

## **Week of December 5 - 11**

### **The Priest Ezra**

When we last left the book of Ezra in chapter 6, the Temple had been rebuilt and dedicated. The Feast of Passover had been celebrated in the temple for the first time since the fall of Jerusalem, and the exiles worshiped the Lord. Now sixty years have passed. Ezra was a priest still living in Babylon when Artaxerxes I sent him to Jerusalem to teach God's laws to anyone who did not know them. He led a large group of exiles back to Jerusalem where he discovered that Jewish men had been marrying non-Jewish women. He tore his garments and confessed these sins to God, then resolved to nullify all these marriages. Several years later, Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem as governor to rebuild the city walls. Once this was completed Nehemiah had Ezra read the Law of Moses to the Israelites. The Israelites and priests covenanted to obey the law and to separate themselves from all other peoples.

### **Ezra 7 Ezra's Letter from Artaxerxes I**

We know little about the 60 years that had passed since the first exiles returned from Jerusalem except that they had been uneventful. God moved Ezra to help his people in Jerusalem. In verse 10, we see God leading Ezra to study the law of God, to do it, and to teach these laws to the people of Israel. Artaxerxes gave him the authority to return to Jerusalem with a large group of Israelites and teach God's laws. Artaxerxes also gave Ezra authority to collect silver and gold, wheat, wine, salt, and whatever else he needed from the providences in which he passed to use in the Temple. We see the individual inspiration of Ezra and Artaxerxes by God.

Verse 23 shows that Artaxerxes had some knowledge of the power of God, which caused him to finance Ezra's return so he could teach.

### **Ezra 8 Preparation and Return to Jerusalem**

The chapter lists those who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra. But before the actual march started, Ezra discovered that there were no Levites in the group to assist with Temple's work. He asked for and was assigned a Levite named Sherebiah and his sons and brothers to join them on the journey. They fasted and prayed for a fast and safe journey, rejecting any help from the king, but depending only on God for safety.

The voluntary gifts of the king were welcomed, but to ask for soldiers would have questioned the ability of God to help. At last, after a long journey, they arrived safely at Jerusalem.

### **Ezra 9 The Mixed Marriage Issue**

When Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he discovered that during these sixty years, God's law against intermarrying with the local people had been broken. The primary offenders were the priests and Levites.

Ezra was so stirred with outrage that he tore his clothing and pulled hair from his head and beard. Then he fell on his knees before God and prayed. He confessed his shame and cried out for the sins of his people. He went over the history of Israel's sin and saw that it had been a story of failure and disaster.

## **Ezra 10 The Mixed Marriages Annulled**

A crowd gathered around Ezra as they became conscious of their sin when they saw how it had affected Ezra.

Then Shecaniah acknowledged the sin and suggesting a remedy, to divorce their heathen wives and to send them away with their children and to obey the laws of God. Ezra called the people to put away their sins. He led them in carrying out their covenant with strict justice and severity. All the marriages to the heathen women were annulled and the people were brought back to obedience with God's laws. The book ends with a list of the names of the priests, Levites, and people who had been guilty and divorced their heathen wives.

The man who set himself to seek, to do, to teach the law of God was slowly bringing God's people to repentance.

## **Nehemiah Overview**

Nehemiah is the last Book of Old Testament history. About twelve years had passed between the reformation under Ezra and Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem. The story continues with the work started by Zerubbabel rebuilding the wall.

Nehemiah was the cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes and had learned that the Jews in Judah were distressed and that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. He asked the king for permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. Artaxerxes sent him to Judah as governor with the mission to rebuild the wall. He also sent letters explaining his support and provided timber from his forest to build the wall. Once there, Nehemiah defied the opposition on all sides—Samaritans, Ammonites, Arabs, and Philistines—and rebuilt the walls within 52 days.

## **Nehemiah**

Nehemiah explains what his office was at the court of King Artaxerxes. He was cupbearer, a position of honor. But he was truly interested in what was happening in Jerusalem.

He learned that things were not good, that the wall of Jerusalem was still torn down, and that the gates were all burned. When he heard this, he sat down and cried, refusing to eat for several days, and prayed. He asked God to hear his prayer and help him as he went in to ask the king for a great favor.