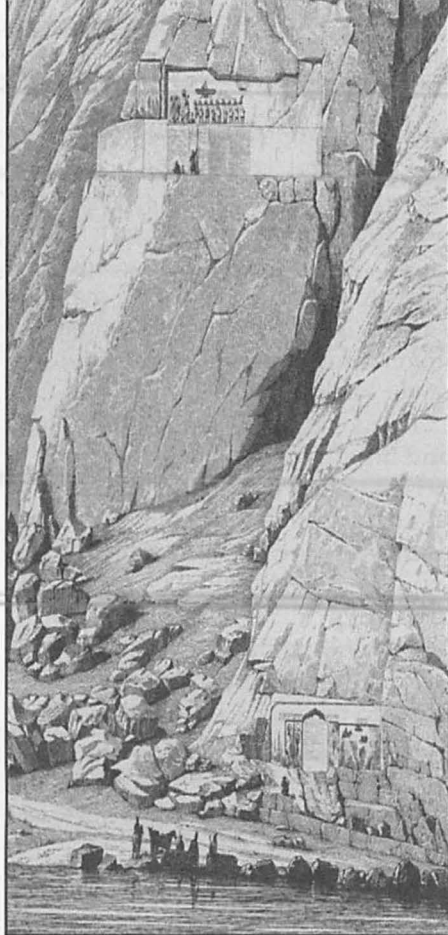
fessional scribes to turn their dictation into diplomatic Aramaic and to translate official correspondence back into oral Persian for them (vs. 18). Artaxerxes reported to the Samaritan rulers that research in the royal archives confirmed their allegation that Jerusalem had a long history of rebellion against Assyrian and Babylonian overlords (vs. 19).

Furthermore, Artaxerxes had found reports of King David and King Solomon, who had ruled over all of Trans-Euphrates as the most powerful monarchs of their day (vs. 20; see II Sam. 8; I Kings 4:21-24). In typical bureaucratic fashion, he was most impressed with the record of the tax revenue they had collected.

The glory days of David and Solomon had occurred more than 500 years earlier, but Judah and Jerusalem had been rebellious even more recently (for example, see II Kings 18:7; 24:1, 20). Artaxerxes felt the need to call a provisional halt to all defensive construction in Jerusalem until he could examine the situation further and make a final ruling (Ezra 4:21).

Artaxerxes called on Rehum and Shimshai to enforce his provisional ban on construction in Jerusalem (vs. 22). He did not want treasonous attitudes to fester in that part of his empire if he could prevent it from happening. The Samaritans were ecstatic to carry out this imperial edict. They went directly to Jerusalem and “compelled them by force to stop” (vs. 23).

In all likelihood the Samaritans destroyed the work on the walls



The Behistun Inscription, a huge sculpture and proclamation carved into a Persian mountainside, reports that Darius faced nine rebellions in the first months of his reign. Not until his second year could he give attention to anything as peaceful as the building of a provincial temple. © Pascal Coste

and gates of Jerusalem that had been done at this time. This would explain the distress Nehemiah experienced back in Persia when word reached him about conditions in Jerusalem (see Neh. 1:3). He would have been aware of what Nebuchad-

nezzar had done 140 years earlier, but this recent activity of Rehum and Shimshai would have surprised and distressed him (vs. 4).

Ezra 4:24 jumps back in the sequence of Samaritan opposition and picks up the story of the temple construction where it left off at verse 5. Even as Rehum and Shimshai later interfered with the rebuilding of the walls, so the earlier evil counselors from the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius I brought a stop to the temple construction.

Perhaps the most discouraging characteristic of the resistance of sinful forces to the work of the gospel is that it rarely lets up. The enthusiasm of the returned exiles for rebuilding the temple eventually grew cold in the face of ongoing opposition. In this vein Paul wrote the Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Gal. 6:9).

Ask Yourself . . . *Under what circumstances am I most likely to give up on a difficult task?*

Ezra 5:1—6:12 in Brief

From sometime around 535 B.C. until 520 B.C., construction on the temple was at a standstill in Jerusalem. Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged Jeshua, Zerubbabel, and the other leaders to start again in earnest. Opposition emerged from the governor of all of Trans-Euphrates, not just Samaria.

Building continued while an appeal was made to the imperial court of Darius I. Their letter reported the claim by the Jews that Cyrus had authorized the temple project.

Upon discovering Cyrus's decree, Darius ordered the plaintiffs to cease and desist all opposition to the temple builders in Jerusalem and to assist the Jews in securing building materials. They were to pay all building expenses from the provincial treasury. They were to see that everything needed for sacrifices in Jerusalem was available. Darius closed his decree with strong imperial and divine sanctions against any who disobeyed it.

C The Temple Is Completed (6:13-22)

The elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. —Ezra 6:14

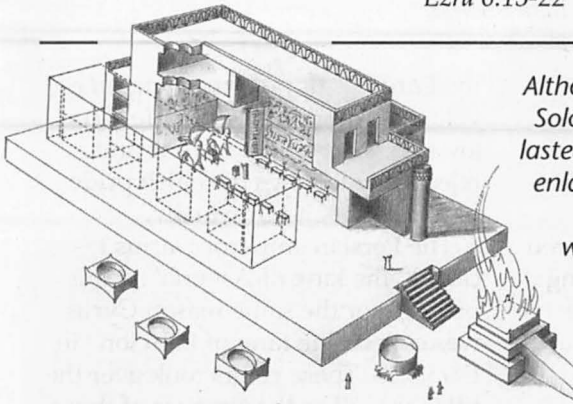
Achieving a difficult goal after years of effort is an exhilarating accomplishment. Ask the athlete who endured the pain and loneliness of training to win an Olympic medal. Ask the small business person who sacrificed vacations and

weekends to carve out a niche for his or her service. Ask the missionary who endured hardship and sickness to provide a translation of the New Testament to an indigenous tribe. At times, these people may have thought the struggle would go on forever, and the goal would never be reached.

The governor of Trans-Euphrates and his allies must have been surprised to find out Darius expected them to become the facilitators of the temple project they had opposed. Because they feared the king, they diligently supported the Jews. Meanwhile, the exiles were responding with renewed spiritual vigor to the practical challenges of Haggai and the visionary exhortations of Zechariah (vss. 13, 14a).

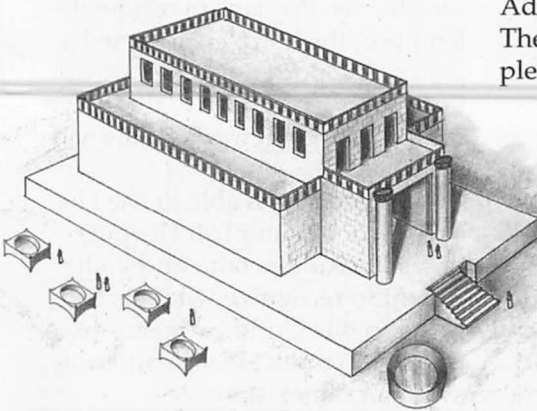
Haggai's identity is not supplemented with genealogical data in the Scriptures, but Zechariah is always connected with his ancestor Iddo (see Zech 1:1). Nehemiah 12:16 refers to another Zechariah who had been the head of the priestly clan of Iddo. The prophet Zechariah, who ministered for several years beginning in 520 B.C., may have been the grandson of that earlier Zechariah. If this is the case, then Zechariah the prophet was also a priest.

Ezra's report of the completion of the temple takes into account all of the layers of responsibility for it (Ezra 6:14b). The elders of the Jews were responsible for the laborers at the job site. Haggai and Zechariah provided the spiritual motivation that produced success. The decrees of three Persian emperors—Cyrus,



Solomon's Temple

Although smaller and less ornate than Solomon's temple, the second temple lasted much longer. This structure was enlarged and expanded by Herod the Great into the vast complex that was destroyed by Roman armies in A.D. 70.



Zerubbabel's Temple

Darius I, and Artaxerxes I—authorized the project at the level of world politics. However, it was “the God of Israel” whose word of command encompassed everyone and everything else involved.

“The sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (vs. 15) occurred long before the time of Artaxerxes, the third emperor credited with the temple's erection. Artaxerxes is the one who commissioned Ezra to enhance temple worship and teach the law of Moses (see 7:19, 20, 25, 26). The lunar month Adar corre-

sponds roughly with February—March in our solar calendar. In 516 B.C., the third of Adar would have been March 12. The destruction of Solomon's temple by Nebuchadnezzar had begun on August 14, 586 (see II Kings 25:8). About 70 years had elapsed between the destruction of the first temple and the construction of the second.

Everyone celebrated the dedication of the new temple with great joy as they offered hundreds of animal sacrifices as whole burnt offerings and sin offerings (Ezra 6:16, 17). However, this marvelously joyous celebration was tiny compared to the dedicatory service during the reign of Solomon (see I Kings 8:5, 63).

The divisions of priests and Levites had been ready for activation as soon as the temple was built and dedicated (Ezra 6:18). The Aramaic passage that began at Ezra 4:8 ends with Ezra 6:18. The description of the first Passover celebrated at the new temple is fittingly reported in Hebrew. Adar had been the last month of the lunar calendar, so “the

fourteenth day of the first month" (vs. 19) was about five weeks after the temple was completed (around April 21, 516 B.C.). The newly rededicated priests and Levites ritually purified themselves and slaughtered the Passover lambs the worshipping families brought them (vs. 20; see Deut. 16:5, 6).

The exiles included in their Passover celebration the Jewish inhabitants of the land who had neither experienced the captivity in Babylon nor immigrated to Egypt (Ezra 6:21; see II Kings 25:22-26). These nonremnant Jews had to separate themselves from the practices of their Gentile neighbors and rededicated themselves to observing the law of God.

The seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread followed right after Passover. It was observed at the new temple with the same joy that had marked the temple dedication (Ezra 6:22; see vs. 16).

One of the greatest joys a child of God can have is the realization that

the Lord has done something marvelous through his or her life. True joy sees what God has done and rejects any feelings of selfish pride as irrelevant and unworthy.

The Persian emperor Darius I is called "the king of Assyria" in this passage for the same reason Cyrus was called "the king of Babylon" in Ezra 5:13. These rulers took over the titles as well as the empires of those they conquered. When the Lord directed the Persians to restore the temple of the Lord, He reversed a policy of deportation and destruction that reached back to the Assyrians whose realm the Persians had absorbed:

The Lord still is able to use His enemies to accomplish His purposes. It requires faith and godly insight to recognize what He is doing in our world by means of those who think He is dead, irrelevant, or nonexistent.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God used unbelievers in my life?*

3

Ezra Arrives to Teach God's Law

Ezra 7—8

a **Ezra Is Qualified to Teach (7:1-10)**

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

—Ezra 7:10

After Moses, Ezra was the most important human figure in the shaping of classical Judaism. Moses was considered the giver of the law; Ezra was considered the teacher of the law. Ezra demonstrated that a godly scholar could do as much, if not more, than a general or a politician to shape the character and destiny of a nation. Our churches need leaders at every level with Ezra's devotion to learning, living, and sharing the Word of God.

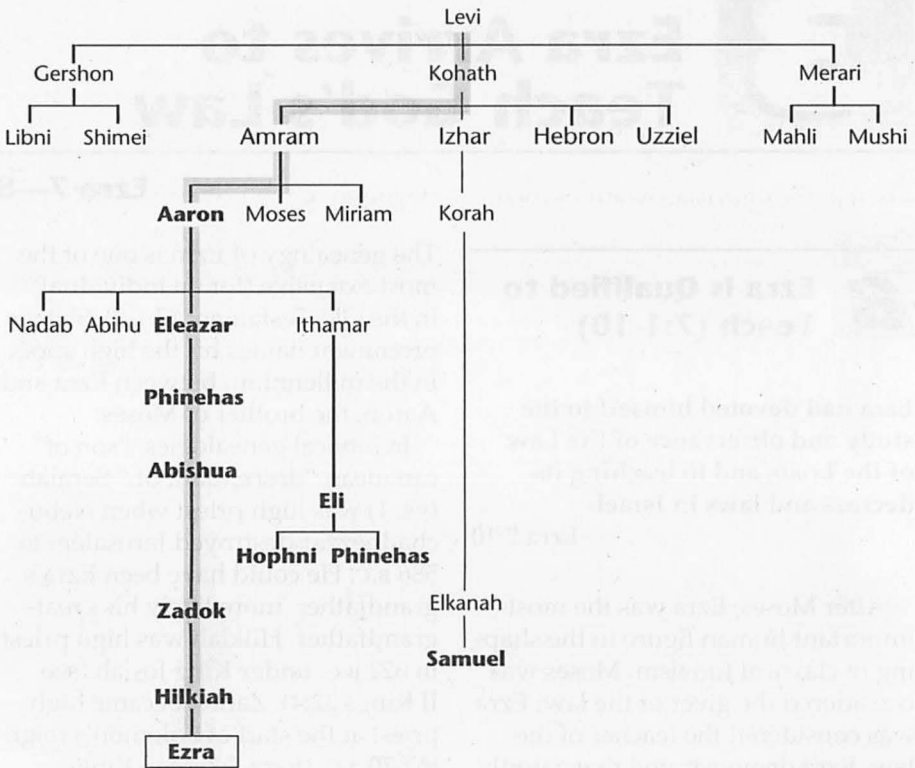
Ezra finally appears in the seventh chapter of the book that bears his name. Chapters 7 through 9 are taken from the memoirs of the great scribe. The memoirs begin abruptly as though no time had elapsed between the completion of the temple in 516 B.C. and the seventh year of Artaxerxes (458 B.C.).

The genealogy of Ezra is one of the most extensive (for an individual) in the Old Testament (7:1-5). Sixteen prominent names hit the high spots in the millennium between Ezra and Aaron, the brother of Moses.

In biblical genealogies, "son of" can mean "descendant of." Seraiah (vs. 1) was high priest when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. He could have been Ezra's grandfather, more likely his great-grandfather. Hilkiah was high priest in 622 B.C. under King Josiah (see II Kings 22:4). Zadok became high priest at the start of Solomon's reign in 970 B.C. (Ezra 7:2; see I Kings 2:35). Abishua, Phinehas, Eleazar, and Aaron were, with no gaps, the first four generations of Ezra's ancestry in the 15th and 14th centuries B.C. (Ezra 7:5). See I Chronicles 6:3-15 for a fuller genealogy from Aaron to the Babylonian Captivity. Even this list omits at least four high priests mentioned in the historical books.

Ezra brought this kind of heritage with him back to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 7:6a). On top of that, he was an expert in the law of Moses. Critical biblical scholars have long theorized that when Ezra

Ezra's Heritage



This abbreviated family tree places Ezra's genealogy within the priestly branch of Levi's descendants and shows his relation to other major priests of the Old Testament.

brought the law with him from Babylon, he was introducing something new to the religious life of Israel. They speculate that this was Ezra's own expanded edition of Israelite traditions.

However, Ezra viewed himself as a student of, not a contributor to, the ancient body of sacred writing penned by Moses a thousand years

earlier. We still have the same task today: to discover God's will in His revealed Word and obey it.

As you read the Book of Ezra, notice that he referred to the people in and around Jerusalem as "Israel" rather than "Judah" (unless he was specifically referring to the Persian province). Ezra obviously wasn't interested in religious innovation.

He focused on recapturing the covenant that the Lord had made with His people when the 12 tribes of Israel were united under Moses.

Ezra mentioned in passing that he had initiated the contact with Artaxerxes. He asked for authorization to teach the law in Jerusalem, to mobilize a party of priests to strengthen worship at the temple, and to gather contributions for improvements within Jerusalem (vs. 6b). Ezra played down the courage it must have required to approach an Eastern despot (see Esth. 4:11). On the other hand, he repeatedly emphasized the role of God's blessing on him and others (Ezra 7:6, 9; see also vs. 28; 8:18, 22, 31).

In this summary of his venture, which he then expanded in 7:11—8:36, Ezra mentioned that he was accompanied by various spiritual leaders, ranging from highly regarded priests to lowly temple servants (7:7). He mentioned that the journey took exactly four months in the spring of 458 B.C., the preferred time of year for long journeys in the ancient Middle East (vss. 8, 9). Again he credited God's hand for the success of the trek. He stressed the graciousness of the Lord's travel mercies—which become more obvious when the expanded version of the story reveals the size of the party, the wealth they transported, and their vulnerability to robbery.

The most obvious quality of Ezra's personality was devotion. "Devoted himself" (vs. 10) translates a Hebrew idiom that could be rendered "fixed his heart on." Not

surprisingly, this descendant of the high priestly family of Israel had set his heart on studying "the Law of the LORD."

Ezra's devotion did not stop with an intellectual grasp of theology. He lived the law. His obedience was not a slavish legalism but wholehearted devotion to the Lord. Finally, Ezra did not simply focus on his own personal holiness; he also taught others and motivated them to godly knowledge and living. Ezra was "a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, InterVarsity Press).

Ask Yourself . . . *How well does my life reflect what I know to be the revealed will of God?*

b

Ezra Is Authorized to Strengthen Worship (7:11-20)

Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God.

—Ezra 7:19

The letter of Artaxerxes that authorized Ezra's mission to Jerusalem is the other portion of this book written in Aramaic (vss. 11-26; Ezra 4:6—6:18 is the first). The use of this international language reminds us that God can use the unwitting emperors of pagan empires to fulfill

His purposes just as readily as He uses believers.

The content of Artaxerxes' letter was evidence to Ezra of the gracious hand of God on his mission to Jerusalem. It's not surprising that he included the complete text of the decree in his memoirs. Persian emperors often employed advisers from the provinces to help draft edicts pertaining to their home territories. They did this in order to write laws that fit the diverse cultures of the empire. Artaxerxes' decree reads as though a priest (perhaps Ezra himself) edited it so the details about Israelite worship and sacrifice would be accurate.

Persian policy was to patronize the religions of each province as the best way to stabilize local social structures. The emperors also required the priesthood of each province to pray to their local deities for the welfare of Persia. They studied and codified the religious customs of every culture and sent experts, such as Ezra, to their homelands to facilitate worship.

Artaxerxes valued Ezra because he was both a priest and a teacher (7:11). Artaxerxes wanted Ezra to take his immense learning concerning the "commands and decrees of the LORD" back to Judah. The king expected Ezra to have a significant

PERSIAN CONCERN FOR JEWISH SPIRITUALITY

Archaeologists found a document in Egypt containing official correspondence from Persia to Jews living in Egypt during the late fifth-century reign of Darius II. The document illustrates the interest of Persian monarchs in the details of religions in the provinces. The letter reads as follows:

"To my brethren Yedoniah and his colleagues, the Jewish garrison, your brother Hananiah. The welfare of my brothers may God seek at all times.

"Now, this year, the fifth of King Darius, word was sent from the king to Arsames, saying, 'Authorize a Festival of Unleavened Bread for the Jewish garrison.'

"So count 14 days of the month of Nisan and observe the Passover, and from the 15th to the 21st of Nisan observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Be ritually clean and take heed. Do not work on the 15th or the 21st day, nor drink beer, nor eat anything in which there is leaven from the 14th at sundown until the 21st of Nisan. For seven days it shall not be seen among you. Do not bring it into your dwellings, but seal it up between these dates.

"By order of King Darius.

"To my brethren Yedoniah and the Jewish garrison,

"Your brother Hananiah."

impact on the social and religious life of the exilic community in and around Jerusalem.

Artaxerxes called himself “king of kings” (vs. 12a), a title the earlier Assyrian and Babylonian emperors also used to express their sovereignty over dozens of lesser monarchs. In the New Testament, God the Father is called “King of kings,” as is God the Son (see I Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). In the Talmud (a Jewish commentary on the oral law), some Jewish rabbis referred to God as the King of the king of kings.

The emperor directed his decree specifically to Ezra in his roles as priest and teacher (Ezra 7:12b). In order to advance “the Law of the God of heaven,” Artaxerxes encouraged all interested Israelites, especially priests and Levites, to return to Jerusalem with Ezra (vs. 13). The returning party was commissioned to examine how well the law of God was being observed in Judah and Jerusalem (vs. 14). The role of the seven advisers who joined the emperor in authorizing Ezra’s expedition is explained further in Esther 1:13, 14.

As Cyrus and other Persian emperors had done before when they restored religious communities in various parts of the empire, Artaxerxes and his nobles made lavish contributions of gold and silver to the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:15). He also authorized Ezra’s party to solicit contributions from Jews who were remaining in Babylon (vs. 16).

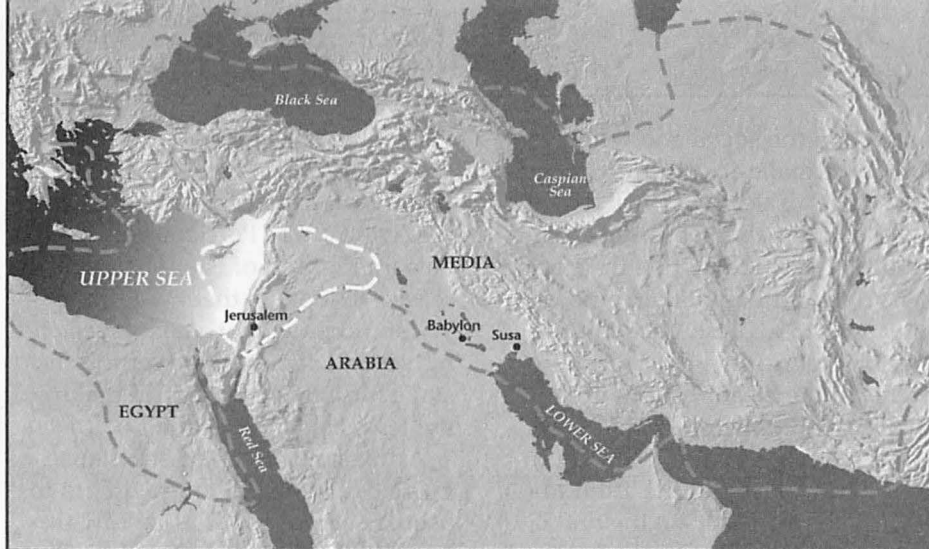
The money Ezra gathered was not for temple construction or maintenance.

It was to provide the animals, grains, and wines prescribed by the law for regular sacrifices in the temple (vs. 17). The Persians wanted to be sure the God of Israel had every reason to look on them with favor. Without knowing it, Artaxerxes and his seven advisers were setting the stage for Ezra’s ministry of making the Jews “a people of the Book.”

Artaxerxes put an elastic clause in his decree that permitted Ezra to use any excess funds as he saw fit toward the goal of implementing the will of God. There were some temple artifacts in Ezra’s care—either old ones discovered in Babylon or brand-new ones made in exile and donated for use in the mother country. Finally, the emperor gave Ezra a blank check on the provincial treasury to finance anything the temple needed for worship as outlined in the law of God (vss. 18-20).

In the course of his decree, Artaxerxes referred to the Lord as “the God of heaven” (Ezra 7:12; see also vss. 21, 23), “your God” (vss. 14, 18-20; see also vss. 25, 26), “the God of Israel” (vs. 15), and “the God of Jerusalem” (vs. 19). These names reflect both a familiarity with the religion of Israel and a detachment from it on the part of the Persian rulers. Ezra and his companions would worship God as “the LORD, the God of our ancestors” and as “the LORD my God” (see vss. 27, 28).

In this section about preparing to worship, the emperor gave “freely” (vs. 15) and the Jews made “freewill offerings” (vs. 16). Ezra returned to Jerusalem to instruct the people in



The fifth satrapy of Persia was large but relatively poor. Tax records reveal that it yielded less revenue than smaller but richer satrapies.

worship that sprang from generous and willing hearts. God also desires that our worship be characterized by generosity and eagerness.

Ask Yourself . . . *How would I characterize my worship of God?*

C Ezra Implements the Law of God (7:21-28)

Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment. —Ezra 7:26

Nehemiah, who would come to Jerusalem 13 years after Ezra, had impressive leadership credentials from his experience in the court of

Artaxerxes. Ezra, on the other hand, does not seem to have had practical experience in the day-to-day administration of government. He was simply a devout scholar who trusted implicitly in the power and grace of God to accomplish His purposes.

The second half of Artaxerxes' decree gave directions to the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates about financing Ezra's work (vss. 21-24) and to Ezra about implementing the law of God throughout Judah (vss. 25, 26). The Persian Empire was divided into 20 districts called satrapies. The fifth satrapy was Trans-Euphrates, which consisted of many provinces (see Esth. 1:1), including Samaria and Judah.

The expenses of Ezra's mission were ordered paid from the treasury of Trans-Euphrates (Ezra 7:21). For the second time in the decree and the third time in this passage, Ezra is identified as a priest and a teacher

(see vss. 11, 12). Artaxerxes gave this priest-teacher a very liberal line of credit: up to 7,500 pounds of silver, 600 bushels of wheat, 600 gallons each of wine and olive oil, and unlimited quantities of salt (vs. 22).

We don't know if Ezra drew much against this line of credit with the treasury of the satrapy. The treasurers were ordered to be diligent in honoring any draft Ezra presented so that the worship of the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem would be carried out precisely as the Lord demanded (vs. 23). Artaxerxes feared that divine displeasure might rest on him and his dynasty if he did not provide for Israel's God.

Furthermore, the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates were not permitted to tax any temple personnel from the high priest to the lowliest temple worker (vs. 24). For all Persia's enlightened social policies, its rates of taxation were outrageous. The treasurers must have hated the order to pay out for Jewish religious services while removing all Jewish religious personnel from their tax rolls.

Artaxerxes equated the law of God and the wisdom of God (vs. 25; see vs. 14). Even this pagan king understood that the character of God was the foundation of Ezra's mission. The emperor specifically directed Ezra to set up a system of justice based on the wisdom of that law. By this decree, all the Jewish people residing in Trans-Euphrates became subject to the magistrates and judges Ezra would set up to

apply the law to specific cases.

Artaxerxes attached sanctions to his edict. Persian penalties reinforced any penalties contained in the law. Ezra had the imperial authority to sentence lawbreakers to death, exile, confiscation of property, and imprisonment (vs. 26). Later he would threaten exile and confiscation of property against any who failed to convene to resolve the problem of intermarriage with pagans (see 10:8).

Ezra understood all that Artaxerxes decreed to be God's gracious care for the people of Israel and the temple that represented His presence among them (7:27). Persian politics may have been paramount to the politicians, but the man of faith knew the honor of God was more important. Ezra realized that ultimately it was the Lord of heaven, not the emperor of Persia, who had been so gracious to him (vs. 28a). The Persian authorities had been indulgent with Ezra because God's hand had been upon him.

Ezra drew courage from what the eye of his faith saw about God behind the facade of world politics (vs. 28b). He promoted the idea of a return from Babylon to Jerusalem among handpicked leaders of the Jewish community. He wanted the right kind of people to fulfill his mission of establishing the law as the basis for Jewish life in and around Jerusalem.

Perhaps the complexity of God's involvement in the world is beyond the scope of human comprehension. Sometimes His lessons involve

difficulty and pain that are hard to understand. Even so, His love and purpose for each of us is as certain as they were for Ezra in the presence of the Persian emperor.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I experienced God's graciousness recently?*

Ezra 8 in Brief

Ezra gathered an impressive group of family leaders and their kin who wanted to go with him back to the city of Jerusalem. Two of the clans were priestly families; most

were following relatives who had returned with Jeshua and Zerubabel. He delayed departure eight days while he found key Levitical families to infuse new vigor into temple ritual. Ezra would not accept an armed escort for their 900-mile journey. They trusted the Lord to guard them from bandits as they transported several tons of precious metals to the temple treasury. At the end of their four-month journey, Ezra and his company sacrificed praise offerings to God and delivered the imperial decree to the appropriate officials.

4

Ezra Leads Spiritual Reform

Ezra 9—10

a

Ezra Grieves over Israel's Sin (9:1-4)

Everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I [Ezra] sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.
—Ezra 9:4

Some leaders spark reform with skilled rhetoric that sweeps followers along on a wave of emotion. Others prevail because of flawless organization that mobilizes resources and personnel efficiently and effectively. A few carry the field on the strength of their charismatic personalities alone. Ezra approached the task of inspiring the returned exiles in Judah and Jerusalem with none of those qualities. He was an exceedingly rare leader whom God equipped to lead by the power of a godly example.

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem on August 4, 458 B.C. (see 7:8, 9). While he was tying up the loose ends of delivering the gifts and goods he brought and settling his fellow travelers, a delegation of Jewish leaders came to Ezra with a problem they

felt needed urgent attention. It was the ninth month (see 10:9), which corresponds roughly to December. Ezra had been in Jerusalem about four months.

All the people of Israel were involved in this problem, but it was the involvement of the priests and Levites that posed the greatest danger (9:1). These men had intermarried with some of the idolatrous women of the land. This moral compromise threatened the spiritual purity of Israel. Those who brought the problem to Ezra spun out a list of names of nations reminiscent of the peoples in the land when Joshua conquered it (see Josh. 9:1; 24:11). Only the Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians still existed in Ezra's day. The archaic names reminded everyone that the threat of intermarriage with idolaters was an ancient one that had gotten Israel into serious spiritual trouble since the days of the conquest under Joshua (Ezra 9:2; see Exod. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-4). The complaining leaders admitted that the leadership class had led the way in this abomination. Evidently they wanted Ezra to use his imperial mandate to enforce a prohibition against such intermarriages.

The prophet Malachi preached against returned exiles who divorced Jewish wives to marry foreign women instead (see Mal. 2:10-16). Ancient rabbis took this to mean that many Jewish wives had aged prematurely from the rigors of the return and the rebuilding and their husbands preferred more attractive local women. It may also be that many unmarried men had accepted the challenge of returning to Jerusalem and later could find only local brides. Still others may have married idolaters for economic advantage.

The prohibitions against intermarriage with surrounding nations are expressed not in racial terms but in religious ones. Converts to faith in Israel's God from among the nations were not stigmatized. Spiritual purity was the issue. Ezra did not react to the report by exercising his imperial power. Instead, He went into mourning.

Tearing garments was a typical Jewish method of displaying grief (Ezra 9:3; see Gen. 37:29, 34; Esth. 4:1). Ezra's pulling out his hair and beard is unparalleled in the Bible, though others shaved their head in grief (see Job 1:20; Amos 8:10). Ezra's grief exceeded normal bounds, and he sat where he was, immobilized with appalling sorrow, anger, and dread (Ezra 9:4). The word "appalled" vividly suggests trembling, paleness, and stunned senses.

Evidently Ezra received the news and reacted in grief to it in the temple. Everyone else who felt the same

SIGNS OF SORROW

Anient Hebrews expressed their sorrow visibly and audibly. Wearing sackcloth of dark goat or camel hair (Jer. 6:26; Isa. 32:11), lying in dirt or ashes and putting them in one's hair (Job 2:12; Ezek. 27:30), tearing one's own clothing (II Sam. 1:11; 3:31), wailing and weeping aloud (Ezek. 27:30-32), even lacerating one's body (Jer. 16:6; 41:5) in violation of the law of God (Lev. 19:28) marked occasions of deep distress. Men typically shaved their hair or beards to symbolize loss (II Sam. 10:4; Isa. 15:2; Ezek. 7:18). In contrast, full hair and beard represented vigor and prosperity.

A Phoenician carving on a sarcophagus older than the time of Ezra shows professional female mourners tearing at their hair. Ezra is the only man whom the Bible tells us spontaneously tore at his hair because his sorrow was so intense he could not wait for a razor. By contrast, when Nehemiah was later confronted with similar sin (Neh. 13:25), he tore out the offenders' hair!

dread about the future gathered around the priest-scholar to mourn with him. The sense of the passage is that Ezra sat appalled for some time before the evening sacrifice at 3:00 p.m. Ezra was no showman, staging a tantrum to create a superficial effect. His was a genuine grief observed, and its effect was authentic and enduring.

God doesn't expect everyone to respond as Ezra did when they become aware of sin in their lives. However, Ezra's example reminds us that sin is never a ho-hum matter. We should abhor all wrongdoing and detest its presence in our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . *What is usually my first reaction to an awareness of sin in my heart?*

b Ezra Confesses Israel's Sin (9:5-15)

I [Ezra] am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

—Ezra 9:6

The time of the evening sacrifice was a recognized time of prayer and confession in the routine of the Jewish day (Ezra 9:5; see Acts 3:1). Ezra roused himself from his display of mortification to stand, face the temple (see Ezra 10:1), and fall on his knees with hands upraised

to God in heaven. He confessed the sins of Israel out loud in the temple courtyard in the presence of all the trembling worshipers.

Ezra would not raise his face to heaven in the typical Jewish posture of prayer. He was ashamed in relation to God and disgraced in relation to his fellow Jews. In the spirit of Nehemiah and Daniel, two others who confessed the sins of their people, Ezra identified himself with the sinners around him (9:6; see Neh. 1:5-11; Dan. 9:4-19).

Ezra feared that the community of returned exiles had fallen right back into the pattern of rebellion that had resulted in the Babylonian Captivity and left the Jews a subject people in the sprawling Persian Empire. He recognized the precarious existence of their homeland and its temple. God had graciously restored a remnant in Judah and Jerusalem by His sovereign control of the policies of the Persian emperors. He had acted as a wall of protection around the little enclave of Jews (Ezra 9:7-9).

And so, by God's grace, the community of exiles were basking in the light of His love. Though still a conquered people, the Jews enjoyed a sense of liberty because God's mercy had granted them favor with all of the Persian rulers who had permitted them to rebuild the temple, Jerusalem, and their home villages.

All of that made it incredible in Ezra's eyes that the exiles would even think about violating the law of this gracious God. The prophets had written over and over about the moral pollution of the land of

THE EXCEPTION TO INTERMARRIAGE

The law of Moses forbade intermarriage between Israelites and the various nations inhabiting Canaan at the time of the conquest (Deut. 7:1-3). Further, the law forbade the presence of Ammonites, Moabites, and their descendants in the sanctuary of God (23:3). Yet Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite both married into the tribe of Judah and the lineage of David and Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

The prohibition seems to have been against marriage with foreign women committed to idolatry, not foreign women who had identified with the God of Israel. The concern of the law was that idolatrous wives "will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you" (Deut. 7:4). Marriage with converts to faith in the Lord was not unlawful and may explain the lengthy interview process preceding the divorces reported in Ezra 10.

Canaan (vss. 10, 11; see Deut. 9:4; 18:9-13; I Kings 14:22-24).

Because of the corruption of the Canaanite people at the time of the conquest, Israel had been forbidden to intermarry with them or form other intimate alliances (Ezra 9:12; see Deut. 7: 1-3). Prosperity in the promised land had always depended in part on not being entangled with foreign people and their gods.

The Assyrian and Babylonian conquests in 722 and 586 B.C. had occurred because Israel had wantonly and persistently rebelled against the law of God (Ezra 9:13). Ezra insisted that the Lord's punishment had not been commensurate with Israel's crime—He had gone easy on them. Now the remnant, proof of God's mercy, was once again trying His patience by intermarrying with foreigners whose religious practices the Lord abhorred (vs. 14).

Ezra feared the Lord might justly destroy the Jews of the remnant for their ungrateful, repeated disobedience. He concluded his prayer of confession by acknowledging the righteousness of God and the guilt of the remnant of the Jews (vs. 15). He did not so much as request forgiveness or petition the Lord in any way. He only admitted their unworthiness to stand before His holy presence.

Ask Yourself . . . *Is there any sin in my heart that I have not acknowledged before God?*



The Exiles Deal with Their Sin (10:1-8)

Let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law.

—Ezra 10:3

Ezra may have felt his mission to teach the law of God to the Jewish exiles had ended before it began. Instead of founding a school, he faced a spiritual emergency that

threatened the future of the remnant. He responded to it as a priest leading his people in repentance. He wailed in the temple courtyard as he prayed (vs. 1). Repeatedly he stood and prostrated himself in abject remorse.

Astoundingly, the mass of men, women, and children who collected around Ezra in the temple joined with him in repentant wailing. Then a spokesman for the people approached Ezra to confirm the report that the nation had sinned through intermarriage and to insist that it wasn't too late to remedy the situation by means of a specific measure (vs. 2). Shecaniah was of the

MAKING A COVENANT

The original Hebrew expression for making a covenant was "to cut a covenant." Ancient covenant ceremonies required the contracting parties to divide sacrificial animals and walk between the halves of the carcasses (Gen. 15:9-17). Implicit in this ritual was the threat that violating the covenant would lead to the death and dismemberment of the violator. The bloody ritual had fallen out of use by the time of Ezra.

clan of Elam, a family that returned at the beginning with Zerubbabel (see 2:7). His father, Jehiel, apparently was one of the prominent men who had married a foreign woman (see 10:26).

In response to the heartfelt repentance of Ezra, a plan emerged from the people of the remnant. They had already recognized their sinfulness. Ezra's public display of grief gave them a rallying point around which to express their spiritual concerns.

Shecaniah proposed a covenant between the Jews and the Lord in which they promised to honor the law of God by sending away the foreign wives and any children born to them. Shecaniah called on Ezra to champion his plan and use his clout to get the offenders to agree (vss. 3, 4).

Ezra responded to the plan of Shecaniah and put the leaders of the priests, Levites, and general populace under oath to send away these foreign wives. The leaders agreed to the oath, and Ezra cloistered himself in a temple chamber and initiated a total fast (Ezra 10:5, 6). While other leaders might have merely planned, Ezra gave himself to prayer as well. He was convinced he could do more good in prayers of mourning over Israel's sin than in planning the social reform. Perhaps he felt that others more gifted than he in such matters would draw up the plan.

Ezra's fast was more severe than most fasts recorded in the Bible. Only Moses and the Ninevites abstained from both food and drink as did Ezra (see Exod. 34:28; Deut.

9:18; Jonah 3:7). Ezra held his fast in the room of Jehohanan, the son of Eliashib. Jehohanan was a member of a priestly family. His father, Eliashib, may have been the high priest (see Neh. 12:10, 23). While Ezra fasted in Jehohanan's chamber, the officials and elders of Judah issued a proclamation ordering every resident of Judah and Jerusalem to attend an assembly in Jerusalem at the end of three days to deal with the issue of intermarriage with foreign women (Ezra 10:7, 8).

Ezra's powers of confiscation and banishment were threateningly employed in this edict. Anyone who did not attend the convocation in Jerusalem at the end of three days would forfeit all property and be exiled from Judah. Although the authority to impose such sanctions belonged to Ezra, the order went out over the names of all the family heads and administrators of the exiles.

Church leadership profits from men and women with superior administrative skills and gifts in understanding problems and formulating responses to them. Ezra reminds us that our churches also need men and women whose hearts hunger and thirst to know God and spend time in His presence. Such folk are not impractical; they are invaluable.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I consider to be a prayer warrior?*

The Hebrew Calendar

Order of Months in Sacred Year	Order of Months in Civil Year	Hebrew Name of Month	Modern Equivalent
1	7	Abib	March/April
2	8	Ziv	April/May
3	9	Sivan	May/June
4	10	Tammuz	June/July
5	11	Ab	July/Aug.
6	12	Elul	Aug./Sept.
7	1	Ethanim	Sept./Oct.
8	2	Bul	Oct./Nov.
9	3	Kislev	Nov./Dec.
10	4	Tebeth	Dec./Jan.
11	5	Shebat	Jan./Feb.
12	6	Adar	Feb./March

The events of Ezra 10 occurred between the seventeenth day of the ninth month (Kislev) and the first day of the first month (Abib).

d The Exiles Send Their Foreign Wives Away (10:9-17)

"Let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at a set time, along with the elders and judges of each town, until the fierce anger of our God in this matter is turned away from us."

—Ezra 10:14b

All the people of Judah and Benjamin gathered within the designated time to deal with the intermarriage issue (vs. 9). In 458 B.C., the 20th day of the ninth month (Kislev) was well into December. The rainy season had begun in October; its heaviest rains would fall in Decem-

ber and January. The temperature would have been chilly. The crowd gathered in the open square suffered as much from physical discomfort as spiritual turmoil.

In his function as a priest, Ezra confronted the people's infidelity in the matter of marrying foreign women. He ordered the Jews to take two actions: inwardly they were to confess their rebellion against God's ways; outwardly they were to separate themselves from idolatry, especially their foreign wives (vss. 10, 11). The larger issue was doing God's will in terms of being a holy people. The specific application of the principle was intermarriage with worshipers of other gods.

Ask Yourself . . . *How does God want me to express His holiness?*

The assembly that shivered in the rain voiced their united agreement with Ezra's assessment of the situation and the solution he proposed. They recognized that they deserved the wrath of God as long as this situation continued. This response was probably a summary of the opinions of the delegates who gathered after the crowd dispersed to find shelter. Everyone realized that implementing Ezra's solution would be painful and difficult in individual cases. Unraveling this tangled web of faithless marriages would be hard and bitter work (vss. 12-14).

The committee proposed that a task force made up of elders and respected mediators examine each case of intermarriage and work out the details of the separations. Four men of note, including one Levite, opposed the system (vs. 15). Their reasons are not given. Perhaps they had intermarried. Perhaps they thought the remedy too drastic.

The plan was adopted. Ezra appointed the panel to assess each offensive marriage. Every clan was represented. The interviews with those whose marriages had to be reviewed started 10 days after the

mass assembly in the rain and lasted for three months, that is, until March 27, 457 B.C. (vss. 16, 17). In all, 110 men were found guilty of marrying foreign wives and were required to separate from them (see vss. 18-44).

Ezra 10:18-44 in Brief

The priests, Levites, and temple personnel head the list of 110 men who had offended God by marrying foreign wives. The pledge and the sin offering they made probably was the same response required of the others on the list. Nine of the original 33 families that returned from Babylon were involved in this offense. But that means no one from 24 of the original remnant families intermarried with idolaters. The guilty ones tended to group within certain families that had strayed from the Lord. The most touching cases were the ones that involved children who were taken away from their fathers. Presumably, these foreign women and their children returned to their families and became dependent on parents, brothers, or uncles.

5

Nehemiah Begins to Build

Nehemiah 1—3

a

Nehemiah Prays for Jerusalem (1:1-11)

When I heard these things, I [Nehemiah] sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. —Nehemiah 1:4

When the first Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem with Sheshbazzar in 537 B.C., they may have expected to found the blessed messianic community anticipated by Isaiah and other prophets after the Lord purified His people (see Isa. 40; 54; Zeph. 3). Instead, they faced disappointment, failure, and disillusionment. Malachi preached against a cynical spirit among the remnant who felt that it didn't much matter whether they served the Lord or not (see Mal. 2:17; 3:13, 14).

After 20 years the exiles did manage to complete a small version of the former temple in response to the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (see Ezra 6:14). During this time Ezra strengthened the commitment of the exilic community in

Judah to the Law of the Lord (see 7:14, 25-26). However, nearly a full century after the first exiles arrived in Judah, Jerusalem still lay unfortified, the spiritual reforms of Ezra were only skin-deep, and the powerful enemies surrounding Judah were committed to keeping the Jewish community weak and disgraced.

Today, many similar problems can creep into the church to hinder the spiritual growth of its members. Internal struggles, a lack of devotion, and prayerlessness are only a few of the things that can quench a group of believers' desire to grow in the Lord.

Ask Yourself . . . *What sorts of things tend to hinder my spiritual growth?*

In the fall of 445 B.C., the Lord laid a burden for the welfare of Jerusalem on the heart of a Jewish man named Nehemiah. Like Daniel before him in Babylon, Nehemiah had risen to prominence in the imperial court of Persia. The Hebrew name Nehemiah meant "The Comfort of the Lord." Nehemiah is related to the biblical names Nahum ("Comfort") and Menahem ("Comforter").

Ezra had assembled the residents of Judah to address the problem of mixed marriages in the ninth month of Artaxerxes' seventh year (see Ezra 10:9). In the ninth month of Artaxerxes' twentieth year, one of Nehemiah's brothers came from Judah to visit him in the imperial fortress, one of the winter palaces of the Persian emperors on the outskirts of the city of Susa (Neh. 1:1).

Nehemiah questioned his brother. The news he received came as a result of concern for both the people and the place of the exiles. The population of Judah and Jerusalem faced danger and disgrace. Jerusalem was not secure, because its walls were broken down and its gates were burned down (vss. 2, 3).

Hanani's [huh-NAY-nigh] news concerned a failed effort to fortify Jerusalem early in the reign of Artaxerxes, not the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., which happened 140 years earlier. Ezra had reported an aborted building campaign that the surrounding provincial leaders stopped by force (see Ezra 4:16, 21-23). Nehemiah may have known that the emperor's edict at that time held open the possibility that Jerusalem could be fortified at a later time. He was surprised to hear that opposing leaders had taken it on themselves to destroy the defenses that had been started.

When Nehemiah heard of the distress of the Jews and Jerusalem, he took the most appropriate action available to him. For days he sat, wept, fasted, and prayed (Neh. 1:4). Four months would pass before

this spiritual action translated into physical action (see 2:1). He initially focused all of his personal and spiritual strength on clearing the communication channels between himself and God so he could pray from a prepared heart and be ready to take any action the Lord required of him.

Nehemiah began his prayer by praising God (1:5). He addressed the "LORD," Israel's covenant deity; the "God of heaven," who controls all nations; and "the great and awesome God," before whom everyone must bow. Nehemiah praised God for His faithfulness to His covenant with Israel, which demonstrated His love to all who were faithful in return.

Nehemiah's requests began with an appeal to God to give full attention to his earnest, marathon prayer for Israel (vs. 6). By terms of its covenant with the Lord, Israel was a nation of servants. By the facts of history, Israel was a nation of faithless hirelings who had consistently violated their covenant with the Lord.

Nehemiah identified himself and his family with the historical faithlessness of Israel and confessed Israel's past and present sinfulness. They had violated the moral commands, the ritual decrees, and the judicial precedents established in the Mosaic Law. Consequently, the nation of Israel had been scattered among the nations as punishment (vss. 7, 8; see Deut. 28:64).

Thankfully, the Law also promised regathering from the nations to the promised land in response to

national repentance (Neh. 1:9; see Deut. 30:1-4). Nehemiah reminded the Lord of Israel's redeemed servant status that resulted from Moses' words of intercession at Mount Sinai following the golden calf incident (Neh. 1:10; see Deut. 9:29). Nehemiah asked once more for the Lord's attention to his prayer of confession and the prayers of other Jews who shared his reverence

for the Lord (Neh. 1:11ab).

Up to this point in his prayer, Nehemiah had been humbly referring to himself in the third person as "your servant." After his prayer, Nehemiah revealed that he was a cupbearer to the king, a confidant to the emperor himself (vs. 11c).

HOLDING MORE THAN A CUP

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the great Persian King Artaxerxes (Neh. 1:11). "Cupbearer" was a humble title for an important post. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Edwin Yamauchi suggests that a royal cupbearer would

1. be trained in court etiquette
2. be physically impressive
3. control the imperial wine cellar
4. be a companion and sounding board for the emperor
5. grant or deny access to the emperor
6. either have the emperor's absolute confidence or lose his head

b Nehemiah Prepares for Jerusalem (2:1-10)

I [Nehemiah] answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

—Nehemiah 2:5

From the time that Nehemiah began mourning, fasting, and praying until he approached Artaxerxes was roughly the span from Thanksgiving until Easter—late November to early April (Neh. 2:1; see 1:1). Artaxerxes had winter palaces in Susa and Babylon, and he may have been in Babylon during the four months of Nehemiah's fast. Finally, the time came when Nehemiah had to appear before the Emperor.

Nehemiah's appearance was altered as a result of his extended fast, and Artaxerxes noted this (2:2). Nehemiah feared for his life because everyone in the presence of the emperor was required to show

WHICH WAY TO THE KING'S PARK?

Nehemiah requested Artaxerxes' permission to use timber from "the king's royal park" (Neh. 2:8). The best-known source of fine timber in the Persian Empire was in Lebanon, where Zerubbabel secured materials for the temple (Ezra 3:7). However, it is improbable that these costly, imported cedar logs were used to rebuild the gates of Jerusalem.

A likely location of the king's forest is Solomon's garden (II Kings 25:4; Eccl. 2:5), which the early historian Josephus located at Etham, roughly six miles south of Jerusalem. Native oak, poplar, or terebinth in this area would have made good construction timbers for gates.

how pleased they were to enjoy that honor. However, Artaxerxes showed his regard for his trusted aide by expressing concern about his emotional well-being rather than taking offense.

In the exchange between Artaxerxes and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:2-8), the emperor was always brusque and demanding, while the courtier was formal and deferential. Nehemiah never mentioned Jerusalem by name but always tied the city to himself and his family. He did not waste the emperor's time with wishful generalities; God had helped him formulate a specific plan during those months of fasting and prayer.

As with most monarchies, Persian protocol required one to give the emperor a wish for a very long and prosperous reign. Nehemiah gave this wish, then quickly but carefully

connected his sadness, inappropriate as it was in the throne room, to the tragedy of knowing his ancestral city was desolate and defenseless (vs. 3).

Artaxerxes' blunt "What is it you want?" (vs. 4a) may have been more than Nehemiah hoped for so early in the conversation. In the space of a deep breath, Nehemiah's heart reached for God's hand even as his mouth started forming the words of his petition to the emperor. Nehemiah knew he needed the "LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God" (1:5) to shape Artaxerxes' attitude toward the project and toward himself as a petitioner.

Ask Yourself . . . *Who do I need the Lord to influence on my behalf?*

Using few words, Nehemiah asked for permission to go to Judah

and rebuild the city of his ancestor. At this point in his narrative, Nehemiah mentioned the presence of one of Artaxerxes' wives. Perhaps she played a role in the emperor's decision in Nehemiah's favor. Artaxerxes gave permission by asking how long it would take Nehemiah to get to Judah and when he would be back (2:4b-6a).

Once Nehemiah knew he had imperial permission, he laid out the plans he had made. He set a time by which he would return to his duties. Then he asked for written authorization for his mission so he wouldn't face delays from various bureaucrats in Trans-Euphrates. He requested orders that timbers be provided from the king's forest for the walls and gates and for the residence he planned to build (vss. 6b-8).

Nehemiah knew that Artaxerxes granted his requests because the hand of God graciously moved him to do so. He didn't bother to describe his journey, although it should have been quicker than Zerubbabel's and Ezra's since he was unencumbered by children, livestock, and household possessions. He presented his documents authorizing his mission to the authorities in Trans-Euphrates (vs. 9). His status was enhanced by the presence of his armed imperial escort.

Ominously, Nehemiah introduced into his narrative two characters who were upset that he had arrived to promote the welfare of the Jews (vs. 10). Sanballat's name was Babylonian; he was likely named after

Sin, the moon god. He was probably from Upper or Lower Beth Horon, two villages about 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem on the main road to the Mediterranean coast. He was a leader of the Samaritan opposition. Tobiah was a Jewish name meaning "The Lord Is Good." He probably was a worldly Jew living in and controlling the territory associated with Ammon east of the Jordan River (vs. 10). These two men would be Nehemiah's bitter enemies for years to come.

Nehemiah probably would not have been the great leader he was without Sanballat's and Tobiah's opposition. The presence of difficult people in our own lives may be the Lord's way of stretching our capacity to love the unlovable, and thus become more like Christ.

C Nehemiah Motivates Jerusalem (2:11-20)

[Nehemiah] said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

—Nehemiah 2:17

God had enabled Nehemiah to win the approval of the emperor of Persia for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He secured the cooperation of the officials of Trans-Euphrates with an imperial edict.

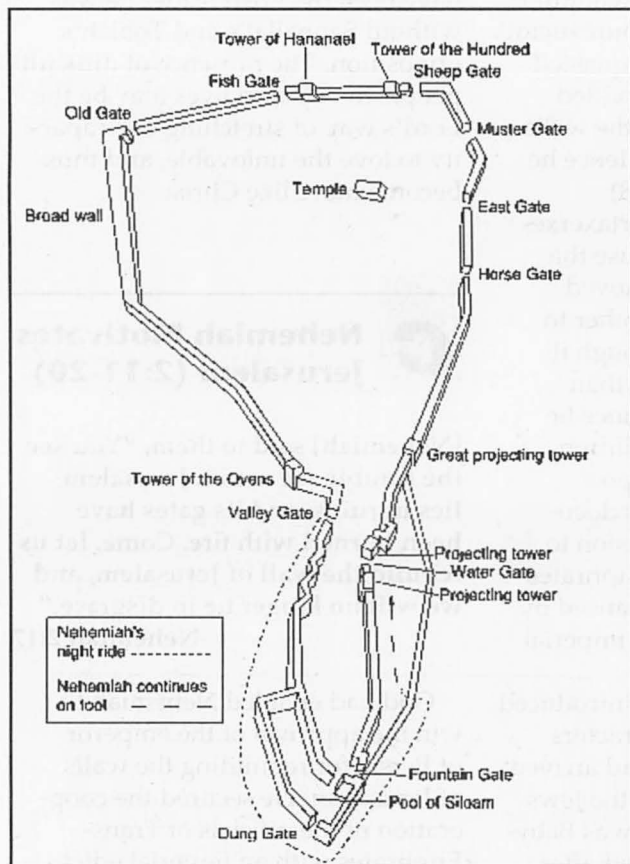
That left just one thing: securing the commitment of the residents of Jerusalem and Judah to do the work. It's often easier to get permission to lead a project than it is to motivate the people involved to carry it out.

After contacting the officials of the satrapy of Trans-Euphrates, Nehemiah went on to Jerusalem (vs. 11). As Ezra had done before him, Nehemiah rested three days before initiating any activity (see Ezra 8:32). Before telling anyone in Jerusalem what he had come to do, Nehemiah surveyed the most damaged portion

on the city walls. As an outsider he wanted to be able to give the leaders of Jerusalem an informed account of what needed to be done when he revealed his mission.

Perhaps the greatest challenge Nehemiah faced was transmitting his conviction that rebuilding Jerusalem's walls at this time was God's idea—not the fantasy of a government official who would go home in a while and leave the locals to live with the trouble he had stirred up. Nehemiah took a few trusted associates—probably men who had

accompanied him from Susa—and set out to inspect the walls (Neh. 2:12, 13). Nehemiah rode a donkey; the others walked. The inspection party went out through the ruins of the Valley Gate on the west side of the southern point of Jerusalem and turned to the left toward the Jackal Well near the



Nehemiah's wall encompassed David's old city along the narrow southern ridge, the temple area, and some newer suburbs west of the temple. The whole city took in roughly 90 acres ringed by two miles of walls.

city's southern extremity. They passed the Dung Gate before reaching the well.

After rounding the bottom of Jerusalem, Nehemiah turned north up the Kidron Valley along the eastern wall (vs. 14). Here the Valley Gate exited to the King's Pool (the Pool of Siloam, see 3:15). The hillside from Jerusalem into the Kidron Valley is steep. The old wall of Jerusalem had been far down the hill and a system of terraces that supported buildings had been anchored against that wall. When the old wall was destroyed, the terraces had crumbled too. Nehemiah had to dismount and continue on foot because the slope along the east side of Jerusalem was choked with rubble that even a donkey could not negotiate in the moonlight.

Nehemiah's inspectors picked their way an unspecified distance farther along the ruins of the eastern wall (2:15). This side would be the most daunting section to rebuild. Much of the rest stood on relatively level ground. Finally they turned back, retraced their steps over the rocks, rounded the southern point of Jerusalem, and reentered the Valley Gate to the southwest.

No one in Jerusalem knew what this important Jew from the imperial court was up to or where he had gone when he left the city at night. Then Nehemiah gathered everyone together and surprised them all. He reviewed their disgrace and defenselessness. He challenged them to join him in rebuilding the defenses and removing their humiliation. And as

his clincher, Nehemiah shared the amazing story of God's intervention with Artaxerxes to secure official sanction for this task (vss. 16-18).

Ask Yourself . . . *What would inspire me to take on a difficult task?*

The response of the priests, nobles, officials, and ordinary people was profoundly united: "Let us start rebuilding" (vs. 18). In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the concept of "the hand of the LORD my God" (see Ezra 7:6, 28; 8:31) or "the gracious hand of my God" (see 7:9; 8:18, 22; Neh. 2:8, 18) explains the influencing force behind everything that happens. Emperors, nations, and the people of God are all tools in that gracious hand.

Opposed to the gracious hand of God were three potent human enemies (vs. 19). The company of Sanballat and Tobiah was joined by Geshem the Arab. Ancient sources reveal that Geshem led an assortment of Arab tribes that controlled the deserts south of Judah from Egypt to the Arabian peninsula. He was more powerful than Sanballat and Tobiah combined, but his hostility to the Jews appears to have been less intense. Sanballat to the north, Tobiah to the east, and Geshem to the south forged a hostile boundary around Judah.

Together they launched a campaign of ridicule and mockery against the small Jewish community. Their initial charge was the old standby: rebellion against the emperor (see Ezra 4:11-16). Nehemiah shrugged off Sanballat, Tobiah,

and Geshem as though they were minor annoyances (Neh. 2:20). He was used to dealing with the real political heavyweights of Persia; comparatively speaking, these men were small fries.

On the other hand, Nehemiah looked at the situation in Jerusalem through a theological lens. The God of heaven wanted the walls built. He and the Jews were the servants of the God of heaven by terms of a covenant. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had no covenant status. Jerusalem belonged to God and His people. The blustering nations around them had no part in God's plan for Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 3 in Brief

This remarkable chapter of the Bible contains a roster of the work crews that labored on the walls and

gates of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership. The locations of the work crews are noted, starting with the high priest in the northeast corner of Jerusalem next to the temple and moving counterclockwise around the city to the last group, made up of goldsmiths and merchants.

The 10 gates received the most attention from the builders. A city gate was not just a set of doors in a stone wall, but a small fortress protecting its entryway. Along the western wall, workers repaired long sections, suggesting it was not totally destroyed. The eastern wall required most of the manpower because of the steepness of the terrain and the devastation of the original wall. It's likely Nehemiah moved his wall farther up the slope and left the worst debris outside the new wall.



Nehemiah Builds Despite Opposition

Nehemiah 4:1—7:73a

a

Nehemiah Ignores Insults (4:1-5)

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.

—Nehemiah 4:4

Nehemiah 4:1 picks up where 2:20 left off. Sanballat, the Samaritan leader, assembled his army in his capital city to agitate Nehemiah and his workers. Along with all the petty bureaucrats, Tobiah joined Sanballat on the speakers' platform as a visiting dignitary. The intensity of Sanballat's anger at the Jews exposed the lie behind his ridicule. Under the veneer of his propaganda, Sanballat was worried about what Nehemiah was doing. This tenacious exile threatened his power over Judah.

In a series of five questions, Sanballat made Nehemiah and the Jews seem ridiculous in the eyes of the army of Samaria (4:2). He implied the Jews were powerless to do anything. He scoffed at the idea that such a bunch could fortify a city. He suggested they were religious

SANBALLAT AND TOBIAH:

THE BIG CHEESES

A papyrus document dated about 40 years after the time of Nehemiah identifies Sanballat as the governor of Samaria. The letter concerns Sanballat's adult sons, suggesting that he was elderly at the time.

Other archaeological finds pertaining to Samaria in the time between the Old and New Testaments connect the name Sanballat (perhaps a grandson) with the movement that produced the Samaritan religion and temple.

Tobiah's ancestors may have been powerful landowners in the vicinity of Ammon with influence at Jerusalem as early as the eighth century B.C.

Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has produced a genealogy containing nine generations of Tobiads. Their influence was felt as late as the second century B.C.

fanatics trusting God to raise the walls in response to sacrifices. He claimed they had barely strength for one day, so they had better work fast. He mocked the wall as a fortress made of charcoal briquettes. The native limestone, when subjected to fire, turned brittle and crumbly. In time, Sanballat would find that the Jews had no trouble finding sound building stones.

The Samaritan army must have responded favorably to Sanballat's taunts, because Tobiah followed them up with the kind of joke that assumed his audience was ready to hear it (vs. 3). If a stray fox jumped up on that ridiculous wall, the whole thing would totter and collapse from the shock. Imagine the clash of swords on shields and battle yells from the assembled army as they responded to the jibes and jeers of their leaders.

At this point in his memoir, Nehemiah inserted a prayer. He had no time to bother with the empty words of posturing opponents. He committed these hecklers to God, who alone has the right to take vengeance on those who oppose His purposes (see Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). He asked God to take note of the abuse hurled at His servants and to deflect that spite back on those who initiated it.

Nehemiah prayed that the enemies of God's people might know the horrors of the kind of captivity the Jews had survived. He prayed that their offense might never be forgiven, because they had opposed the purposes of God to protect His people (Neh. 4:4, 5).

Nehemiah prayed as Jeremiah and certain of the psalmists had when they asked God to bring calamity on their enemies (see Ps. 137:7-9; Jer. 18:23). Centuries later Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-44). While this may be an apparent point of tension between the Old and New Testaments, it's important to note that Nehemiah and these other Old Testament saints prayed not about their personal enemies but about the foes of God.

Ask Yourself . . . How do I usually pray for my enemies?

b Nehemiah Anticipates Surprise Attacks (4:6-14)

I [Nehemiah] stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." —Nehemiah 4:14

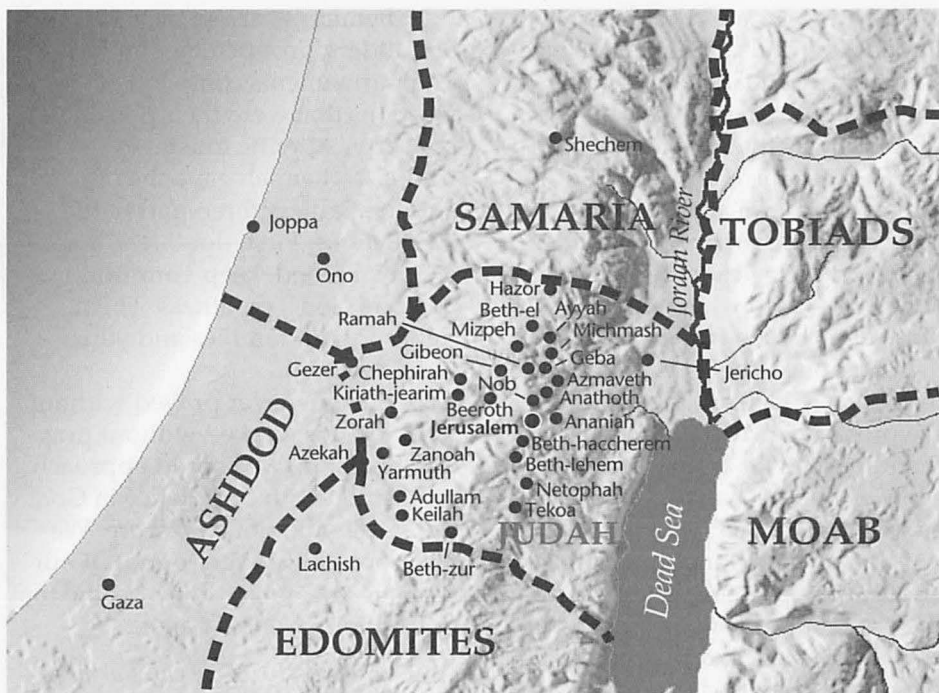
While Sanballat and Tobiah waged a war of words, the Jewish laborers from Jerusalem and the surrounding towns were mounting stone on stone all around the two-mile perimeter of Jerusalem. Before

the opponents knew what was happening, the wall had reached half its planned height all the way around (vs. 6). In the 1960s, noted archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon excavated a short section of what she concluded was Nehemiah's wall along the

eastern side of ancient Jerusalem. Her report described the wall as more than nine feet thick and roughly finished as though it had been thrown up in haste.

The wall went up quickly because the exilic community toiled hard.

Judah was surrounded by powerful enemies. Nehemiah and the builders had to rely on the power of God as they pressed forward with their building project. Notice the precarious location of Ono, where the enemies later wanted to meet with Nehemiah. Relatively few exiles lived in Jerusalem; most established their homes in the surrounding towns.



The last phrase of verse 6 could be rendered as "they had a heart to work." Sanballat and Tobiah had to change their strategy since their saber-rattling mockery clearly had discouraged no one. First, they recruited more allies. Sanballat and his Samaritans to the north, Tobiah and his Ammonites to the east, and Geshem and his Arabs to the south were joined in angry opposition to Jerusalem's walls by the Ashdodites, people of the strongest Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast to the west of Judah (vs. 7).

Second, the alliance that ringed Judah and Jerusalem started planning attacks on Jerusalem. Nehemiah heard rumors about the impending raids; perhaps this was something Sanballat and Tobiah wanted him to hear. Their biggest problem was that Nehemiah had Artaxerxes' permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. An actual attack would risk bringing Persian wrath on their heads. A threatened attack might do what taunts had not—demoralize the Jews (vs. 8).

In response, the Jews started praying. Clearly Nehemiah organized the prayer vigil, because it was accompanied by around-the-clock sentries to detect any raiders. Even as they prayed and watched, the builders were feeling the cumulative effect of the pressure of the task and the opposition. They were exhausted from the toil and discouraged by the rubble they had to work in. In response, the opponents engaged in psychological warfare by claiming they could use the cover of the

rubble to send terrorists in among the builders to kill them before they knew the attackers were at hand (vss. 9-11).

When Sanballat and Tobiah sensed that rumors of war were affecting the morale of the builders, they planted more rumors in Jewish villages that bordered enemy lands. Soon Nehemiah had repeated intelligence reports that together indicated attacks from every point of the compass. In response, Nehemiah stopped the construction and posted heavy guards inside Jerusalem wherever the wall was still low or where there were open spaces (vss. 12, 13).

Nehemiah's "army" was his corps of builders, grouped by family units. Their armaments consisted of the weapons that were their personal property. After he mustered the troops, Nehemiah gave the officers and the fighters three-part battle instructions. First, don't fear the enemy. Second, keep your mind fixed on God's greatness. Third, fight for your families and your homes (vs. 14).

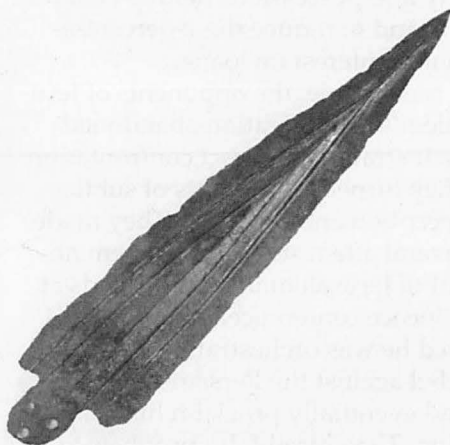
Nehemiah never prayed without working nor worked without praying. Like him, we should approach opposition with confidence in God. But we should not stop there. We also should use every ounce of our courage and ability to overcome that opposition in God's name.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I achieve a better balance between prayer and work?*

C Nehemiah Implements a Vigilant Strategy (4:15-23)

Half of my [Nehemiah's] men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. —Nehemiah 4:16, 17a

Nehemiah showed great organizational skill when he devised the initial scheme for portioning out the work on the walls and gates among



Nehemiah's builders carried materials in one hand and a weapon in the other (Neh. 4:17). This dagger, dated from the time of Saul, had an iron blade and a bronze handle. The builders may have held weapons similar to this one.

the work crews. He revealed flexibility in the face of daunting opposition as he anticipated and headed off the various schemes of the encircling foes. There came a time, however, when he needed to put in place a plan that could handle a variety of threats. Otherwise, the walls and gates weren't going to get done.

After waiting an unspecified number of days for a surprise attack, Nehemiah somehow heard the news that Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and the Ashdodites had given up on ambushing the workers. Nehemiah took no credit for the failure of the numerically overwhelming enemies. He knew only God could have frustrated their plans to attack (vs. 15).

After receiving the good news, Nehemiah encouraged everybody to get back to work. From this point on, until the walls and gates were finished, half the people worked while the other half served as armed sentries (vs. 16). Officers ready to take charge in the event of a military emergency waited at intervals behind the workers and guards. The carriers who transported materials to the various work stations around the walls kept one hand free to carry their weapons. The builders wore swords on their belts (vss. 17, 18a).

A trumpeter stayed with Nehemiah at all times so that he could signal everyone to gather at any point on the walls where trouble developed (vss. 18b-20). The trumpet was a ram's horn (shofar) and was the standard signal for assemblies or attacks (see Exod. 19:16, 17; Josh. 6:20; Judg. 6:34). Nehemiah knew

the workers were too spread out along the rim of Jerusalem to know without a signal that they should gather. The ram's horn also would remind the workers by its association with Sinai, Jericho, and Gideon that God would fight with them against their opponents.

Solomon wrote, "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain" (Ps. 127:1). Nehemiah understood this truth and experienced it during the time the people watched and worked from first light until after the sun went down (Neh. 4:21).

Nehemiah felt compelled by the gravity of the security issue to have workers from neighboring towns remain in Jerusalem at night rather than return to their homes (vs. 22). Jerusalem and its temple were the twin focal points of the faith and history of the Jews, but most of the exiles lived in other towns. The sparseness of Jerusalem's population would continue to be a problem for Nehemiah throughout his governorship (see 7:4; 11:1, 2).

Nehemiah and his closest associates endured great hardships as they set the pace for all the workers on the wall project (4:23). When they could catch some sleep, they slept in their clothes. They kept their weapons with them at all times so they could be in the front lines if an attack materialized at any point.

Ask Yourself . . . *What spiritual lessons did I learn the last time I experienced a serious hardship?*

Nehemiah 5:1—6:14 in Brief

For decades the poorer residents of Judah had been struggling to pay the exorbitant taxes due Persia. Most had mortgaged their lands. Some were reduced to selling their children into slavery. The stress of the building project forced into the open long-standing grievances against Jewish creditors whose unforgiving business practices contributed to the financial ruin or distress of many builders.

Nehemiah called a general assembly and confronted the Jewish creditors with their hard-heartedness toward their fellow Jews. He secured their pledge to return property and possessions held as collateral and to reduce the 1-percent-a-month interest on loans.

Meanwhile, the opponents of Jerusalem's refortification abandoned their strategy of direct confrontation. They turned to attempts of subtle deception and betrayal. They made several attempts to lure Nehemiah out of Jerusalem into their hands at a "peace conference." They insinuated he was orchestrating a plot to rebel against the Persian Empire and eventually proclaim himself king. They hired false prophets to convince Nehemiah to do something damaging to his reputation. Nehemiah was too focused on what God wanted him to accomplish to fall for any of their ploys.



Nehemiah Consolidates His Achievements (6:15—7:3)

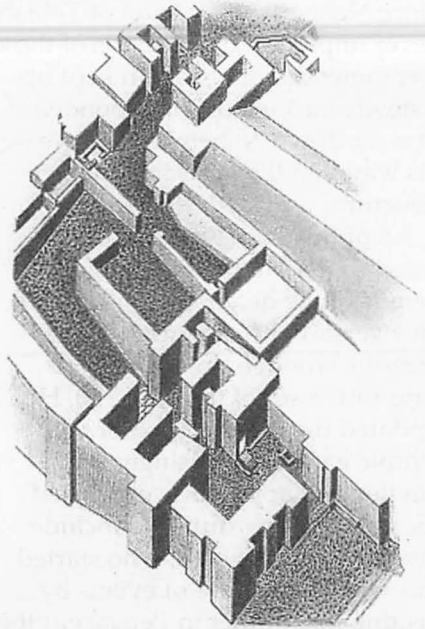
I [Nehemiah] said to them, “The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses.” —Nehemiah 7:3

Nehemiah told surprisingly little about building the wall of Jerusalem. He included an honor roll of the dedicated builders, but he told mostly about the obstacles overcome from without and within in the process of building. That’s what he remembered. That’s what God wanted every generation of His children to keep in mind as they do His work. Success comes after facing foes in the strength of His name.

All of the commotion reported in Nehemiah 4 through 6 occurred in the 52 days from the second of the month of Ab to the twenty-fifth of the month of Elul—approximately August 11 to October 2, 445 B.C. (6:15). Everyone in the coalition opposed to the construction of the walls were informed instantly by their intelligence network. They were awed because such an outcome was humanly impossible. In their hearts they knew the God of Israel

had been at work. Tinges of terror colored their thoughts of the future, and they doubted whether good things lay ahead for them (vs. 16).

Interestingly, the account of the completion of Jerusalem’s walls with the aid of God is not followed with a story about a celebration. Circumstances were still too insecure to justify a party. Tobiah operated a fifth column inside the Jewish community through his network of business associates and relatives. He



The doors were the last feature added to the gate-fortresses. Gates concentrated defenders around and above the openings in city walls. Often interior dividers made those passing through a gate change directions once or twice as a further impediment to attack.

was married to a daughter of one of the original families of the exiles and his son was married to a daughter of one of the most vigorous wall builders. Tobiah also had influence with the high priest (vss. 17, 18, see Ezra 2:5; Neh. 3:4, 30; 13:4).

Since Tobiah had been unable to prevent the construction of the walls, he set out to exploit his base of influence within those walls. All his contacts repeatedly praised Tobiah to Nehemiah and reported Nehemiah's reactions back to him (6:19). Since Nehemiah's opinion of Tobiah never improved on the basis of these recommendations, Tobiah kept up a steady barrage of correspondence to wear down Nehemiah and weasel his way into the Jerusalem power structure.

All of this kept Nehemiah motivated to tend to the finishing details of the defenses of Jerusalem. He oversaw the mounting of the massive wooden doors in the 10 gate-fortresses of the city (7:1). He updated the organization of the temple gatekeepers, singers, and Levites and apparently expanded the gatekeepers' duties to include the city gates. Hanani, who started this whole sequence of events by visiting his brother in Persia, got the nod from Nehemiah to oversee the defenses of the whole city (vs. 2).

He shared this responsibility with Hananiah who commanded the troops garrisoned at the citadel just north of the temple courtyard. Integrity, rather than family connections or position, won these two their jobs.

Ask Yourself . . . *Why would an employer hire me?*

Nehemiah was not convinced that the danger of attack from their many enemies was past. He directed Hanani and Hananiah to be cautious about opening the new city gates (vs. 3). Gatekeepers were not to open the gates at first light. They were to wait until the full light of morning showed the surrounding countryside was free of potential attackers. In the evening, the gates were to be closed and barred before the fading light of dusk could conceal a foe. Finally, civilians still had to serve regularly as a defensive militia until the crisis passed.

Nehemiah 7:4-73a in Brief

Nehemiah knew that the final step to defending Jerusalem involved bolstering the population of the city to the point that it did not have to rely on the men from neighboring towns. The city had to be able to defend itself. To research how to get people to move into Jerusalem, Nehemiah familiarized himself with the record of the original party of exiles who accompanied the first wave of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem nearly a century earlier (compare Neh. 7:6-73a with Ezra 2:1-70). Nehemiah 7:70-72 adds some detail to Ezra's account concerning the temple treasures brought back by the exiles.

7

Ezra Leads a Public Confession

Nehemiah 7:73b—8:18 in Brief

While Nehemiah busied himself organizing the physical defenses of the new walls of Jerusalem, Ezra worked on the spiritual defenses.

Four days after the walls were completed, Ezra celebrated the first day of the seventh month—Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Day) and the Feast of Trumpets (see Lev. 23:24)—by spending six hours reading the Law of Moses to the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem. Ezra the scribe stood upon a high wooden platform that was specially built for the occasion of reading God's Word. The Levites "read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh. 8:8).

The next day, the leaders of Judah met with Ezra for further study. From that study came a joyous celebration of the Feast of Booths from the 15th to the 22nd of the month. On all eight days of those festivities Ezra taught the Law to the people.

Nehemiah 7:73b—9:37

a The Israelites Gather to Confess (9:1-5a)

Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

—Nehemiah 9:2

The ninth chapters of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel all contain prayers of confession dealing with the national sins that led to the Babylonian captivity and the loss of Israel's sovereignty over its own affairs. These confessions of the sins of people long dead were not requests that the original sinners be forgiven. They were statements of identification with the past. Through the prayer in Nehemiah 9, Ezra helped his contemporaries rehearse the sins of the past, recognize the present results of those sins, and prepare to move into a tomorrow marked by faithfulness and blessing. As Christians today, we, too, can find it helpful to face the past in order to understand the present and move into the future with God's fullest blessing.

Two days after the last joyous day of the Feast of Booths, the people of Judah and Jerusalem gathered once again in Jerusalem (vs. 1). Earlier Ezra and Nehemiah had discouraged mourning over sin during the festival days when the people were to draw spiritual strength from the joy of knowing the Lord (see 8:9, 10). Now they came again to explore another aspect of being the people of God through fasting, separation from idolatry, and confession of sin.

Rough goat-hair garments and dust-covered heads illustrated the state of mourning the Jews adopted as the proper approach to confession of their sins. They were prepared to connect their personal sins with the obvious rebelliousness of their ancestors before the captivity. They stood for three hours of reading from the Law and three hours of confession and worship, just as they had stood all morning on the first of the month to hear Ezra read the Law (9:2, 3; see 8:3, 5). They stood in reverence because the Law had come through Moses from "the LORD their God" (9:3).

Probably the assembly of Judah gathered for confession before the same platform in the square at the Water Gate where Ezra had read the Law (see 8:1). The steps on which the Levites stood as worship and confession guides probably were the stairs to the platform. Two groups of eight Levites are named in Nehemiah 9:4, 5. The first group of Levites called on the Lord while the people watched. The second group led the mass of worshipers in praising God.

The Wardrobe of Mourning

The sackcloth worn by the confessing Jews was probably a coarsely woven cloth of goat hair (Neh. 9:1). Sackcloth irritated the skin; it was too rough for ordinary clothing. Because of its durability, this material was typically used to create bags.

The sackcloth worn by people in mourning could have simply been two rectangular pieces sewn together, with holes for the head and arms. Or, it could have been nothing more than a loincloth. The physical characteristics of this coarse material served as a powerful symbol of how the wearer felt. Mourners wore sackcloth as a form of self-abasement and to illustrate how their sorrow chafed their spirit.

Five Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, and Sherebiah—participated in both acts of worship.

The Levites called on the people to stand for worship (vs. 5a). This worship consisted of praise that focused on the covenant relationship between God and His people Israel. "The LORD"—Yahweh—was

God's covenant name, and indeed the following recitation of Israel's history is a story of God's covenant faithfulness and Israel's covenant faithlessness.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I use the quiet weeks of January, after the joy of the Christmas season, to reflect on my need to turn away from any sins that may mar my relationship with God?*



The Israelites Confess God's Faithfulness (9:5b-15)

"You [Lord] have kept your promise because you are righteous."

—Nehemiah 9:8b

Jewish tradition and many Christian commentators attribute the beautiful prayer of Nehemiah 9:5b-37 to Ezra. The prayer is structured carefully to guide the worshipers of Judah and Jerusalem in contrasting themselves with the Lord. Worship at its best always does that. We stand in awe before God in His infinite majesty and power while we acknowledge our limitations. We stand mourning because He is pure and holy while we are stained by the effects of sin. We stand in hope because He is gentle and loving toward undeserving sinners who cast themselves on His mercy.

The emphasis throughout these verses is on God. They are addressed

to Him, so the pronoun "you" peppers every sentence as the subject who acted decisively. The pattern is something like "You did this, and You did that, as You proved Your faithfulness again and again." No wonder the sequence begins with a blessing on God's glorious name to the effect that His name be lifted above the highest pinnacle of blessing and praise (vs. 5b).

The next 10 verses rehearse God's faithful works from Creation to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (vss. 6-15). Their wording reflects the vocabulary of Genesis and

The Patriarchs' Covenant

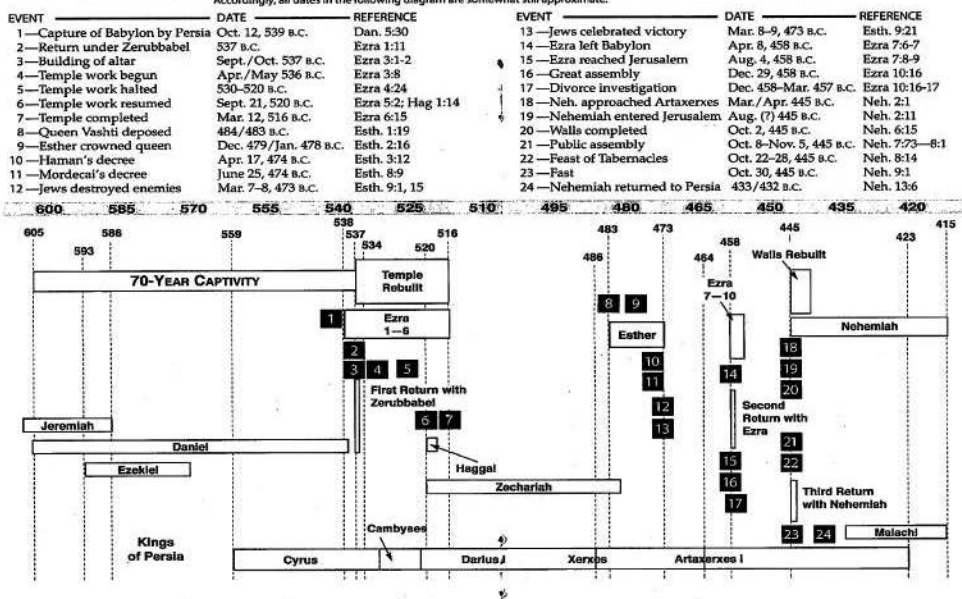
As God heard the groanings of His chosen people who suffered under the oppression of the Egyptians, He "remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob" (Exod. 2:24).

God's covenant with Abraham consisted of two parts. God promised to provide Abraham a homeland for his descendants (Gen. 15:18-21), and later promised to make him "the father of many nations" (17:4).

God affirmed those promises to Isaac and to Jacob (vs. 21; 35:10-12). Ezra reminded Israel of these promises in his prayer of confession (Neh. 9:8).

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN THE LIVES OF EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER

Dates for biblical events during the period of the Persian Empire are fairly reliable because of the quantity of historical material available. Disagreements about dates do arise when scholars differ over how an ancient writer decided what was a king's first year on the throne. Accordingly, all dates in the following diagram are somewhat still approximate.



Exodus at several points. This characteristic also suggests that Ezra, the accomplished student of the Scripture, composed this prayer.

On behalf of the Jews, Ezra confessed that God alone created the heavens with its stars, the earth and seas with all that is in them, and life in all its forms. Accordingly, the angelic multitude adored Him. They rejoiced in God's choice of Abraham and in the covenant that God made with the patriarch, which formed the basis of all His invariably faithful dealings with their nation (vss. 6-8). This is the only Old Testament reference outside Genesis to God renaming Abraham.

The Jewish assembly next recited God's mighty works of the Exodus. He heeded their anguish in Egypt and at the Red Sea when escape seemed hopeless. By means of the 10 plagues, God earned a lingering reputation among the nations. Then the barrier of the sea opened to save

Israel and swallow the pursuing Egyptians (vss. 9-11). The phrase "like a stone into mighty waters" (vs. 11) echoes the victory song of Moses and Miriam sung on the shores of the Red Sea (see Exod. 15:5).

The Jews confessed how the Lord led their ancestors from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They recalled the way He personally descended to address Israel through Moses. They acknowledged the justice, righteousness, and goodness of every kind of command they received from God on Sinai. They expressed special gratitude for the gift of the Sabbath through God's revelation to Moses (Neh. 9:12-14).

The confessing congregation acknowledged the physical sustenance that God gave Israel in the desert along with the spiritual food of the Law. He gave them manna from heaven every day, water from the rock in emergency circum-

CLOUDS AND FIRE

Ezra praised God for leading the Israelites with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Neh. 9:12). Cloud and fire are often used as symbols of God's presence in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Indeed, God gave Moses the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai in the midst of smoke and fire (Exod. 19:18). Fire symbolizes God's holiness in Deuteronomy 4:24, His protective presence in II Kings 6:17, His wrath against sin in Isaiah 66:15, 16, His glory in Ezekiel 1:4-13, and His righteous judgment in Zechariah 13:9.

Clouds symbolize God's mystery and hidden glory in I Kings 8:10-11.

stances, and the opportunity to enter Canaan and enjoy its riches (see Exod. 16:4; 17:6; Num. 20:7-13). At that moment, the Jews confessed, their ancestors had been poised to receive a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Neh. 9:15).

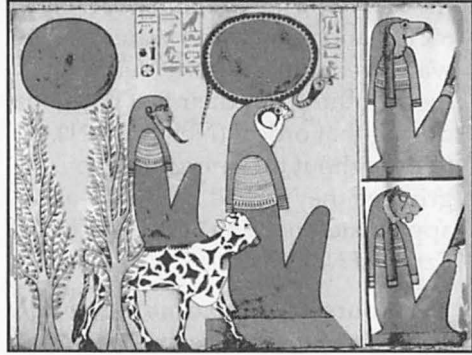
Ask Yourself . . . *How has God recently provided for me?*

C Ezra Confesses Israel's Historic Rebelliousness (9:16-27)

"They were disobedient and rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies." —Nehemiah 9:26

When we remember God's faithfulness, we often become aware of our own infidelity. When we consider the blazing righteousness of God, we know better than to pretend we're impressing Him. Likewise, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem readily contrasted God's goodness with their track record of sin.

The pronouns "you" and "they" interchange throughout Nehemiah 9:16-38 as the Jews compared and contrasted the deeds of God and their ancestors. Despite their deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the



This panel from Sennedjem's tomb in Egypt shows the importance cows had in Egyptian mythology, where Ra-Horakhty, the sun god, is linked with a young calf. The Israelites may have thought of this symbolism when they created the golden calf and worshiped it at Mount Sinai. The worship of the golden calf epitomized their rebellion throughout Old Testament history.

revelation of the Law at Sinai, the guidance and nourishment in the wilderness, and the clear instructions on how to enter and possess the promised land, Israel stubbornly bowed its neck like an ill-tempered ox and rebelled against the Lord. The people disregarded His revealed will and His gracious miracles of deliverance and decided to go back to Egypt and slavery (vss. 16, 17; see Num. 14:1-4). Only God's graciousness and compassion kept Him from abandoning Israel when they went further and worshiped a golden calf (Neh. 9:18; see Exod. 32:4).

The Jews confessed that for 40 years God faithfully furnished Israel with the pillars of fire and cloud,

the Holy Spirit (see Num. 11:17; Isa. 63:11), and manna and water as they wandered in the desert. Neither their clothing nor their feet gave out during that ordeal (Neh. 9:19-21). "Throughout this miraculous pilgrimage they lacked nothing—and appreciated nothing" (Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*).

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I show my appreciation to God this week for everything He has done for me?*

The assembled citizens of Judah and Jerusalem acknowledged that God gave their ancestors more territory than they had expected. He gave them the Transjordanian kingdoms of Sihon and Og. He greatly multiplied their number and gave the land of Canaan to the children of those who had left Egypt. God drove out the Canaanite nations before Israel and gave them well-established cities and houses and cisterns and orchards for which they did not have to toil (vss. 22-25).

Ezra's confession on behalf of the assembled congregation admitted that their ancestors enjoyed to the full every good gift God gave them in Canaan, even as they rebelled against the Lord by disregarding and disobeying His Law. Throughout the period of the judges and into the monarchy, when Israel fell into the habit of killing God's prophets, the people suffered repeatedly through a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and divine deliverance (vss. 26, 27).

The Jews of the days of Ezra and Nehemiah recognized that the

faithlessness of their ancestors had amounted to "awful blasphemies" (vs. 26). They knew the chastening of God had been just and that His deliverance through the judges revealed His "great compassion" (vs. 27). We, too, need the spiritual maturity to recognize how deeply our sinfulness affects God and to appreciate the mercy He extends to us every time we acknowledge our sin and He forgives us.



The Israelites Confess God's Just Judgment (9:28-37)

Because of our sins, [the land's] abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.
—Nehemiah 9:37

Praise God for His mighty acts of creation. Praise Him for calling us into a relationship with Him. Praise Him for delivering us from the bondage of sin. Praise Him for His Word, which feeds our soul. Praise Him for daily bread and a place to live. Praise Him for lovingly disciplining us for our sins. Praise Him for the chastening that may be unpleasant though needful. Praise Him for never giving up on us no matter how often we casually disobey Him.

The Jews confessed that the cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and

deliverance did not end with the era of the judges. Even during the monarchy, peace and prosperity tended to lead to wicked behavior (vs. 28). Then surrounding enemies oppressed Israel until the nation cried out to God in heaven. Time after time He delivered His rebellious people because of His compassion.

The assembly in Jerusalem confessed that God warned their ancestors repeatedly through His prophets to return to His Law and live (vs. 29). They became progressively more arrogant, stubborn, and stiff-necked in their refusal to heed the Word of God. God knew Israel was becoming impervious to His Law, but His Spirit patiently kept sending prophetic warnings until there was no option but to bring upon them the curses threatened in the Law for repeated, persistent disobedience (vss. 30, 31; see Deut. 28:15-68). Only

the great mercy of the Lord prevented their annihilation.

Ask Yourself . . . *What does it usually take to make me aware that I have sinned?*

We see in Nehemiah 9:32 how the Jews began bringing their prayer of confession down to their own time within the Persian Empire. They praised God afresh as "the great, mighty, and awesome God." By contrast, they bemoaned the distress of their political leaders, spiritual leaders, and tribal structures. They saw a straight line of well-deserved misery starting with the Assyrian conquest of the 10 northern tribes in 722 B.C., through the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., right down to their plight under Persian domination.

The Jews admitted that in all of this God had been just and

POLITICALLY INCORRECT PRAYERS

Some scholars question whether Nehemiah would have participated in a prayer that longed for freedom from Persia and complained about oppressive aspects of Persian rule (Neh. 9:36, 37). A few critics would place this portion of Nehemiah after Ezra 8 to get Nehemiah out of the picture.

But Nehemiah easily could have been a faithful Persian bureaucrat and a Jewish patriot, as long as he was discreet about it. Besides, the point of the prayer of confession is spiritual rather than political. If God's favor and blessing would lead to independence, that would be wonderful. It was up to God.

faithful, while their ancestors and they had been guilty as charged. Political leaders, spiritual authorities, and tribal heads all had strayed from the Law and ignored every warning to repent. They looked back longingly to “the good old days” when Israel had been a prosperous, independent nation. But even then they had been disobedient (vss. 33-35).

In the end, the confessing Jews appealed to God’s mercy on the basis of their status as slaves in their own country, their own cities, and their own homes. Their livelihood was disappearing to pay the crippling taxes that the Persian emperors imposed on all the provinces (vss. 36, 37). They acknowledged that their own sins were adequate reasons for their subjection to foreign rulers.

The assembly of Jews reminded “the great God, mighty and awesome” (vs. 32), who keeps His promises because He is righteous, that they—His repentant servants—were “in great distress” (vs. 37). This had been the sort of thing that moved Nehemiah to leave the palace in Susa to help his people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see 1:3). They hoped God would be favorably disposed toward them, too.

The Old Testament gives several examples of prayers that reason with God on the basis of His Word and previous deeds. No one has any right to tell God what to do, but He looks favorably on those of His children who root their prayers in the Scriptures and in His promises to them. Let the prayer of the Jewish remnant serve as a model for your prayers of confession and petition.

8

The Jews Dedicate the Walls

Nehemiah 9:38—10:27 in Brief

Following their morning of Scripture reading and confession, the Jews renewed their commitment to abide by the covenant God had first made with Israel at Mount Sinai. They wrote out a binding pledge to observe the law to represent the seriousness of their commitment. By affixing their seals to this document, they pledged their hearts and minds to following the revealed will of God in all of their daily activities.

Many people took part in this signing ceremony. The family leaders, Levites, and priests signed this pledge as representatives of the remnant community. Nehemiah and Zedekiah represented the civil government. Twenty-one priests affixed their traditional family names to the written pledge to commit themselves and their families to the promises in this document. Seventeen Levites represented their clans. Forty-four noblemen signed for all the families and communities throughout the territory of Judah and Benjamin.

Nehemiah 9:38—12:47

a The Jews Promise to Keep the Law (10:28-33)

"All these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord."

—Nehemiah 10:29

There are times in the lives of individuals and groups when they face the truth about their spiritual neediness and God's gracious provision for their souls. Intensive exposure to the Word of God had led the Jews to one of those times. As Christians we can also be thankful for the spiritual crises God uses to turn our hearts toward Him.

The preamble to the pledge to keep the law embraced all of the common people and all of the various categories of worship leaders—from greatest to least—as willing participants in this obligation. The document remembered the crisis of

intermarriage that Ezra had faced a full dozen years earlier, in 457 B.C. (see Ezra 9—10). They vowed to separate themselves from pagan entanglement. This pledge was comprehensive. It took in men, women, and children old enough to comprehend the covenant (Neh. 10:28).

All the people and all the leaders obligated themselves with a sacred oath to the Lord's covenant and subjected themselves to the stipulated curse for disobeying it (vs. 29; see Deut. 28:15-68). They took their place with the generation that camped at the foot of Sinai when Moses went up the mountain to receive the law from the hand of God Himself. They obligated themselves to keep every aspect of moral code, religious practices, and social regulations in the covenant.

The covenant pledge signed by the leaders of the Jews highlighted several features of the Mosaic law that were of special concern in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. They specifically vowed not to intermarry with the pagan peoples around them (Neh. 10:30). The promise was worded in terms of giving their daughters to idolatrous husbands or receiving foreign wives for their sons. Marriages were arranged in biblical times, often with economic advantage for the family in view. The Jews promised to value God's law above any bride-price or dowry.

The Israelites had always understood that engaging in commerce on the Sabbath violated God's command to keep it holy (see Exod. 20:8-11; Amos 8:5). Perhaps they

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF THE SABBATH

After the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews became zealous keepers of the Law. Many surrounding nations found Jewish customs incomprehensible. About the end of the first century, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote these words:

"Moses, wishing to secure for the future his authority over the nation, gave them a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practiced by other men.

... We are told that the rest of the seventh day was adopted, because this day brought with it a termination of their toils; after a while the charm of indolence beguiled them into giving up the seventh year also to inaction.

"This worship, however introduced, is upheld by its antiquity; all their other customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness."

had concluded that they could get around God's Word by letting foreign merchants do the work of selling, while they only bought. As part of their covenant renewal, the Jews promised not to buy from foreign merchants on the Sabbath or other holy days (Neh. 10:31).

They also promised to obey the laws about canceling debts and leaving the land fallow every seventh year (see Lev. 25:4; Deut. 15:1-11). The Jews of Ezra and Nehemiah's day must have made great sacrifices to obey the Lord. They chose to care for the land and poor neighbors rather than squeezing every crop from the soil and every penny from debtors.

The Jews promised to give a third of a shekel each year for the support of regular temple services. The 12 loaves of the bread of the Presence, which were replaced every week, required a lot of flour. They were large loaves (see Lev. 24:5-8). The daily grain offerings and burnt offerings, the monthly New Moon festivities, the annual feasts and day of Atonement, and occasional expenses all would be covered by the poll tax (Neh. 10:32-33).

Only men of military age (20 years old and older) paid the annual temple tax (see Exod. 30:12-14; II Chron. 24:4-5). The Law specified a half shekel, not a third, for the tax. Some assume the Jews of Ezra and Nehemiah's time were too poor to pay the full tax. Others think the shekel in use in Persia was larger than the shekel of Moses' day.

Worship and confession should

always result in practical holiness. Ezra and Nehemiah did not let the zeal of the Jews created by the Feast of Booths and the time of national confession die away. They channeled it into concrete steps of obedience that would benefit the faithful for the rest of their lives.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has my current spiritual state shown itself in practical ways this week?*



The Jews Promise to Support the Temple (10:34-39)

"We will not neglect the house of our God." —Nehemiah 10:39b

Some believers find it easier to pursue personal holiness than to support corporate worship. The Jews of Ezra and Nehemiah's day struggled to maintain their individual commitments to the Lord, and yet they regularly failed to take care of the temple, the Levites, and the priests.

The pledge to keep the law contained provisions for Jewish clans to take turns supplying firewood for the temple (vs. 34). The priests and Levites were to establish the firewood schedule by casting lots to determine the order of the families. The law itself did not direct Israel to provide firewood for the brazen altar of the temple. The leaders of

A WOODEN OFFERING

The exiles pledged, in part, to bring wood to the temple for the burnt offerings (Neh. 10:34). The Jewish Mishnah, a collection of oral teachings, mentions nine occasions on which families brought supplies of wood to the temple. It states that all the wood was acceptable except olive wood and grapevine.

Josephus wrote that a Festival of Wood Offering eventually developed as an annual event celebrated on the 14th of Ab, the fifth month (July–August). The Temple Scroll from Qumran indicates the wood gathering lasted for six days following an olive oil festival.

the day made this provision, probably reflecting a loss of tree cover around Jerusalem.

The Jewish community reaffirmed their covenant obligation to take the firstfruits of their field crops and orchard fruit to the temple as a testimony that everything they had was a gift from God (vs. 35; see Deut. 26:1-11). This offering would be stored and used to feed the priests and Levites while they served at the temple (see Num. 18:8, 13; Ezek. 44:30).

The signatories to the pledge and those they represented also promised to present every firstborn male and animal to the Lord at the temple (Neh. 10:36). Every firstborn male belonged to the Lord from the

time of the Passover in Egypt when He asserted His claim of them (see Exod. 13:1-16). Firstborn clean animals were given to the Lord in sacrifice; unclean ones were sold by the priests or redeemed by the owner at 20 percent over market value (see Lev. 27:26, 27). Firstborn sons were redeemed with five silver shekels (see Lev. 27:6; Num. 3:47).

The Jews affirmed again that they would bring the firstfruits of all their crops to the Lord's temple. Additionally they promised to tithe all their agricultural produce for the ongoing support of the Levites (Neh. 10:37). The firstfruits made a symbolic statement about the Lord as the giver of all. The tithes were the substantial

means of support for the servants of the temple. The Levites gathered the tithes because they were decentralized in the Levitical cities throughout Judah and Benjamin.

A priest was to accompany each group of Levites who collected the tithes to assure the process was conducted properly (vs. 38). Then the Levites were to deliver to the temple a tithe of all the tithes they collected throughout the land. This tenth of the Levites' tithe went to support the priests (see Num. 18:25-29).

In the days of Moses, the Levites comprised an entire tribe of Israel, while the Aaronic priests were one family within that tribe. A 90–10 split between Levites and priests fits the facts nicely. In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, more priests had returned from exile than Levites (see Ezra 2:36-58). We can see that, in this case, Ezra and Nehemiah did not change God's Word to accommodate their situation.

Ask Yourself . . . Which of God's commands is the most difficult for me to follow?

Nehemiah 11:1—12:26 in Brief

After the Law had been reaffirmed, the leaders of the Jewish people tackled the practical problem of increasing the population of Jerusalem. They approached the problem with three strategies: many leaders settled there as an example

to the nation; 10 percent of the general population was assigned by lottery to move there; and others volunteered to the acclaim of their neighbors. The tribe of Benjamin contributed twice as many new residents to Jerusalem as Judah. The priests continued to greatly outnumber the Levites in total.

The priests and Levites continued to keep meticulous family records based on the documents created when Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the first exiles from Babylon. Their family records in Nehemiah 11 extend to the days of Darius II, the emperor after Artaxerxes.

C Two Choirs March atop the Walls (12:27-39)

I [Nehemiah] had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. . . . The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. —Nehemiah 12:31, 38a

When Nehemiah inquired about the condition of his homeland, he asked about both the people and the place (see 1:2). He did not celebrate the physical rebuilding of the walls until the people who would live within them had been spiritually rebuilt as well. Bricks and mortar

are never as important as hearts and lives. In our churches, we need to keep in mind, as Nehemiah did, that every facility we build should advance the work of God in human hearts and lives.

Nehemiah's first-person account of the restoration of Jerusalem had broken off after Nehemiah 7:5. It picks up again at 12:27 and continues through the end of the book. When he was ready for an official celebration by the renewed people to dedicate the renewed walls, Nehemiah assembled the Levites from all the towns of Benjamin and Judah where they lived (vss. 27-29). These men had the instrumental and vocal musical skills necessary for a mass celebration.



An illustration of an eighth century B.C. Assyrian wall relief found at Carchemish portrays a group of musicians leading a procession, much as the priestly and levitical musicians led the two choirs of thanksgiving dedicating the walls of Jerusalem.

Before they dedicated the recently completed walls, the priests and Levites conducted purification ceremonies. These ceremonies were not concerned with physical cleanliness but with spiritual preparation to be in God's presence. The unspecified rituals may have involved washings by the priests and Levites and sacrifices for the people, the gates, and the walls (vs. 30; see Exod. 40:30-32; Lev. 14:49-53).

Nehemiah directed all of the community leaders of Judah to ascend the wall for the dedication (Neh. 12:31). He divided the priests and Levitical musicians into two large choirs. The Hebrew text says these choirs represented "two thanksgivings." They embodied what they did. The choirs got in formation atop the wall and marched around the city: the first choir moved in a counterclockwise direction, and the other clockwise. The starting point was the Dung Gate. This gate was the city exit to the garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom on the southern tip of the city.

Ezra probably led the first procession, followed by singers and instrumentalists (vss. 35, 36). The political leaders brought up the rear (vss. 32-34). Old Testament compass points are determined by facing east. "To the right" (vs. 31), therefore, means "to the south." This choir rounded the southern tip of Jerusalem and processed north atop the eastern wall alongside the ancient City of David and his royal residence (vs. 37).

The second choir matched the

first in makeup. Nehemiah joined the other civic leaders at the rear. He did not lead this sacred procession because he was not a priest. The people also divided themselves in two masses and followed one or the other choir of thanksgiving around the wall. The second choir marched north atop the western wall, then east atop the northern wall (vss. 38, 39). At the Gate of the Guard, in the vicinity of the temple at the northeast corner of Jerusalem, the two choirs of thanksgiving met one another face-to-face and halted.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do I usually celebrate a personal spiritual victory?*

d The Jews Rejoice in Dedication (12:40-47)

On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

—Nehemiah 12:43

When the Jews dedicated the walls of Jerusalem, purity preceded praise, and praise resulted in faithful service. Today, in our lives, dedication to God should not be isolated from personal purity or joyous service. We praise God best when our lives back up what our lips declare.



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Kathleen Kenyon excavated this portion of ancient Jerusalem's eastern wall in the 1960s. The stone work is about nine feet thick and roughly finished, as though constructed hastily. Most scholars conclude it is part of Nehemiah's walls.

Psalm 48:12-14 reads, "Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end." After encompassing Jerusalem with a parade that claimed it as God's gift to His people, the two choirs descended from the walls and massed "in the house of God" (Neh. 12:40). This means in the courtyards of the temple—not in the actual holy place, where no one went but the ministering priests and Levites in the course of their daily routines.

Nehemiah and half the civil leaders joined the choirs and fifteen priests (seven of whom blew trumpets) for a choral festival under the direction of Jezrahiah (vss. 41, 42). His name meant "The Lord Shines Forth," and he fulfilled his name's significance by directing the gathered multitude in glad adoration of the Lord.

The leaders, priests, Levites, and ordinary citizens worshiped the Lord with numerous sacrifices on the brazen altar before the temple entrance on its east side (vs. 43). Men, women, and children launched into an extended time of praising God for the joy He had given them and was giving them through His gifts of the city walls and the renewed covenant.

Ninety years before (536 B.C.), the exiles who returned under Zerubbabel and Jeshua had made a noise of celebration that could be heard a long way outside the city. They were rejoicing that the foundation of the temple had been laid. At that time, sorrow mixed with joy as some old-timers remembered better days (see Ezra 3:10-13). No sorrow dampened the spirits of the revelers in 445 B.C., however, as the walls were dedicated. They had no doubt that God was in their midst and ready to affirm them as His holy people in His holy city.

Ask Yourself . . . *What kinds of events bring me deep and abiding joy?*

Out of the joyous dedication of the walls came a repeated pledge to serve the Lord faithfully and gladly. Stewards were appointed to keep track of the firstfruits and tithes brought to the temple storerooms (Neh. 12:44). At this time, the Jews were pleased with the spiritual labor of the priests and Levites in assisting Ezra in bringing about revival. The people were glad to support them from their fields, orchards, and vineyards. For their part, the priests and Levites were prepared to follow the worship duties spelled out centuries before by kings David and Solomon (vss. 45, 46; see I Chron. 23-26).

Nehemiah reported that the people of Judah regularly contributed to the support of the priests, Levites, and temple worship all during his governorship and that of his predecessor Zerubbabel (Neh. 12:47). The Levites remembered to give a tithe to the priests from the tithes they received from the people. Some of the Jews after the exile did not support their spiritual leaders. Nehemiah and the contemporary prophet Malachi dealt forcefully with those who shirked their responsibilities to worship (see Neh. 13:10, 11; Mal. 1:7, 8; 3:8, 9). After the flush of enthusiasm that accompanies an exhilarating worship experience, it often takes determination and reliance on the Lord's power to follow through on our spiritual commitments day after day.

2

Nehemiah Cements His Reforms

Nehemiah 13

a Foreigners Are Excluded Again (13:1-14)

The Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God. . . . When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

—Nehemiah 13:1, 3

Nehemiah's book ends on a bittersweet note. This extraordinary, forceful man returned for a second term as governor of Judah after an unknown period of time back in Persia. His walls still stood firm, but his spiritual reforms were in disarray. He immediately jumped back into the fray and whipped things into shape.

Perhaps Nehemiah's prayers of frustration are a fitting way for this period of Old Testament history to end. The best human efforts to keep God's commandments usually fail—then as now. The final chapter of Nehemiah virtually calls out to God

to send the promised Messiah and make things new.

At some point after the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, the "Book of Moses" was being read at a public assembly (vs. 1). Moses had said, "At the end of every seven years, in the year for canceling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing" (Deut. 31:10b, 11). Nehemiah's first reforms began when the law was read during the Festival of Tabernacles (see Neh. 7:73b—8:18). It was fitting that the second set of reforms should begin in the same way.

When the early verses of Deuteronomy 23 were read, the people discovered that God's law banned certain foreigners from the assembly of God's people because of how their ancestors had treated Israel when the nation approached Canaan to conquer it. Once again the public reading of God's law had a powerful practical impact on its hearers. The Jews began expelling unconverted aliens from their communities (Neh. 13:2, 3).

This policy brought a serious matter to public attention. Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's strongest opponents when the walls were being built, had used his connections with the high priest Eliashib to convert a storage area on the temple grounds into his Jerusalem living quarters. Long before this, Tobiah had developed his network of supporters in Judah (see 6:17-19). The support of the high priest surely marked the pinnacle of his popularity. The name Tobiah meant "The Lord is good." He may even have been part Jewish, but he apparently had no concern for the Lord or His work. Tobiah gladly put his interests ahead of the worship of God and the support of the priests and Levites (13:4, 5).

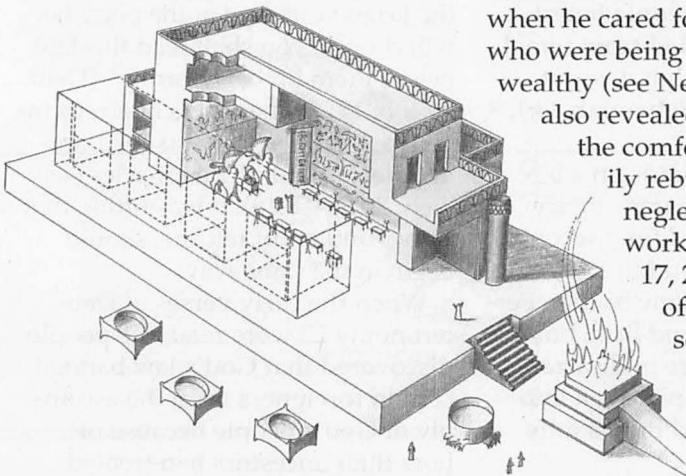
Evidently the expulsion of foreigners from the midst of Judah and Jerusalem started at the bottom of the social ladder and reached up to the point where powerful Jewish friends offered protection. Tobiah probably felt he had little to worry about in his temple apartment.

When the Holy Spirit exposes sin in our lives, it's always easiest to deal with the minor sins that influence us least. The sins that are toughest to root out are the ones that have made themselves at home in our hearts.

Ask Yourself . . . *Have I grown accustomed to any particular sin in my life?*

The name Nehemiah meant "The Lord comforts." He had shown that he could comfort the afflicted when he cared for the poor of Judah who were being oppressed by the wealthy (see Neh. 5). Nehemiah also revealed he could afflict the comfortable. He readily rebuked those who neglected God's will and work (13:11; see also vss. 17, 25). The stark words of Nehemiah lead some Christians to examine whether they are too comfortable with their present level of commitment to the Lord.

Nehemiah revealed that he was absent when the law prompted the people to expel the foreigners. During that time, however, Tobiah was allowed to move into the temple



This diagram of Zerubbabel's temple reveals the number of storage chambers around the sanctuary. Tobiah's apartment may have been in a courtyard storage room rather than in the actual temple building.

(vs. 6). Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem in the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign (see 1:1; 2:1) and returned in the 32nd year. Twelve years was a long time to divert from his duties in Persia to the needs of Jerusalem. Even so, he felt that he needed to do more. After an unspecified period of time, Nehemiah petitioned Artaxerxes to send him back to Judah.

One of the first things Nehemiah learned when he got back to Jerusalem was that the high priest was shielding Tobiah's residence in the temple from public opinion. Armed with imperial authority and an aggressive personality, the governor went to the temple and personally threw Tobiah's furnishings and personal effects out on the pavement (13:7, 8).

Having done his part, Nehemiah ordered others to ceremonially cleanse the affected temple chambers and restock them with temple gear and worship materials (vs. 9). Soon he had heard that temple worship was upset by much more than a set of misused rooms. Levites and singers had left Jerusalem to make a living on farms throughout Judah because not enough people were supplying firstfruits and tithes to support them (vs. 10). Temple



Once grain crops were harvested, threshed, winnowed, and sifted, a tithe of the grain was taken to the temple to support worship and the priests and Levites who led worship (Neh. 13:12). Before wheat was taken to the threshing floor, it was placed in bundles.

rituals were impoverished by the absence of these worship leaders.

Nehemiah gathered the elders of Judah and Benjamin for a tongue lashing (vs. 11). He held them responsible for the faithlessness of Jewish worshipers and the defection of the Levites. Then Nehemiah gathered the Levites, musicians, and other temple servants from around the countryside and put them back to work at their designated tasks.

Almost at once, ordinary people began responding to the initiatives

of Nehemiah and their local officials. Tithes of various agricultural products flowed in again (vs. 12). Nehemiah devised an interesting approach to administering the materials provided for the temple and its personnel. He appointed a priest, a scribe, and a Levite—people with three different perspectives on temple activities—to share oversight of the storage system (vs. 13a). Then he made another man their assistant, which brought a lay point of view to the project.

In the same way, he had appointed keepers of the gates years earlier, Nehemiah chose overseers of the temple storerooms based on integrity and fidelity (vs. 13b; see 7:2). He relied on them to care for the material needs of all the temple staff so the worship of God could proceed without distraction.

Ask Yourself . . . *What can I do to free up the leaders in my church to become more effective in their ministry?*

Earlier, Nehemiah had asked God to remember his care for the poor and his opponents' wickedness (see 5:19; 6:14). In his prayer in 13:14, Nehemiah feared all the advances he had made might be lost. He pleaded with God to preserve the new reforms enacted for the temple and its services.

It's tempting to give up when it seems that our service for the Lord may be of no avail. Nehemiah refused to give up no matter how frustrating his circumstances became. He had confidence in God. He believed that praying was a nec-

essary part of every spiritual venture he undertook. Nehemiah's spiritual tenacity is a good example to follow when the fruit of our labors seems to be rotting on the vine.



The Sabbath Is Kept Again (13:15-22)

I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

—Nehemiah 13:22a

Sometimes it's difficult to synchronize our spiritual ideals and our daily actions. We affirm that Jesus is Lord, but we may pay an inappropriate amount of attention to money, houses, cars, and clothes. The Jews in Nehemiah's times also had trouble making God the Lord of their businesses and wallets.

Years before, Nehemiah had faced foreign merchants coming to Jerusalem to sell goods on the Sabbath (see 10:31). The Jews had decided at that time to accept the practice. After all, they weren't the ones running the shops. In Nehemiah's absence, winking at Sabbath violation by foreigners had led to Jewish physical labor as well as Jewish commercial activity on the Sabbath (13:15).

Nehemiah did not hesitate to order the Jewish laborers and merchants to stop doing business on the Sabbath. He turned his attention to

the Phoenician merchants bringing salted and dried fish and all sorts of other kinds of merchandise from Tyre, the commercial capital of the entire region. Nehemiah dealt with the irreligious Phoenicians by straightening out the Jews who were buying from them. He dealt with the Jews by giving the nobles of Judah a stern history lesson (vss. 16-18).

Nehemiah wanted the people of Judah and Jerusalem to avoid any of the unfaithful practices that had led

to the exile. He used terms such as "calamity" and "wrath" to remind them of the deadly nature of persistent rebellion against the will of God.

On the next Sabbath, Nehemiah ordered the gates closed and barred as the shadows of late afternoon darkened the recesses of the doorways (vs. 19). The Sabbath officially began at sundown, but the governor shut the gates early and posted his personal guards to emphasize that

PORTRAIT OF A GODLY LEADER

***Nehemiah provides one of the most vivid patterns
of leadership in the Scriptures.***

1. Nehemiah was a man of responsibility (Neh. 1:11c).
2. Nehemiah was a man of vision (Neh. 2:5).
3. Nehemiah was a man of prayer (Neh. 2:4; 4:4, 5; 13:14, 22b, 29, 31b).
4. Nehemiah was a man of action and cooperation (Neh. 2:17, 18).
5. Nehemiah was a man of compassion (Neh. 5:6-8).
6. Nehemiah was a man who triumphed over opposition (Neh. 6:15, 16).

(Adapted from "Ezra—Nehemiah" by Edwin M. Yamauchi, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, published by Zondervan.)

business hours were done until the following evening.

For the first couple of weeks, merchants showed up outside the locked gates of Jerusalem as usual. Either they had not heard or did not believe the Jews were strictly observing the Sabbath. Nehemiah finally sent them away with a threat to take action if they showed up again. Finally Nehemiah entrusted the guard duty at the gates of Jerusalem to the Levites (vss. 20-22a). This was a sacred duty for which they ceremonially purified themselves.

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I tactfully communicate my commitment to obey God to those who would like me to fudge a little?*

Once more Nehemiah asked God to remember him (vs. 22b). "To remember," in this case, does not mean to simply call to mind. Nehemiah was not afraid that God would forget about him. Rather, "to remember" means to intervene, in this case to show grace and loving mercy to Nehemiah by preserving the work he had done for God's people.

We may feel overlooked by God as He carries out His grand designs for the cosmos. Nehemiah's request to have his work preserved, however, is an example of the kind of petition we might consider offering when our hard work doesn't seem to be making a difference.

C **Intermarriage Is Stopped Again (13:23-31)**

"I [Nehemiah] rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: 'You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.'"

—Nehemiah 13:25

When Nehemiah saw that things were wrong in Judah, he started with a problem in the heart of everything—the integrity of the temple. Then he attacked the problem of ignoring the Sabbath. Finally he went after an issue that extended through the whole nation, namely, intermarriage.

Nehemiah started in the center and worked out. Perhaps we can take a similar approach when we need the discernment to deal with moral compromise in our lives. We should first go to the heart of things and work outward.

More than 25 years earlier, Ezra had imposed the drastic measure of sending away foreign wives (see Ezra 9—10). When Nehemiah returned from Persia for his second term as governor, the practice had surfaced again (Neh. 13:23). In the streets of Jerusalem and other towns or villages, the governor heard children who spoke the languages

of their mothers from the Mediterranean coast or the lands east of the Jordan River (vs. 24).

Nehemiah did not approach this problem through the leaders of the people, as he had the previous two problems. He went directly to the fathers who had arranged these marriages with foreigners, and he did not treat them gently (vs. 25). He scolded them. He invoked the curses that accompanied the covenant they had made with God (see 10:29). He physically struck some of the offenders. He pulled the hair of their beards.

Finally Nehemiah compelled those who had given their children in marriage to foreigners to swear an oath in God's name that they would not repeat the practice with their younger sons and daughters. He preached a short sermon about the dire consequences of King Solomon's prolific intermarriage with foreign women (13:26). He reminded them how that national hero—Israel's greatest king, who was loved by God—had fallen into grievous sin and led the nation after him. He asked them rhetorically if they wanted to do the same thing in their generation through their sons and daughters (vs. 27).

The worst incident of intermarriage with a foreigner involved a member of the high priestly family and a daughter of Sanballat—one of Nehemiah's archenemies during the construction of the walls of Jerusalem (vs. 28). It's unclear from the Hebrew text at this point whether Eliashib was still the high priest

or if Joiada had already succeeded his father. It made no difference to Nehemiah. He drove the offending son or grandson of the high priest out of Jerusalem and Judah. He would not allow that kind of spiritual pollution so close to the high priesthood.

As mentioned earlier, Nehemiah had prayed that God would take special note of the wickedness of those who opposed the Lord's will to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see 6:14). Now he prayed that God would deal in the same way with those who defiled the priesthood (13:29). This kind of corruption immediately touched the entire covenant God made with His people and the Levitical community, who stood between the Lord and His people as servants.

Consequently, Nehemiah once again reviewed the organization and practices of the priests and Levites to be sure nothing inappropriate compromised their holiness to the Lord (vs. 30). He made sure all the duties connected with the temple and the sacrificial system were properly assigned and carried out. He once again organized the rotating system of responsibility for the temple wood supply (vs. 31a). Finally, he motivated the general populace to be faithful in bringing their firstfruits to supply the needs of the temple and its servants.

Nehemiah's final words capture the energy that restored the walls of Jerusalem and the spiritual integrity of the postexilic Jewish community. "Remember me with favor, my

God," Nehemiah prayed (vs. 31b). "With favor" virtually reads "for good." Nehemiah asked the Lord for His refreshing blessing on his life as a reward for his faithfulness.

If our hearts are as devoted to the purposes of God for His people, we will labor and pray as Nehemiah

did. Who knows what remarkable things the Lord might do through our lives because we care passionately to participate in His will!

Ask Yourself . . . *How can I become more like Nehemiah in my passion for serving God?*

10

Esther Becomes Queen of Persia

Esther 1—2

a The King Gives a Great Banquet (1:1-9)

In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. —Esther 1:3

The story of Esther captures the imagination of readers of every age. In this tale, we read how God delivered an entire nation through the heroism of a beautiful princess. But then we're surprised to hear that the Book of Esther contains no reference to God, prayer, the Law, sacrifice, the temple, anything overtly spiritual. Though hidden, God's activity is there, playing a vital role in stopping a serious threat of the eradication of an entire race.

Esther follows Ezra and Nehemiah in the order of biblical books, but her lifetime fell between the events of Ezra 6 (516 B.C.) and Ezra 7 (458 B.C.). The early Persian emperors were Cyrus, Cambyeses, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. Cyrus sent

the first Jewish exiles home from Babylon to Jerusalem. Esther lived during the reign of Xerxes (486–465 B.C.).

Many English translations call this emperor Ahasuerus, after the Hebrew attempt to pronounce his Persian name. The Greeks called him Xerxes [ZURK-seez]. This is the common name used in world histories and many Bible translations.

Darius had organized the Persian Empire into 20 satrapies, or governing regions. The satrapies contained Xerxes's 127 provinces stretching from the Indus River (where gold was panned) in northwest India to the land of Cush along the upper Nile River (modern Sudan) (Esth. 1:1). The first two years of Xerxes' reign were marked by trouble in Egypt and Babylon. By his third year (483 B.C.), Xerxes had settled into the winter palace in Susa (vss. 2, 3). It seemed like a favorable time to celebrate the success of his empire with a great banquet.

The Persian Empire maintained capitals in Babylon, Ecbatana, Persepolis, and Susa. Susa was the ancient capital of Elam. Daniel had had a prophetic dream in Susa (see

Dan. 8:2); Nehemiah dreamed of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls while in Susa (see Neh. 1:1).

Xerxes favored Susa and built there extensively, completing what his father, Darius, had begun. All of the events of Esther occur in Susa, suggesting Xerxes lived there year-round. The citadel of Susa was a fortress-palace complex on a rocky hill some 120 feet higher than the rest of the city.

When Xerxes assembled the empire's military leaders, hereditary nobility, and provincial authorities for extended festivities, those events were probably outdoors because of the climate. Xerxes's seven-day feast was the climax of 180 days in which the emperor displayed his wealth and the imperial treasures to all of his important guests (Esth. 1:3-5). For half a year the citadel of Susa served as a museum featuring

the extravagance of the wealthiest monarchy of the world. During this time, Xerxes and his military leaders probably planned their ill-fated invasion of Greece.

The banquet proper was attended by everyone high and low connected with the imperial court in the citadel

A WINTER RETREAT

In the summer, Susa's weather was unbearably hot, but its winters were relatively mild. The city's climate made Susa the winter capital of the Persian Empire. Cyrus made Susa one of the capitals of Persia. Darius I built his palace here. This palace, restored by Artaxerxes I, played a major role in the events of Esther's life.

The territory of Susa is now in modern-day Iran about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf and due east of Babylon. Archaeologists discovered that this city was occupied since at least 4000 B.C.

Detail from the archers' frieze in Darius's palace in Susa.



of Susa. Persian palaces were set in the middle of walled parks that were the products of skilled gardeners. The Greeks called such a park a *paradeisos*, from which the English word *paradise* derives.

With an eyewitness's touch, the writer of Esther noted the garden of the palace was decorated with blue

and white linen draperies tied with cords of white and purple to silver rings in marble pillars. The pavement was a multicolored mosaic of costly stones. The Hebrew words for the various paving stones are obscure and uncertain. Guests could rest on gold and silver benches scattered around the grounds (vs. 6).

Drinking wine seems to have been a highlight of Xerxes's seven-day party. Each guest was presented with his own unique drinking horn of gold, and wine flowed freely as a sign of the emperor's generosity. Since guests were from all over the empire, Xerxes proclaimed that each guest could drink or abstain according to the custom of his culture (vss. 7, 8).

As if by afterthought, the author of Esther mentioned at this point that Queen Vashti [VASH-tee] was hosting a parallel banquet for women inside the palace (vs. 9). Persian women were typically not segregated from men in social settings. The size of Xerxes's gathering or the revelry stemming from the extended drinking may have required a separate gathering for the women.

Esther's adventure is set against the backdrop of world power, unparalleled wealth, and conspicuous debauchery. To enter such an arena—then or now—requires tremendous faith in God, whether that faith is expressed openly or held quietly in the heart.

Ask Yourself . . . How do I usually express my faith during times of crisis?



Metropolitan Museum, New York.

During Xerxes' festival his guests probably drank from Persian horn-shaped vessels like this one (Esth. 1:7). This silver drinking horn has a mythical lion as its base. It stands 8 inches high and dates to the fifth century B.C., the time of Esther. Horn-shaped vessels ending in an animal's head have a long history in the Middle East as well as in Greece and Italy.

b

Queen Vashti Is Deposed (1:10-22)

"If it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she."

—Esther 1:19

The action of the Book of Esther begins with a domestic crisis that involves a husband's overreaction. Often the small events of life serve as the triggers for the really big ones. It's important to handle those little moments with wisdom from God so that they don't snowball out of control.

On the seventh and final day of his party for all the important people of the empire, Xerxes had a brainstorm under the influence of a week of heavy drinking (vs. 10). He sent his seven personal attendants to get the queen and parade her around in her crown to show his guests how beautiful she was (vss. 10, 11).

Vashti refused to play trophy queen for Xerxes (vs. 12). Early Jewish traditions speculate that she was required to appear without clothes, except for her crown, as a show for the elite of the empire. Xerxes's reputation as the all-powerful ruler of the world was at stake. He looked foolish and his rage must have been colossal.

When he calmed down, Xerxes treated his problem with Vashti as an affair of state rather than a marital issue. She had insulted him publicly before representatives of every part of the empire. He looked for legal advice from the seven advisers who served as Persia's supreme court (vss. 13, 14; compare Ezra 7:14). These nobles were noted for discernment in the affairs of the day and had special access to the emperor.

Xerxes's inquiry to his advisers is surprising. He wanted to know what legal penalties Vashti could face for refusing to answer his summons (Esth. 1:15). The gist of the response of the advisers is that there was no law against the queen's disobedience, so Xerxes should create one to cover the situation. Memucan spoke for his six colleagues.

The seven advisers feared the impact of Vashti's defiance of Xerxes. She had embarrassed Xerxes before all the officials at the feast. They imagined word spreading from province to province about what Vashti had done, with the result that wives would rebel in every home from India to Cush. They were sure the wives of the nobility were already planning to defy their husbands at the first chance (vss. 16, 17).

To head off rampant "disrespect and discord" (vs. 18), the seven noble advisers suggested that Xerxes make an irreversible decree permanently barring Vashti from his presence and announcing that he would replace her as queen. This, they felt,

would head off the imminent disintegration of husbands' authority in the vast realm of Persia (vss. 19, 20).

Xerxes and his advisers went to extraordinary lengths to see that this decree got into the homes of common people. They could have sent Aramaic documents to every province, and they would have been understood by all educated people. They took the pains to send documents to each locality in the native language and script (vss. 21, 22). The Persian system of postal relays along imperial highways throughout the realm was unparalleled in ancient times for spreading communications to and from the emperor.

The imperial message that set in motion all the translators, scribes, horsemen, horses, and heralds from 127 provinces was this: "Every man should be ruler over his own household" (vs. 22). You can't help but wonder how things would have turned out if Xerxes had communicated with Vashti as well or as often as he did with the empire.

God sovereignly used the folly of Xerxes to advance His purposes and preserve His chosen people from destruction. It is comforting to know that the Lord can weave even the blunders of foolish people into His good and perfect will.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God used my blunders for His glory?*



Xerxes Searches for a New Queen (2:1-11)

"Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti."

—Esther 2:3, 4a

Xerxes indulged his imperial pride in deposing his first queen. He indulged his carnal pride in looking for a replacement. Whenever we try to recover from one sinfully motivated mistake without repenting and correcting it, we often find ourselves faced with other sinfully motivated options.

The events of Esther 1 occurred in 483 B.C., the third year of Xerxes's reign (see 1:3). Xerxes chose his new queen late in 479 B.C., his seventh year (see 2:16). In between, Xerxes attacked Greece and suffered the awful naval defeat at Salamis (480 B.C.) and the rout of his army at Plataea (479 B.C.). The search for a queen probably was set in motion shortly after Vashti was deposed and then interrupted for nearly three years during the Greek campaign.

Xerxes did nothing about replacing Vashti until his monumental

This solid gold bracelet from the fifth century B.C. shows the quality of jewelry that Esther and the other women in the Persian harem wore.



rage subsided (vs. 1). When he asked his advisers for their opinion about how to carry out his decree banning Vashti and promising a new queen, they advised him to assemble an empire-wide candidate pool of beautiful young virgins (vss. 2, 3). Xerxes created a new level of imperial bureaucracy whose sole job was to locate the loveliest young women in the 127 provinces and transport them to the harem in Susa.

The eunuch in charge of the entire harem would put these young women through a 12-month beauty regimen, after which time Xerxes would choose a permanent replacement for Vashti to be his queen (vss. 3, 4). Xerxes approved the plan and immersed himself in plans for war while young women were taken from their families all around the empire and dispatched to Susa.

Right in Susa was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai [MORR-dih-kai] (vs. 5). He may have descended from the prominent historical Benjamites named Shimei [SHIM-eh-eye] (see II Sam. 16:5-14) and Kish (see I Sam. 9:1). If Kish was Mordecai's great-grandfather, he was the one deported by the Babylo-

nians along with King Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. (Esth. 2:6; see II Kings 24:15). If Shimei and Kish were distant ancestors, then Mordecai's family had been carried into exile about 115 years earlier.

Mordecai's name was derived from "Marduk," the chief Babylonian god. He probably had a native Hebrew name as well. He certainly had a cousin (Esth. 2:7) much younger than he with a Hebrew name, Hadassah ("myrtle"), and a Persian name, Esther ("star" or "Ishtar"). Mordecai had adopted Hadassah as his daughter after both her parents died. She was beautiful in every way, which made her eligible for this Persian lottery.

As the first young women arrived in Susa from east and west, north and south, Hadassah—called Esther

from this point on in the story's Gentile setting—was taken by the beauty police and put in the care of Hegai the harem master. Though the story doesn't say, we can speculate that it was by God's grace that Esther became Hegai's instant favorite among all these exotic beauties (vss. 8, 9). The Hebrew in verse 9 can be rendered, "She lifted up grace before his face." Esther's charms were godly qualities. Soon Hegai gave her special attention, special food, and extra attendants to care for her.

At Mordecai's insistence, Esther kept quiet her connection to him and her Jewish ancestry. Perhaps the anti-Semitism that Haman would later bring into the open was afoot privately. At this point, Mordecai had no thought that his adopted daughter would become queen. He just wanted to stay in touch with her and prayed she would make it through this selection process unharmed (vss. 10, 11).

Some fault Esther for concealing her Jewishness and not rejecting unclean food as Daniel did (see Dan. 1:8). We must keep in mind, however, that she was not being trained for government as Daniel was. Her spiritual courage shows, not in what she refused to eat, but in her refusal to give way to despair. We would do well to show the same confidence in God's sovereignty during moments of crisis.

Ask Yourself . . . *What promises from God's Word give me courage?*

d Esther Is Chosen Queen (2:12-18)

The king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

—Esther 2:17

The beauty treatment Esther and the others endured was divided into two parts. The first six months consisted of treatment with oil of myrrh to lighten the skin and remove spots and blemishes. The second six months was devoted to perfumes and cosmetics (vs. 12). Some cosmetics smoldered in burners and served fumigation purposes. Special attention was given to hands and feet as well as to face and hair.

Once a candidate for queen went to Xerxes for a night, she went to the second harem house, reserved for his concubines (vss. 13, 14). Those women who had known intimate relations with the emperor could never leave or marry another man. Only other women or eunuchs, under the command of Shaashgaz, entered their presence. They never saw Xerxes again unless he asked for one of them by name—a highly unlikely prospect.

In one sense, the women of the harem had no identities. The author rescued Esther from such anonymity by reminding us that Mordecai had

cared for her enough to adopt her and that she had had a father—with a name—who had loved her (vs. 15).

When Esther's turn came to go to Xerxes, she didn't try to impress him. She let the chief eunuch guide her in choosing her clothing, jewelry, and accessories. Once again "Esther was lifting up grace in the eyes of all who saw her," including the emperor. Xerxes found in Esther qualities he had sensed in no other young woman (vs. 17). He personally set the queen's crown on her head and declared her queen in Vashti's place.

Xerxes chose Esther to be his queen in the 10th month of his seventh year (vs. 16). "Tebeth" meant "mud" because December—January was a cold, wet time of year. Esther's wedding banquet fell in a month with an unromantic name (vs. 18). Probably no one complained about a midwinter holiday. Many translators think the term rendered "holiday" means "being excused from taxes." That would have been welcome too.

Esther was a beautiful woman, on a par with all the others, but she

also excelled from within. Xerxes had no idea that he responded to the presence of God in Esther. It would be a long time before he understood what made her unique. All of us need to reflect the character of Christ to those with whom we come in contact. That's the first stage of being His witness in a darkened world.

Ask Yourself . . . *How do my friends and acquaintances know that I am a follower of Christ?*

Esther 2:19-23 in Brief

Some later time when Xerxes's harem received another infusion of young women, Mordecai learned of a plot against the emperor's life by two of his guards and got word to him through Esther. Evidently Esther had secured a minor judicial post for Mordecai, although she continued to hide her identity as a Jew. Mordecai's court met in a chamber of a city gate. That is where he caught word of the coup. Esther saw that Mordecai was credited in the official annals with saving Xerxes's life.

11

Esther's Choice

Esther 3—4

a Haman Wants to Destroy the Jews (3:1-7)

Having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. —Esther 3:6

Perhaps it seemed miraculous to Mordecai and Esther when she was chosen by Xerxes to be his queen. With this appointment their futures seemed secure. But they did not become proud and self-centered. Implicit in their reactions to prosperity was the certainty that God's blessings brought responsibility with them.

After the passage of a period of time, an ominous cloud loomed on the horizon of Mordecai and Esther's world. In the 12th year of his reign, five years after he made Esther queen, the emperor Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the second highest position in Persia (vs. 1). The first foreboding

thing about Haman is that he was a descendant of Agag. Today we might pass right over that bit of information as genealogical filler, but the original readers of Esther would have sat bolt upright knowing the plot had just thickened.

Mordecai claimed an ancestor named Kish; Haman, one named Agag (vs. 1; see 2:5). King Saul had been the son of Kish; Agag had been the Amalekite king God ordered Saul to kill as part of a holy war against the Amalekites 500 years before the time of Esther (see I Sam. 15). The Lord had sworn lasting enmity against the Amalekites after they attacked the Israelites leaving Egypt another 400 years before the time of Saul and Agag (see Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19).

This historical background would explain Mordecai's disregard for Haman and Haman's hatred for not only Mordecai but for all the Jews.

Part of the court protocol that accompanied Haman's promotion was that everyone, including other government functionaries, should bow to him in recognition of his status (Esth. 3:2). Mordecai refused to bow to this representative of the ancient enemies of Israel.



These pillars that supported the king's gate Xerxes built at Persepolis suggest the splendor of the one at Susa. Mordecai worked in the king's gate. All the royal officials, except Mordecai, bowed to Haman there (Esth. 3:3).

God did not consider it idolatry for His people to bow in honor before human authorities (see Gen. 23:7; 42:6; I Sam. 24:8; II Sam. 14:4; I Kings 1:16). But as a Jew and descendant of Saul, Mordecai would not bow to an Amalekite (Esth. 3:3, 4).

At first Haman didn't realize that Mordecai wasn't honoring him.

Other court officials nagged Mordecai to follow Xerxes's directive. When he wouldn't, they reported Mordecai's behavior to Haman in order to watch the fireworks. They wanted to see if Mordecai could get away with snubbing the emperor's new favorite.

Haman was furious with Mordecai, but his rage took a sinister turn when he found out Mordecai was a Jew (vss. 5, 6). With all his new power, Haman did not want to stop with the death of one man—Haman would eliminate his entire people. He determined to kill

every Jew between the Indus River and the upper Nile.

Haman superstitiously believed omens would identify the best times to undertake important actions. He had priests or magicians cast lots to show when he should go after the Jews (vs. 7). The Persian word for "lot," *pur*, is highlighted because it plays an important part in events at the end of Esther (see 9:23-28). The lots pointed out the 12th month. Haman had most of a year to set his trap and get revenge on God's people.

Haman represents the worst possible kind of person—one so bitter

against God that he or she attacks everyone who belongs to Him. As Christians we are under Jesus' orders to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (see Matt. 5:44). As difficult as it seems, we are to pray for the Hamans of our life and hope for their salvation from bitterness and sin through the death of Jesus.

Ask Yourself . . . *What natural tendencies would I have to fight in order to pray for someone who has hurt me?*



Xerxes Decrees the Jews' Destruction (3:8-15)

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

—Esther 3:13

For all his bluster, Haman had less power than he let on. He could not harm the Jews without permission from the emperor, and he couldn't get that without twisting the truth a little. He was on shakier ground than he or anyone else could imagine. How often are we paralyzed by situations and people that seem hostile, when in reality they are less

dangerous than we think, especially in light of God's power and sovereignty over them?

Once Haman's magicians had picked out the auspicious time to wipe out the Jews, he had to go to Xerxes with half-truths and lies to gain the authorization to annihilate them (vs. 8). He never identified the people he was talking about. He made them seem like a scattered, little bunch of oddballs whose treasonous intent made them a threat not to be tolerated.

Haman showed himself a man of substance when he pledged 10,000 talents of silver (about 375 tons) to the royal treasury to underwrite the expenses of this genocide if Xerxes ordered it (vs. 9). He probably planned to foot the bill from the plunder of the Jews, but he had to have a lot of wealth to make such a promise credible.

Xerxes reacted as though he didn't really care what Haman had asked. He just gave him his signet ring, told him to keep his money, and gave him oral permission to deal with the unnamed people group as he wished (vss. 10, 11). The impression of the emperor's signet ring was his official signature. With that signet Haman had a blank check: unlimited power and unlimited money. No wonder the author of the Book of Esther gave Haman the title "enemy of the Jews" (vs. 10).

Ask Yourself . . . *Who is currently the most powerful human enemy of Christians?*

When Xerxes told Haman to keep his money, the emperor probably was using a standard imperial court response that made him seem superior to thoughts of mere money. Later events make it appear that the emperor fully expected to be paid by Haman for permission to carry out his vendetta (see 4:7; 7:4).

Haman let no grass grow under his feet. On the 13th day of the first month—11 months to the day before his planned massacre of the Jews—Haman put the Persian court scribes to work writing the edict for the liquidation of the Jews (3:12ab).

As with the announcement of Vashti's dethronement, this edict went to each province in its native language (see 1:22).

The recipients of the liquidation edict reflect three levels of administration in the Persian Empire (3:12c). The satraps governed the 20 satrapies, the largest divisions of the realm. The governors ruled the 127 provinces within the satrapies. The nobles of the various families were the aristocrats of the leading families in every province.

Couriers rode relays of horses from house to house along the imperial highways of Persia to distribute Haman's edict written over Xerxes's seal (vss. 13, 14). The legalese of the dispatch intensifies the ugly order "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews." No mercy was to be shown women or children of any age. As an incentive to participate in the massacre, the warriors could keep the property of the Jews they killed. The only limit on the planned massacre of the Jews was that it all had to happen within one calendar day—the 13th of Adar, the 12th month.

Haman's order was issued. The couriers made haste, impressed by the solemn fact that the message they bore had Xerxes's own seal on it (vs. 15). At the same time the decree was posted publicly around the citadel of Susa. In an interesting contrast, Haman and Xerxes relaxed with their drinks while around them the confused people of Susa tried to make sense of such a shocking order.



A cuneiform inscription from Xerxes declaring him to be "king of kings" found in modern-day Turkey. Haman's edict was carried across the far-flung Persian Empire to places such as Turkey, Egypt, and India.



Mordecai Mourns for His People (4:1-8)

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. —Esther 4:1

When Mordecai heard the fate that Haman had decreed for the Jews in Xerxes's name, he could see no escape from destruction. Humanly speaking, he and Esther and all their relatives and friends were nothing but dead people getting their affairs in order. He could have given up and fallen into despair, but he kept hoping that God would save His people.

Since he worked in the city gate, Mordecai would have been one of the first to see a copy of Haman's edict authorizing the extinction of the Jews (vs. 1). His deep grief was probably intensified by knowing that his refusal to bow to Haman had triggered the whole situation. Mordecai showed his sorrow by tearing his clothes and donning sackcloth made of goat or camel hair and putting ashes in his hair.

Mordecai refused to mourn privately. He went into the city of Susa dressed as a mourner and wailing loudly in grief and bitterness. He went as far as the entrance to the palace and waited for word of his mourning to reach Esther (vs. 2).

Mordecai's response was not unique. All through the Persian

Empire Jews reacted to the genocidal edict with fasting, weeping, wailing, and lying in sackcloth and ashes (vs. 3).

Finally the servants of Esther heard that Mordecai was in mourning outside the king's gate of the citadel. They didn't know their mistress's relation to this unusual man, but they knew she communicated with him. She sent appropriate clothes to him so he could enter the palace grounds. He refused the clothes, so Esther sent the eunuch assigned to her by Xerxes and commissioned him to find out what was going on (vss. 4, 5).

Esther probably sent Hathach because he would have experience handling delicate situations. Little did she know just how sticky this one would soon become. Hathach met Mordecai in the public plaza outside the king's gate, and Mordecai told this trusted servant everything. He told Hathach about Haman's scheme and the huge sum of money involved. He gave the eunuch a copy of the edict to pass on to Esther (vss. 6-8).

The dangerous part of this conversation was that Mordecai trusted this palace servant with the secret that Queen Esther too was a Jew condemned under Haman's decree. Mordecai had to trust Hathach to explain everything to Esther and urge her in her adoptive father's name to go to the emperor and beg for mercy for her people, the Jews.

Esther had obeyed Mordecai scrupulously about concealing her identity (see 2:10, 20). Now he asked her

THE FATE OF UNINVITED GUESTS

The Greek historian Herodotus recorded an incident from the reign of Xerxes's father, Darius, that led to the execution of one of seven heroes who had put down a rebellion of the caste of magicians (the Magus).

"Now the law was that all those who had taken part in the rising against the Magus might enter unannounced into the king's presence, unless he happened to be in private with his wife. So Intaphernes would not have anyone announce him, but, as he belonged to the seven, claimed it as his right to go in. The doorkeeper, however, and the chief usher forbade his entrance, since the king, they said, was with his wife."

Intaphernes insisted on entering the throne room. When he did, he and his family were immediately taken away to be executed.

to risk everything to correct what he had caused by refusing to bow to Haman.

Sometimes it is easier to remain silent than to speak up for the truth. We, too, find out what our character is like, how much courage we have, and how unselfish we are when the time comes to take a stand for God's truth.

Ask Yourself . . . *When was the last time I faced the choice of speaking up for God or remaining silent?*



Esther Resolves to Approach Xerxes (4:9-17)

"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." —Esther 4:16

Mordecai asked Esther to precipitate a crisis rather than wait for it to come in its own time. She could have decided to watch and see if things would work out on their own. She could have tried to save

herself at the expense of the rest of the Jews. In the isolation of the palace she would not have to see or hear the atrocities.

The eunuch Hathach relayed to Queen Esther Mordecai's message and the copy of Haman's edict (vs. 9). What stood out in her mind was the personal directive that she go to the emperor and ask him to rescind the order. She worded her reply to him impersonally—"all the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know . . ."—but what she meant was "Mordecai, of all people, you ought to know that you're asking me to risk my life" (vss. 10, 11a).

On penalty of death no one appeared before a Persian emperor without being asked to come (vs. 11b). If someone entered the throne room uninvited, guards would seize the intruder and take him or her to be executed unless the emperor signaled with his gold scepter that he accepted the unauthorized visitor. Esther hadn't been summoned by her husband for a month (vs. 11c). She had no certainty of a cordial welcome. After all, Vashti had been banished because of Xerxes's vanity and capricious wrath.

Mordecai took a firm line with his cousin and adopted daughter. When he got her message pointing out the downside of his proposal, he warned her not to imagine that her position would save her when the massacre of the Jews occurred (vss. 12, 13).

Mordecai's confidence in God's sovereignty was significant. He believed the Lord would deliver the Jews in another way if Esther did

not act for them (vs. 14). If Esther refused to help God's people, her family would suffer the consequences of her faithlessness.

In what may be the key statement of the Book of Esther, Mordecai pointed out to Esther that the dangerous challenge she faced may offer the key to understanding the incredible string of tragedies and surprises that had marked her entire life— orphaned, adopted, forced into Xerxes's harem, pampered for a year to please a vain man, and then made queen of all Persia. Was this gamble with her life the key that made sense of it all as part of God's design?

Mordecai had known how to appeal to the nobility of Esther's heart, frightened though she was. She sent word to him to assemble all the Jews of Susa for an intensive three-day fast in preparation for her risky entrance to the throne room (vss. 15, 16ab). She and her attendants would follow the same regimen: no food or drink, day or night, for three days. This fast clearly marked a period of intensive prayer—pleading with God about Esther's interview with Xerxes and about their future.

Esther approached her interview with her husband with the words "If I perish, I perish" (vs. 16c). Her attitude was not fatalistic. She had accepted that going to the emperor was God's will. She also knew that following His will did not guarantee her personal safety.

Mordecai had given Esther a great deal of direction up to this point. Now Esther took charge, and

Mordecai carried out her instruction to the letter (vs. 17). The people of God raised their eyes and hearts to Him and waited.

Mordecai faced the pivotal moment of his life as an old man. Esther faced this time of crisis as a young woman. Their stories remind us that no Christian can say he or she is too old, too young, too disad-

vantaged, too troubled, too busy, or too unimportant to have something crucial to do in God's plan. We need to be available to Him and willing to accept His challenge whenever it arises.

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God used me despite my weaknesses or deficiencies?*

12

Esther Reveals Haman's Treachery

Esther 5—7

a **Esther Prepares to Appeal to Xerxes (5:1-8)**

"If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

—Esther 5:8

The three chapters studied in this lesson form the pivot of the Book of Esther. Three main features stand out. First, Esther becomes assertive (and remains so to the end of the book). Second, a string of dramatic "coincidences" reveals the intimate involvement of God in the deliverance of His people. Third, Haman's towering pride makes his fall from royal favor all the more dizzying.

When the third day of the exiles' fast ended, Esther dressed in her finest royal robes and went to stand in her husband's line of vision among the columns that bordered Xerxes's throne room (vs. 1). The emperor wore a robe of Phoenician purple,

ornately embroidered with gold, over garments of white trimmed with purple. The slender columns of the Hall of Pillars soared 65 feet to hold the roof in lofty splendor above the monarch.

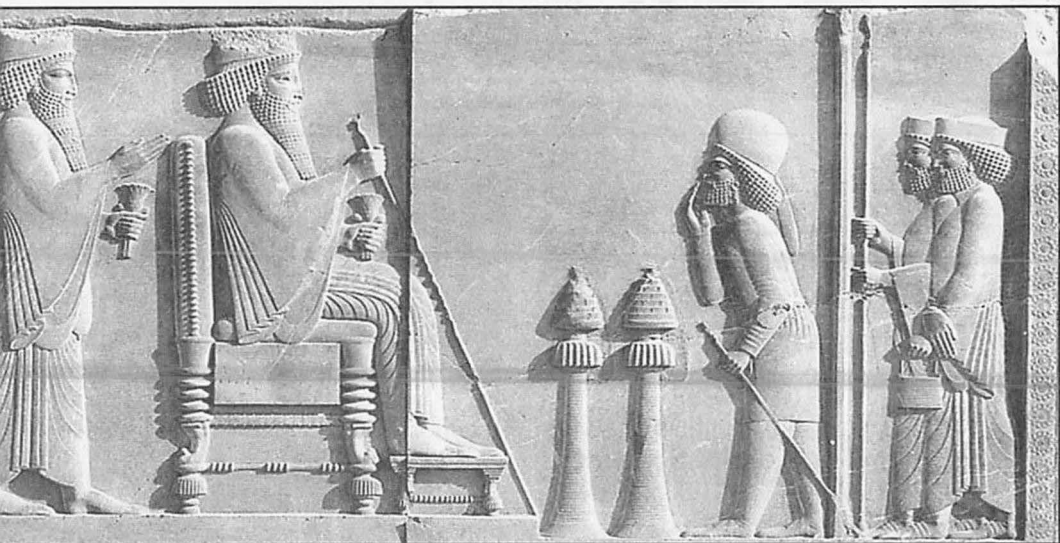
Ask Yourself . . . When is the last time I took a large risk on God's behalf?

Dwarfed by the huge hall, endangered by law and custom, and unsure of her husband's regard (see 4:11), Esther awaited Xerxes's notice and reaction. When the emperor perceived Esther standing across the hall, he saw her as his queen, not as an intruder. For the third time in the book, the Hebrew text says "she lifted up grace in his eyes" (5:2; see 2:15, 17).

Xerxes extended his gold scepter toward Esther as a sign that he welcomed her into his presence. In response, Esther approached the throne and touched the offered scepter. The emperor realized that an issue of great gravity had compelled his wife to risk her life by approaching him, so he immediately inquired after her concern (vs. 3).

The emperor honored Esther by addressing her formally by her title.

In this relief from Persepolis, Darius I sits on his throne holding his scepter. A young Xerxes attends his father by standing behind the throne. The supplicant covers his mouth with his hand as he addresses his emperor.



His promise to grant any request “even up to half the kingdom” is stated in customary exaggeration, but Xerxes’ intent is clear. He was favorably inclined to her.

Esther further cultivated her husband’s goodwill by inviting him to a formal dinner (vs. 4). She invited Haman, too, apparently because he was the emperor’s favorite, but actually because she wanted him around when the right moment came to reveal her concern.

Throughout their communications Esther spoke to Xerxes with the flowery, deferential language of courtly respect. The emperor, on the other hand, spoke bluntly to everyone. In his second response to his wife, Xerxes dropped her title and simply ordered Haman brought to them (vs. 5).

Near the end of a formal Persian meal, there was a course in which wine was served as an after-dinner drink. The emperor expected Esther to tell him what was on her mind at this time, and he reaffirmed his eagerness to grant her any favor (vs. 6).

Esther was acting with great faith. The dinner had been in preparation when she put on her robes and went to the palace. When she put off revealing her request until the next day, she had not necessarily lost her nerve (vss. 7, 8). She evidently felt the need to further cultivate Xerxes’s inclination toward her. By promising to reveal her serious concern at the next day’s dinner, the queen showed she trusted her husband and felt no need to press him to get what she desired.



Haman Plans to Kill Mordecai (5:9-14)

[Haman's] wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole built. —Esther 5:14

While Esther kept her promise to Mordecai by appealing to Xerxes for the preservation of the Jews, she had no idea what God was doing behind the scenes to ensure her success. Part of the literary beauty of the Book of Esther is the interchange of the dependability of Esther in the foreground and the dependability of the Lord in the background. When we look back, we too can detect instances when God has moved decisively to protect and bless us.

Haman left Esther's first dinner party with his head in the clouds (vs. 9a). He was not only the most powerful man in Persia, after the emperor, but he was also the social intimate of both Xerxes and the exquisite Queen Esther. But Haman's ego, which was inflated like a balloon at Esther's banquet, burst like a bubble the instant Mordecai ignored him as he rushed through the chambers of the citadel gate on his way home to brag about his latest success. Mordecai hadn't bowed when Haman was promoted

SONS: THE MORE, THE MERRIER

The Greek historian Herodotus asserted that it was a distinctive of Persia that the men took great pride in the number of sons they bore. Haman showed such pride in his 10 sons (Esth. 5:11; 9:10).

"Next to prowess in arms, it is regarded as the greatest proof of manly excellence to be the father of many sons. Every year the king sends rich gifts to the man who can show the largest number; for they hold that number is strength. Their sons are carefully instructed, from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone—to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth."

(see 3:2); he wasn't about to rise when Haman passed by.

Haman's elation turned to fury (5:9b). For the moment he suppressed his rage and hurried home, gathered his family and friends, and gave them a lengthy speech about his favorite subject—his success. Haman crowed about how much he was worth, how wonderful his 10 sons were, and how powerful he was in the government. But the latest feather in his cap was to be the only guest at dinner with the emperor and his queen two days in a row (vss. 10-12).

Finally, Haman admitted to his family and friends that all his stunning successes could not please him as long as Mordecai snubbed him in the gate of the citadel (Esth. 5:13). Haman called him "that Jew Mordecai" in a sneering way. However, the similar phrase "Mordecai the Jew" occurs several times in the last part of Esther almost as a title of honor (see 6:10; 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3).

Haman's wife and friends suggested Haman erect a pole so tall everyone would see it, and then get permission to execute Mordecai on it (5:14). The Persians did not hang people by putting a rope around their necks. They impaled victims on wooden posts and left them to die. Alexander the Great would later import this type of crucifixion to Europe, and the Romans modified it from the Greeks.

The thought of Mordecai the Jew writhing in anguish on a 75-foot pole while he went merrily off to dinner with Xerxes and Esther

warmed Haman's wicked heart. He set workmen to the task of laboring through the night to erect a suitable execution instrument for Mordecai.

Hatred, pride, and vengeance pollute the stream of life and prevent the enjoyment of everything good. Evil was consuming Haman from the inside out even as he plotted to revenge his ancestors on their ancient enemies the Jews. God reserves vengeance for Himself because He is the only one who can dispense justice impartially (Rom. 12:19). Only God can handle the powerful emotions that are associated with revenge. Therefore, it is best to leave the matter of retribution in the Lord's hands.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I harboring a grudge against anyone? If so, what is the first step toward forgiveness that I need to take?



Haman Forced to Honor Mordecai (6:1-14)

Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" —Esther 6:11

Haman was a wicked man, on the one hand elated by the success of his schemes and on the other depressed by his envy of anyone

else's success. He illustrates Isaiah's insight that "the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked' " (Isa. 57:20, 21).

On the night between Esther's banquets, while Haman erected a 75-foot pole for Mordecai, Xerxes had insomnia (Esth. 6:1). Whether to lull himself to sleep or to use his time efficiently, the emperor had servants read from the log of important daily events in the realm. What should jump out at the restless king but the account of Mordecai informing on the assassination plot of two imperial guards (vs. 2; see 2:21-23).

As many as five years had passed since Mordecai had saved Xerxes's life (compare Esth. 2:16 with 3:7). The Greek historian Herodotus narrated several instances of Persian emperors rewarding exceptional service quickly and lavishly to prove

they were great monarchs. Xerxes must have been appalled to find out Mordecai had never been honored for saving his life (6:3).

The emperor wanted to set things in motion immediately to reward Mordecai. He inquired whether any government officials might be in court in the wee hours. Haman apparently had come from supervising the erection of his pole to be first in line for an early audience with Xerxes. Xerxes ordered Haman brought to him, and the two men met in the emperor's private chambers (vss. 4, 5). In different ways, both men had their minds fixed on what Mordecai had coming to him.

With no preliminary greetings or pleasantries, the emperor demanded Haman's opinion of the best way he could honor someone he really wanted to exalt (vs. 6). Haman's imagination was blinded by his vanity. He assumed Xerxes was fishing politely for what Haman would like as his next reward for being the favorite of the emperor and his queen.

Haman didn't crave more money, more power, or another title as much as he lusted after popular acclaim. Accordingly he suggested that Xerxes dress up the object of his favor and parade him around for all

Detail of mosaic of the Battle of Issus show Persian horses where their manes have been braided and stiffened to stand in a topknot. Haman had a vain desire to ride a horse like this in order to be publicly honored by the king (Esth. 6:8, 9).



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to see as the emperor's darling (vss. 7-9). Haman wanted to wear the emperor's clothes, ride the emperor's horse, and be waited on hand and foot by a most noble prince.

Xerxes liked Haman's idea, so he ordered him to requisition the robe and horse from the royal wardrobe and stable and act as the most noble prince waiting hand and foot on, of all people, Mordecai (vs. 10). And it wasn't just Mordecai whom the emperor sent Haman to exalt, it was "Mordecai the Jew," a label he wore as a badge of honor.

Xerxes acted as though he had no idea of the bitter feelings between Haman and Mordecai. Everybody else in the palace did (see 3:1-4). Probably the common people who watched Haman heralding the greatness of Mordecai had heard court gossip that Mordecai regularly snubbed Haman. Xerxes just made it clear that Haman must carry out every detail of his plan.

Haman had no choice but to carry out the emperor's plan and appear enthusiastic as he proclaimed the imperial benediction on Mordecai (6:11). Mordecai was unaffected by the showy honor bestowed so long after his patriotic act. The sackcloth he had worn two days before meant more to him than the emperor's robe. As soon as his triumphal parade ended, he went right back to work in the gate (vs. 12). Haman, however, was crushed. He covered his head as though he mourned a death in the family and rushed home too ashamed to face colleagues in the palace.

Haman felt compelled to share his desperate grief with the same circle of family and friends who had heard his tale of good fortune the evening before (vs. 13; see 5:10). They reacted superstitiously. Haman's goal was to annihilate the Jews. Mordecai, a Jew, had humiliated Haman. Therefore, Haman was fated to fail at the hands of the Jews.

This irrational fear had barely been planted in Haman's heart when servants arrived to escort him to Esther's second private party for Haman and the emperor (6:14). Were they hurrying Haman because he had forgotten? Did Haman rush, hoping to escape the nightmare of the morning into the pleasant dream of the afternoon? At any rate, events were speeding toward their climax.

Ask Yourself . . . *In what areas of life am I most susceptible to pride?*

d **Xerxes Orders Haman's Execution (7:1-10)**

**The king said, "Impale him on it!"
So they impaled Haman on the
pole he had set up for Mordecai.
Then the king's fury subsided.**

—Esther 7:9c-10

When Esther gave her second banquet for Xerxes and Haman, only God knew everything that was transpiring to deliver His people. Esther didn't know Haman had

built a pole on which to impale Mordecai. Nor did she realize that Mordecai had been honored that morning in the streets of Susa. She only knew that it was time to place her life in God's hands as she tried to deliver her people.

We seldom know the "big picture" as the events of our lives swirl about us. God expects of us what He expected of Esther—unconditional faithfulness to His will. He will take care of everything else. He can be trusted to handle the things we fear and the things we worry about.

Esther, Xerxes, and Haman dined together once more (vs. 1). After dinner as they relaxed over their wine, Xerxes addressed Esther by her formal title and repeated his pledge to grant her whatever she asked (vs. 2). Esther had to tell him this time. She had said she would (see 5:8).

Esther appears throughout this chapter as "Queen Esther" (Esth. 7:2, 3, 5, 7). She had reinforced her rank by the way she dressed and boldly approached the emperor and by her behavior as hostess at both banquets. Her language remained elegant and respectful as she approached the topic of Haman's decree of Jewish annihilation (vs. 3).

In a mere six words in the Hebrew text, Esther dropped a bombshell into the pleasant after-dinner discussion. She had arranged these banquets to beg for her life and the lives of her people. Esther reached into the vocabulary of Haman's edict and the mercenary spirit behind it for her clincher. She and her people had been "sold to be destroyed, killed

and annihilated" (vs. 4; see 3:9, 13). If they had been merely enslaved, she said, she would have accepted her fate rather than troubling the emperor.

Xerxes was stunned by Esther's revelation that she was in danger. He demanded to know the identity of the one who had "dared to do such a thing," as the Hebrew might be interpreted (7:5). Esther knew she was in control of the situation, so she piled all sorts of nasty labels on Haman when she pointed him out (vs. 6). She called him an evil man who chose to be her adversary and enemy.

Haman fell into a trembling panic. He trembled because of what the queen had unexpectedly said and because of what the emperor could be expected to say. In his rage Xerxes lost his composure and stomped into the garden to gain control of himself again (vs. 7).

Persian court etiquette frowned on any man except a eunuch remaining in the presence of a member of the harem when the emperor left. Haman made a big mistake by remaining with the queen. He made a colossal blunder by speaking to her. He signed his death warrant by falling on her couch at the table.

When Xerxes saw Haman so near Esther, he automatically accused him of assaulting the queen (vs. 8). In his fuming rage there was no other possible explanation for the evidence. The servants who had waited on the royal party at dinner covered Haman's face to mark him as a condemned man.

One of the king's attendants took the occasion to let Xerxes know that Haman had just built a monumental pole for the purpose of executing Mordecai (vs. 9a). Evidently, Haman was not too popular in the palace. This revelation served two obvious functions. First, it gave Xerxes another reason to execute Haman, since Mordecai was a hero for saving the emperor's life. Second, it gave Xerxes a poetic means of doing away with Haman.

Xerxes immediately ordered Haman's execution on the pole he had built for Mordecai (vss. 9b, 10). Not until Haman had been killed did the emperor's seething fury fully subside.

Who defeated wicked Haman? Was it Xerxes, who ordered his execution? Was it Mordecai, who advised Esther at every step? Was it Esther, who courageously approached the emperor? Was it the Lord, who worked behind the scenes and within people? It was all of them. That's how God accomplishes His will. All that is required is that you do your part, even though you have no grasp of the larger tapestry the Lord is weaving. You may have a role in something bigger than you imagine.

Ask Yourself . . . *What faithful act does the Lord want me to perform this week?*

13

God Delivers His People

Esther 8—10

a **Esther Pleads for the Jews (8:1-8)**

Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews.

—Esther 8:3

Sometimes it is easy to quit before a job is truly done. Some challenges are so intimidating that a partial success seems enough. Once Esther and Mordecai had escaped the threat of personal destruction and Haman had been executed, Esther could have thanked the emperor Xerxes and concluded that she had done all she could.

Clearly, Xerxes thought he had responded sufficiently to his wife's surprising revelation that Haman wanted to kill her and Mordecai. On the same day Haman died, the emperor confiscated his property for the crown and gave it to Esther as compensation for the distress Haman had caused her. Then Esther presented her adoptive father, Mordecai, to Xerxes, and the grateful

emperor transferred his signet ring and the authority it represented from Haman to him (vss. 1, 2a).

That ring represented an office. Mordecai had replaced Haman as the king's second-in-command. Esther also appointed Mordecai as executor of Haman's confiscated estate (vs. 2b). In more than one way the righteous, trustworthy Mordecai replaced the egotistical Haman.

But Esther did not consider her victory complete. Her original appeal to the emperor concerned her life and the lives of all the Jews (see 7:3, 4). At the very point when Xerxes thought he had tidied up all the loose ends of a nasty situation, his queen fell at his feet in tears, pleading with him to reverse Haman's decree (8:3). It's doubtful that the emperor cared much about the fate of the Jewish people. He probably still had no grasp of the details of the scheme Haman had decreed in his name over his signet.

Esther knew she was risking the unpredictable wrath of a potentate who thought he had just been especially magnanimous (see 1:12b; 7:7). But Xerxes reached out his golden scepter to Esther to show he would



These inscriptions on a cliff near the ancient city of Ecbatana in modern-day Iran recorded for all to see the triumphs of Darius I (left panel) and Xerxes (right panel). From left to right, the columns of each panel are written in Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite.

hear the cause of her fresh batch of tears (8:4).

When Esther had addressed Xerxes before, she had used one or two courtly phrases to flatter the imperial ears (see 5:4, 8; 7:3). At this point, she piled on four flowery introductions before asking the emperor to write a new decree overriding Haman's decree to annihilate the Jews. She followed her request with two rhetorical questions. The obvious point of

those questions was that no one with a heart could accept personal deliverance while her people faced extermination (8:5, 6).

At first the emperor did not seem to want to do anything more. He reviewed everything he had done already for Esther and Mordecai because Haman had attacked the Jews. He had transferred Haman's estate to Esther and executed the rascal. The problem the emperor wrestled with was how to undo an unalterable imperial decree. Finally Xerxes turned the problem over to Esther and Mordecai. They could write a new decree in the emperor's name over his seal that would offset the first one (vss. 7, 8).

The emperor had made a great mistake when he let Haman write

the terms of the first decree. He trusted the queen and Mordecai to write a law that wouldn't come back to haunt him in the future. Esther and Mordecai had shown by their loyalty to their people and their wisdom in approaching Xerxes that they could be relied on. We, too, can demonstrate our ability to handle authority responsibly by the way we handle smaller, less serious matters.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I proven myself reliable recently?*

b

Mordecai Issues a Self-Defense Edict (8:9-17)

The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies.

—Esther 8:11

God is just, and His justice shows in many of the details of the final chapters of Esther. For each of Haman's hateful deeds at the beginning of the Book of Esther there is a corresponding protective deed at the end. In fact the author went out of his way to echo chapters 3 and 4 in chapters 8 and 9. Mordecai the deliverer replaces Haman the destroyer. Regal robes replace

POWERFUL IMPRESSIONS

Mordecai's edict carried the king's authority because it bore the mark of Xerxes's signet ring (Esth. 8:10). A signet, or seal, was a small engraved object that was created to produce an image in soft clay or wax. The origin of such seals is disputed; some scholars claim they preceded the invention of writing.

The presence of a seal on a document, container, or storage compartment guaranteed that the contents had not been tampered with. The seal was considered powerful protection in the Middle East because it was believed that anyone who misused the seal or broke a seal without the proper authority would be summarily cursed.

In Persia an edict that had been stamped with the emperor's seal could not be revoked, even by the emperor himself. The widespread use of the signet seems to have died out among the Persians in the fourth century B.C.

sackcloth. Gathering for self-defense replaces gathering to fast. Finally, celebration replaces mourning.

On April 17, 474 B.C. (the 13th day of the 12th month of Xerxes's reign; see 3:13) Haman had issued his decree to annihilate the Jews. On June 25, Mordecai summoned the same scribes to write a new edict that would cancel out the first one (8:9a). In two months and 10 days, Haman's plot to avenge his people, the Amalekites, on God's people, the Jews, had been thwarted and he had paid with his life.

Just like Haman's first edict, Mordecai's new one went to the satraps of the 20 Persian satrapies, the governors of the 127 provinces within the satrapies, and the nobles of every aristocratic family within the provinces (8:9b; see 3:12). This time, not only did each province receive the edict in its native tongue, but a Hebrew copy went to every Jewish community in each province.

Mordecai's edict, like Haman's, was sealed with Xerxes's signet ring and sent throughout the empire by the imperial post dispatch system (8:10; see 3:13). Mordecai's edict, however, was transported even more quickly by speedy horses bred especially for the emperor's use.

Once it was sealed with Xerxes's signet, Mordecai's edict became the emperor's decree (8:11). Imperial law now permitted the Jews to assemble in every city where they lived to protect themselves from any enemies who used Haman's earlier decree as a basis of attack on them. The Jews could use any force neces-

sary to protect themselves. They could annihilate their attackers and plunder their property to protect themselves, their wives, and their children.

The dreaded day was May 7, 473 B.C. (8:12; see 3:13). The law was publicized throughout the Persian Empire so every Jew and every enemy of the Jews understood the rights of God's exiled people (8:13). Once again the couriers went out and the decree was posted in the citadel of Susa (vs. 14; see 3:15).

Haman's elevation and decree had brought turmoil to Susa. Mordecai's elevation and decree brought joy to the city (8:15; see 3:15). Everyone in the palace had bowed to Haman out of obligation, but everyone in the city rejoiced when Mordecai walked out in blue, white, and purple robes, crowned with a golden coronet that was second only to Xerxes's crown.

The Jews of Susa and the rest of the empire felt ecstasy (8:16). The dawn of hope replaced the gloom of impending doom. Because of the exaltation of Mordecai, the Jews also felt a growing honor in the eyes of their neighbors. Jews of every province must have been astounded in the midst of their communal festivities to find Gentile neighbors asking to become Jewish converts (vs. 17). A fear of this unusual people who could get an imperial exemption from a decree of annihilation prompted many to join with the Jews.

The lesson of this portion of the Book of Esther concerns our source of joy. While we do not literally fight

our persecutors, we have a stronghold in our heavenly Father to which we can run for protection (see Ps. 46). We rejoice because we are more than conquerors (see Rom. 8:37).

Ask Yourself . . . *What gives me the greatest joy in my Christian life?*

C The Jews Defend Themselves (9:1-10)

The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those determined to destroy them. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. —Esther 9:2

To understand these verses, it's necessary to remember an important feature of King Saul's holy war against the Amalekites, Haman's ancestors, during the lifetime of Samuel. God instructed King Saul through Samuel to destroy all the Amalekites and their livestock (see I Sam. 15:2-3). They were to take no plunder; the Amalekites and their resources were to be totally devoted to the Lord.

Saul felt he obeyed the Lord. After all, he saved only the best plunder and Agag the Amalekite king (see vs. 9). But because Saul selectively plundered the Amalekites instead of annihilating them as commanded, God rejected him as king over Israel (see vs. 23).

Mordecai's edict gave the Jews the right to plunder any enemies who attacked them (see Esth. 8:11). The author of the Book of Esther found it significant that the Jews refused any plunder (9:10, 15, 16).

When the 13th day of Adar arrived, two groups of residents in the Persian Empire acted on two different imperial decrees (vs. 1). One group consisted of people who hated the Jews; the other group consisted of the Jews. The enemies were bewildered. For more than two months,



A relief of Xerxes. The Greek historian Herodotus said of Xerxes, "There was no one who, for beauty and stature, deserved more than Xerxes to wield so vast a power." Xerxes in turn gave great power to Mordecai, who used it to serve God and the emperor faithfully.

they had anticipated slaughtering a group of passive Jews and confiscating their property. Perhaps they had already made plans for their anticipated windfall. For eight months, however, they had watched the balance of power and public opinion shift from them to the Jews.

Ask Yourself . . . *How have I seen God demonstrate His power over powerful people?*

Hatred is a powerful force, and many enemies of the Jews persisted in finding a way to overpower them. In cities throughout Persia, the Jews engaged in preemptive strikes rather than waiting to be attacked (vs. 2). They succeeded everywhere because they were feared by everyone.

Mordecai's prestige and influence had been growing in the imperial court all through the time between the issuance of the edict and the day of reckoning (vss. 3, 4). No government official at any level of the empire would support the enemies of the Jews, because to do so would be to oppose Mordecai. Esther 9:4 essentially says, "His reputation was walking throughout the provinces."

On March 7, 473 B.C., the Jews throughout Persia slaughtered the enemies who had planned to slaughter them (vs. 5). No one could frustrate their campaign of self-preservation. In the citadel of Susa alone, the Jews killed 500 men who wanted to carry out Haman's initial decree (vs. 6). There were many in the government who had agreed with Haman's policy of genocide.

Among those killed in Susa were

Haman's 10 sons (vss. 7-10). They may have intended to avenge their father and reassert their claim to his estate. The 10 names of these men apparently are Persian in origin, but the names don't appear in any extra-biblical sources.

Astoundingly, the Jews in the citadel of Susa did not plunder any of their 500 victims (vs. 10). They had not acted selfishly as King Saul had 500 years earlier when he plundered the Amalekites and lost God's favor (see I Sam. 15:17-19). The Jews in Susa exercised restraint and showed how much their thoughts and deeds were influenced by God's working in their history as His people.



The Jews Triumph over Their Foes (9:11-17)

The remainder of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also assembled to protect themselves and get relief from their enemies. They killed seventy-five thousand of them but did not lay their hands on the plunder. This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.
—Esther 9:16, 17

These seven verses in the middle of Esther 9 stress the thoroughness with which the Jews of Persia ferreted out and destroyed their

enemies. Five centuries before, King Saul had casually and carelessly carried out the commands of the Lord against the enemies of God and Israel. The author of the Book of Esther wanted to leave no doubt that the Persian Jews showed no such halfheartedness.

Xerxes received a report of the casualties in the citadel of Susa (vs. 11). The source of that report is not identified, but Esther seems to have been with him at the time he received it. He repeated to her that the Jews had killed 500 men including Haman's 10 sons, in the citadel of Susa as an introduction to his report about how many of his citizens had been killed throughout the empire (vs. 12).

The author of the Book of Esther did not reveal how the emperor knew that Esther had yet another request to make of him. Perhaps he could see it in her face. In any case, Xerxes indicated right away that he was prepared to grant it, even in the face of the Persian casualties.

Queen Esther responded with a grim petition in two parts. First, she asked for a one-day extension of the preemptive defensive strikes by the Jews against their foes in the citadel of Susa (vs. 13). Second, she asked

that the corpses of Haman's 10 sons be impaled on stakes as a public exhibition of the disgrace of the enemies of the Jews.



Some Persian emperors had their tombs cut into mountainsides. This is the tomb of Xerxes carved into a cliff in modern Iran.

Xerxes granted both parts of Esther's petition. The corpses of Haman's sons were exhibited. The Jews in Susa organized for another day of battles with their enemies and killed 300 more adversaries (vss. 14, 15). Once more they refused to take plunder from those they killed.

So in two days, the 13th and 14th of Adar, the Jews in the citadel of

Susa destroyed 800 of their enemies. Meanwhile, across the rest of the empire, the Jews killed 75,000 of those who were prepared to attack them (vs. 16). Those deaths all occurred on the 13th of Adar.

None of the Jews throughout the empire took plunder from those they killed.

Across the Persian Empire, the 14th day of Adar in Xerxes's 12th year was a spontaneous holiday given over to revelry and joy (vs. 17). As this developed into the annual celebration known as Purim [POOR-im], it continued to be marked by merriment within and between families.

Serious obedience to the will of God should not turn a Christian into a humorless bump on a log. Commitment to obeying the Lord can produce a joyous appreciation of God's gracious gifts and a profound sense of significance. Those of us blessed with eternal life, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and biblical instruction for living should be the merriest people alive.

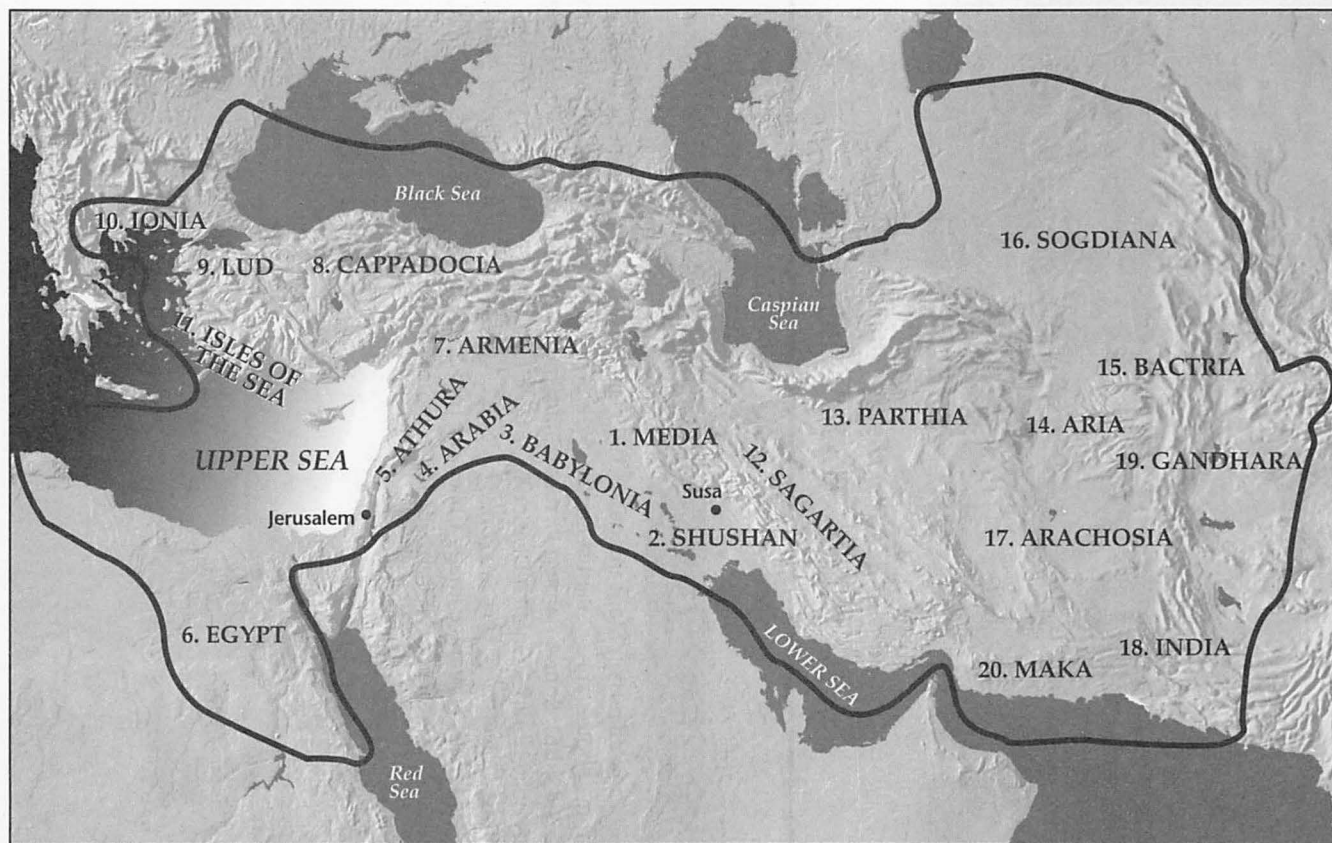
Ask Yourself . . . *If I were going to pick out two or three important events in my Christian life to mark with annual celebrations, what would they be?*

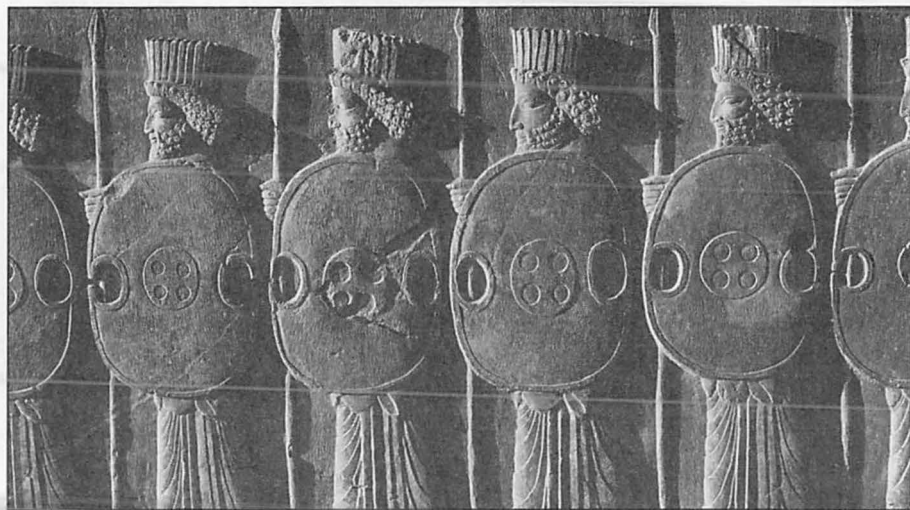
Esther 9:18—10:3 in Brief

Purim emerged as a holiday celebrated a day later in the citadel of Susa than in the rest of the Persian Empire. Mordecai sent a communiqué to Jewish communities throughout the empire recommending that the festival be observed both days as a memorial of the deliverance that turned great sorrow into great joy. He also recommended special attention be given to providing the means for the poor in every community to join in the fun.

The name Purim became attached to the annual festival from the Persian word *pur*, referring to the lot Haman cast to determine the day of reckoning for the Jews. Purim became an inclusive holiday that welcomed Gentiles to convert to faith in the living God, as many did in the days of Esther and Mordecai.

Esther also communicated with the Jews throughout the Persian Empire to reinforce the establishment of Purim. Meanwhile, the status of Mordecai in Xerxes's government continued to increase. His deeds on behalf of the Jews could be read in official Persian annals right along with the accomplishments of the emperor himself.





*Stone lancers that stood at the entrance of Persepolis,
the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire.*

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