

EZRA / NEHEMIAH

LET US RISE UP AND BUILD

THE JEWISH RETURN FROM CAPTIVITY

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Paperback ISBN: 9798884148048

Hardcover ISBN: 9798884148574

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1.

Jewish Historical Timeline

In order to better understand the return of the Jews from captivity and how this occurred over a period of 100 years, it would be helpful if we reviewed a timeline of Jewish history from about 1040 B.C., which would be the beginning of the era of the United Kingdom. This period would be approximately 500 years after Moses led the Jews out of Egypt and to the promised land.

During this time the Jews settled in the land given to them by God and were ruled by family and clan leaders from the twelve tribes of Israel. From time-to-time God would send special spiritual or military leaders like Samuel or Gideon to guide or lead them in battle against their enemies.

By the time we reach roughly 1040 B.C. the people, no longer wanting theocratic leadership, whereby God would lead them directly through the "judges" He raised up and sent to them, demanded to have a king to lead them (an idea they copied from the pagan nations around them).

God permitted Samuel, one of the Judges who had led the people for many years, to anoint for them a king and from this point we begin our timeline.

From Saul to the Exile

Note that the timeline we will be using has four sections:

1. **The Date** – These are approximate dates since there are various opinions over exact years, but the events mentioned are, for the most part, within a year or two (before or after) the event cited.
2. **The Event** – Only major events are included in order to provide the flow of history by noting highlight moments.
3. **The Prophets/Books** – Many times there were several prophets who wrote about the same events since they lived at the same time in history. Listing the prophets and when they lived in the timeline helps clarify their writings and relationship to one another.
4. **The World** – The Bible was produced to maintain a witness and history of God's creation of the world and mankind, but specifically to record the following:
 1. The sin of Adam and its consequences.
 2. God's promise of eventual salvation.
 3. God's plan and fulfillment of the promise from Adam to Noah, to Abraham, to Israel, to Jesus, to the Apostles, to the church, to the return of Jesus, and to eternal life for God's people.

The point to note here is that the Bible is a historical record, but not one of world history; it is a historical record of God's promise of salvation and the fulfillment of that promise through Jesus Christ who appeared on earth, in history, and as a Jewish man. It does, on occasion, mention historical facts, events, and characters, but only as far as these take place during or interact at certain points with the record of God's salvation of mankind.

This doesn't mean that historical information about world events in the Bible is not accurate. The information about world events in the Bible is perfectly accurate, but not of primary importance.

The main story of the Bible is the salvation of mankind, not the history of mankind. With this in mind, let us begin a review of this timeline.

Timeline – 1040 B.C. – 400 B.C.

1. 1040 B.C. Israel

Events - Beginning of the United Kingdom of Israel ruled by one king:

- Saul (1040-1000)
- David (1000-961)
- Solomon (961-922)

Prophets/Books - Beginning of united kingdom where the 12 tribes are now ruled by one king who himself is a servant of and directed by God.

- I & II Samuel
- I Kings 1-11
- I Chronicles
- II Chronicles 1-9
- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Song of Solomon
- Ecclesiastes

World - There were no world events mentioned in our timetable, but the various prophets and chronicles of the period describe numerous interactions and wars with the surrounding nations that existed at that time.

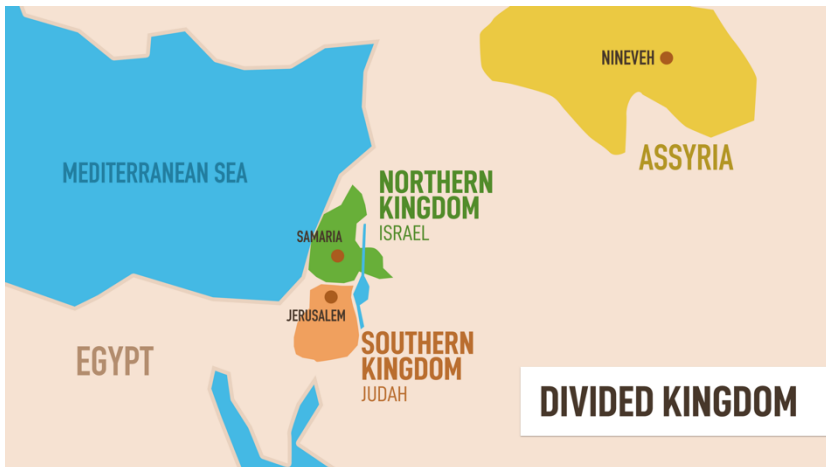
2. 922 B.C. – Divided Kingdom

Solomon's son, Rehoboam, alienates the ten northern tribes with his economic policies and causes a split in the kingdom. He retains the tribe of Judah, largely because his father, King David, was from this tribe and Jerusalem was the seat of power where both the king's palace and the Temple were located.

- The tribe of Benjamin also remains loyal because of its location, which was in the south and the first king, Saul, was from this tribe.
- The ten northern tribes named Jeroboam as their king and the city of Shechem as their capitol.
- Northern tribes kept the name, Israel, and the southern tribes were referred to as the kingdom of Judah.

Books/Prophets - Note that some books like I Kings and II Chronicles are divided, telling the history of both the united and divided kingdoms.

World- The most significant event that will later have a great impact on both kingdoms is the rise of Assyria to the north as a world power.



3. 722 B.C

These books also tell the story of the various kings for both north and south, whose rule overlapped.

- North (Israel) - 20 kings
- South (Judah) - 20 kings

Books/Prophets

- Jonah
- Joel
- Isaiah
- Amos
- Hosea
- Micah

The Lord also sent several prophets to each nation to both warn and encourage them over a period of two centuries.

World – Many scholars place the prophet Jonah's preaching at this point in history. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, is spared by Jonah's preaching.

4. 721 B.C.

Assyria, under King Sargon and later his son, Sennacherib, conquered the northern kingdom and relocated the people throughout the Assyrian Empire in order to assimilate them. The people who were carried out were eventually referred to as the ten lost tribes.

Books/Prophets

- Obadiah
- Zephaniah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk

World

- Israel is carried off into different foreign lands by Assyria
- Assyria is destroyed by the Babylonians
- Babylonian Empire is established

5. 587 B.C.

Events

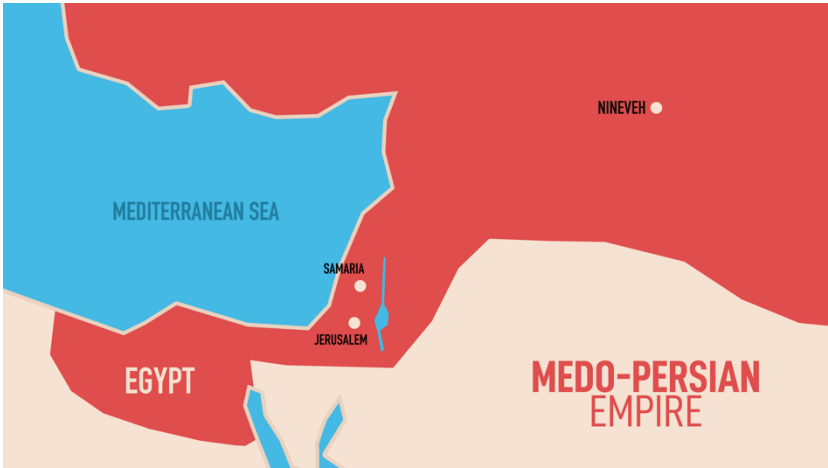
- Fall of Jerusalem and Southern Kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon
- 70 years of captivity

Books/Prophets

- Jeremiah
- Lamentations
- Ezekiel
- Daniel

There begins to be longer term prophecies concerning the kingdom of God (church) and the coming of the Savior in a historical context (Daniel).

World – Once the Babylonians are defeated and the Medo-Persian empire is established, the scene is set for the portion of Jewish history that this study will examine. We are looking at a small remnant of people from the southern kingdom of Judah who returned from exile to their original home in Jerusalem. Through God's mercy and care, a fraction of the original Jewish kingdom (Judah) was preserved in order to serve in the fulfillment of His promise of salvation originally made to Adam and Eve which was recorded in the book of Genesis.



From Captivity to Christ

The period that describes the return of the Jews from captivity covers about 100 years. This return and rebuilding was done in stages.

1. Return Under Cyrus – 538 B.C.

Little is said of this except in Ezra's book. The objective was to rehabilitate the land, rebuild the city and the Temple. The first Jewish leader chosen was Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8).

This group established the cities and laid the foundation of the Temple, but opposition to the work caused a 16-year delay. The building progress was revisited after the prophet Haggai exhorted the people to leave off building their own homes and vineyards and return to the rebuilding of the temple.

2. Return Under Darius – 516 B.C.

The objective here was to complete the building of the Temple itself and the life that revolved around it. This effort was led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

- A. Zerubbabel had originally come with Sheshbazzar and became the leader of this renewed effort to complete the Temple. He was the grandson of King Jehoiachin, King of Judah, who was released from prison and allowed to be at the Babylonian King's table.
- B. Jeshua was the head of the household of priests. This renewed effort to complete the Temple was also opposed, but with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the work was completed.

3. Ezra - Appointed priests and the people - 457 B.C.

King Artaxerxes appoints Ezra who then reinstates the teaching of the Law.

4. Return Under Artaxerxes I - 445 B.C.

This group was led by Nehemiah for the purpose of rebuilding the protective wall around Jerusalem and also re-establishing social order. It is here that the story of Nehemiah and Ezra cross.

- A. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the king, a privileged position in the royal court. There is no mention of a wife so many scholars believe that he was a eunuch. He rebuilds the walls, establishes social order, and is named governor. He returns to Persia for a time but is called back to Jerusalem to reestablish the previous order. The theme for this study is "Rise up and Build" and comes from chapter 2:18 of his book.
- B. Ezra was a priest responsible for Jewish affairs in the nation on behalf of the Persian court. He appears several times in the account of the Jews' return to their country. Ezra reestablished the proper functioning of the Temple, authenticated the priestly lineage, dedicated the wall around the city of Jerusalem, and when he was finished, he also reestablished the reading, copying, and teaching of the Law.

In these accounts we see the process of God's people being gradually returned to their country over a period of a century.

- The land is refurbished.
- The cities rebuilt and inhabited.
- The Temple and wall of the central city of Jerusalem are rebuilt.
- In addition to this, social reforms are established to create peace and harmony.
- Finally, the central focus of the people (the worship of God) is reestablished through a renewed priesthood and temple service.

5. 400 B.C.

Events

- Greek domination of Judea
- Ruled by Ptolemy of Egypt
- Maccabean revolt
- Jesus Christ is born

The last period (400 BC to Christ) sees the rise of the Greek empire, which is subsequently conquered by the Roman empire, the nation in power when Jesus is born.

One important thing to note about this roughly 600 years of Jewish history from Saul's reign as first king, through the 40 kings of the divided kingdom, to Nehemiah's return and Ezra's work in reestablishing the people's "religious life":

In every case, whether the king was good or bad, faithful, or idolatrous, through wars and prosperity, divided allegiance and moments of spiritual glory – **God was always ministering to His people.**

He blessed them, disciplined them, prospered them and gave them victory. He deposed their kings, sent armies to frighten and defeat them, rescued them from impossible odds, gave them periods of peace and

prosperity, warned them, pleaded with them, He dwelt among them and then sent them to dwell among foreign nations. But in all of this there was one constant – He was always a part of their lives, and for those who, despite their failings and weaknesses, remained faithful to Him – He never let them go!

The lessons we will share in this series have this as a recurring theme; God is with His people, and if His people rise to build, He will be with them at every stage. With this in mind, we'll next look at the book of Ezra and note how God stirred up the hearts of those who would eventually rebuild the Temple, the city, and the nation of God's people.

2. God Stirs up the Builders' Hearts

We are studying the period of Biblical history that describes the return of a small portion of the Jewish population that had been held in exile for 70 years.

721 – 587 B.C. – During this period the ten northern tribes were scattered and relocated throughout the Assyrian Empire and were eventually assimilated by the new lands and cultures where they settled. This was Assyria's way of dealing with conquered peoples in order to crush any type of future threat from old enemies.

The Babylonians who defeated the southern kingdom had a different approach to conquered nations. They would train the best and brightest of the defeated nation in order to supply the kingdom with a diversified pool of advisors, this explains Daniel and friends' treatment. The account of the Jewish return from exile begins with Ezra.

The Text - Ezra 1-2

¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying:

² "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.'"

⁵ Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. ⁶ All those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering. ⁷ Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods; ⁸ and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. ⁹ Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates; ¹⁰ 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind and 1,000 other articles. ¹¹ All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

- **Ezra 1:1-11**

Ezra goes back in time to describe the first effort to encourage people to return to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Cyrus was the king who defeated the Babylonians and one of his first acts as king was to return all exiles to their former nations and help them rebuild or renovate their temples (not just the Jews). This decree, known as the Cyrus Cylinder, was especially favorable to the Jewish nation and their God. (The Cylinder exists today and is on display at the British museum in London.)

Cyrus may have practiced "Henotheism," which is the belief in many gods, but the worship of only one. We see hints of this in the way he refers to God as the God of heaven who gives kingdoms to kings, but who belongs only to the Jews, and dwells only in Jerusalem (vs. 2).

Whatever the depth or quality of his faith, it is evident that God has worked in his heart because the decree is quite generous in its terms:

- He permits all who wish to return to go without any conditions (no taxes, etc.).
- He encourages those who were Jewish, and remaining, by providing funds for their journey and the work of rebuilding.
- He himself donates the gold and silver articles in his treasury that were originally taken by the Babylonians when they captured Jerusalem.

¹ Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. ² These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah.
The number of the men of the people of Israel:
- **Ezra 2:1-2**

In chapter two, Ezra will pronounce a long list of names and households of those who chose to return to Jerusalem. These include families, priests, Levites, slaves, along with animals – everything was numbered!

One of the reasons for the history of families was to establish genealogical lineage:

- They were returning as the people of God to their "promised land"; their genealogical records proved them to be true Jews.
- Ezra's record also establishes that his account described real people, dealing with an historical event which was momentous for them and important historically for future generations.
- The record also established in "real time" the actual beginning of Jeremiah's prophecy to return the captives after 70 years.

¹⁰ "For thus says the Lord, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'

- Jeremiah 29:10-14

In addition to this, Ezra's record gives historical fulfillment to Isaiah's prophecy concerning a foreign king who would eventually serve as a savior for the Jewish nation, spoken some two and a half centuries before.

"It is I who says of Cyrus,
'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.'
And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,'
And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"

- Isaiah 44:28

Now, a couple of things to note about the long passage of names and numbers.

Vs. 2 – Note that the names Mordechai and Nehemiah are mentioned here but are not necessarily the people of Esther and Nehemiah's book. These were fairly common names for the time.

Vs. 36-39 – Note that there remained only four families of priests left among the people who could legitimately claim their descendants from Aaron.

Vs. 55 – Sons of Solomon's servants – why are these mentioned here? The idea was to restore as best they could the worship of the temple carried out by those who were most familiar with it.

- Original plates, cups, instruments.
- Legitimate priests, garments.
- Levites, even the descendants of Solomon's original servants – continuity with the priests.

All of this done to restore as closely as possible the temple worship as it was in its purest form in Solomon's original temple.

⁶¹ Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name. ⁶² These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. ⁶³ The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.
- **Ezra 2:61-63**

Vs. 61-63 – A great effort was made to authenticate the priesthood so that, if no written record existed to support a claim that one belonged to a priestly family, they were not permitted to serve at the temple. One of the interesting things about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the

Roman army had to do with the genealogical records. The Romans not only destroyed the temple building and killed thousands of people – they also destroyed their genealogical records.

Therefore, even if the temple could be rebuilt today, there would be no way to determine who could legitimately serve as priest. This was the true blow to the Jewish nation in 70 AD, not only the destruction of their place of worship and nation (things that could be replaced in time) but the destruction of the record of priestly succession which could never be replaced.

In the case of priests in Ezra's time who could not confirm their legitimacy with the records, the Urim and Thummim were used to decide the matter.

- These were sacred lots used by the priests to find out the will of God (Deuteronomy 33:8; I Samuel 14:41).
- They were used like dice and provided a yes or no answer to a question. The Jews believed that God directed the results to reveal His will.

⁶⁸ Some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation.

⁶⁹ According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments.

- **Ezra 2:68-69**

Vs. 68-69 – Finally, Ezra "counts the collection" and records exactly how much was given towards their mission.

- 61,000 Drachmas/Daics of gold (Persian WT.)
- 5,000 Minas of silver (Jewish WT. 1=20 oz.)
- 100 sets of priestly garments

The people are counted, supplies collected and the return from the exile begins.

Lessons

We have many more texts to look at in both Ezra and Nehemiah as well as in Haggai and Zechariah, but before we go on there are some important lessons to note from just this preliminary background introduction and review:

1. God Can Stir Anyone's Heart

Note that both King Cyrus and later, King Artaxerxes, were moved to be generous and kind toward the people of God for their good. They were not "soft men," or individuals who had a social conscience. They were kings who came to power, fought for power, and ruled with absolute power. The penalty for speaking to Artaxerxes without having been invited to do so was death!

Oh, I know that God stirred the Jewish people, and called Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel to do this work, but they were already his servants!

- They were seeking His will.
- They knew the word and what it promised in regard to the return of the people.
- They were open to God, knew His voice, and wanted to hear from Him.

However, these kings were ignorant of the prophets and their words, they listened only to their own voice of reason or perhaps to the visionaries or astrologers in the royal court, but not the God and Laws of the Jews.

And yet, the Bible says that God stirred them up somehow. It could have been a dream, an insight, a thought, or a compulsion of some kind. It is not really important how, what is important, however, is that God knows how to stir every soul into His service.

It doesn't matter if it is a king or a cupbearer or a zoning inspector, or landlord, or contractor, or banker, or the council member of the city you live in.

When it comes to His people and their welfare or their ministry, God knows how to stir the hearts of those He needs for His own purpose.

2. God Doesn't Force Us to Respond to Him

The new king gave everyone a chance to freely return home after years of exile. He provided all the resources to restore the national religion which was the center of their previous lives in Jerusalem. The people collected a fortune to start rebuilding the Temple in order to resume their practice of worship. Thousands of people from every walk of life were gathered and committed to return to their homeland. Their action was the actual fulfillment of the known prophecy spoken by Jeremiah 70 years before!

BUT

Not everybody chose to go back!

- A. Some simply stayed behind in Babylon with their business interests, their land interests, their homes, and their newly established status quo.
- B. Some were content to make a donation to the cause, but not get involved because reestablishing the Temple and worship to God, living in the Promised Land, waiting for the Messiah was not important to them. The synagogues in Babylon, the temples of the new homeland were good enough – why bother going back?
- C. And some didn't go because Babylon was their true love. Their parents did not teach them the Law, neglected to train them in the ways of the Lord, and the ways of the past.

Therefore, when the call to return finally came, they wouldn't understand that it was for them! God comes for us in various ways. Oh yes, there are more dramatic ways,

- When He comes for us in death
- Or when He will come for all of us with the return of Jesus.

But He comes for us in other, more subtle ways also:

- Sometimes it's a stirring of our life or heart to lead us in a new direction of greater service, purity, or commitment.
- Sometimes it's a vision of what should be or needs to be done to glorify Him or expand His kingdom.
- Sometimes it's a thorn that leads one into a deeper, more dependent relationship with Him.

What is certain is that He does come for us many times in our lives, and we can respond in different ways.

- A. Some, like the people who stayed behind, ignore their call, and miss the blessings attached.
- B. Others, like the kings, respond in part but not with a complete faith and trust in God. They unwittingly serve God's purpose but refuse to exchange their earthly kingdoms for the heavenly one.
- C. And then there are those who give full acceptance to the movement of God in their lives and become His Temple.

3. God Can Bless His People Anywhere

Note that in Ezra 2:64, he establishes the number of people returning to Jerusalem at 49,897. That doesn't count the people who decided to stay in Babylon. In Jeremiah 52:30 Jeremiah says that 4,600 people were carried off into captivity. That's a tenfold increase while in exile, while being enslaved in a foreign land! And according to the money and livestock that they had when they came back, it seems that they prospered while in exile. How does that work?

A broken people, ripped from their homeland in a brutal war, forced to live in a strange country with no rights, no natural wealth, no leadership. These people multiply their population over ten times as well as their

wealth. This is how it works. God is not limited as to where, when, and how He will bless you.

The bottom line is not where you live, it's how you live. Not where you worship, but who you worship. Not how rich and powerful you are, but how rich and powerful God is. God can stir you, bless you, multiply you, defend you, equip you, and commune with you wherever you are because wherever His faithful children gather, He is pleased to be there with them.

Keep in mind the words of the angel to Zechariah:

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says, the Lord of hosts.'
- **Zechariah 4:6**

Those who would rise up and build anything from a new life to a new church need to remember that if you respond to God in faith and obedience, He will build you and through you to His glory forever. Amen.

3.

Encouraged and Led by God's Champions

Let's review a little of what's happened so far so we don't get lost in the historical details of our series.

1. The Exile – 587 B.C.

- The small kingdom of Judah is overthrown by the Babylonian army and most of the leaders and citizens awaiting in Jerusalem are taken into captivity and returned to Babylon.
- They are there for approximately 70 years and during their exile they multiply in number and prosper.
- In the meantime, the Babylonian king is conquered by the Medes and Persians and a new king is established.

2. The Return – 538 B.C.

- During the reign of the new Persian king, Cyrus, a law, or edict is passed that permits the Jews in captivity to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their homes, temple, and city.
- This process takes approximately 100 years and includes a series of leaders who each had a hand in the rebuilding and the re-establishment of Jerusalem and its temple and its society.

A. Sheshbazzar (Means – a prince of Judah) 538 B.C.

- Some scholars think this is another name for Zerubbabel, but the common opinion is that he was the one that Cyrus made governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14).
- The king originally entrusted the temple vessels to this man for return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:8).
- He was in the first wave of those who returned and was responsible for laying the foundation to the temple but didn't complete it (Ezra 5:16).
- He was also the "governor" who did not permit certain families to participate in the sacrifice until their ancestry could be proven. (Ezra 2:63).

B. Zerubbabel – (Means – seed of Babylon) 516 B.C.

- Descendent of former king of Judah (Jehoiachin).
- He was part of the original group that came with Sheshbazzar (who may have been his uncle).
- He helped in the laying of the foundation of the temple which was stopped for a while because of opposition from local enemies.

- In 520 B.C. he and Jeshua began the work of the temple again, and this time completed it (Ezra 6:15).
- Haggai refers to him as governor (Haggai 2:21) of Judah, a post he may have held after Sheshbazzar.

C. Jeshua (Joshua) (Means – the Lord is salvation) 516 B.C.

- Ezra and Nehemiah refer to this person as Jeshua, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah call him Joshua, but it's the same person.
- He served as High Priest during the restoration of the city and temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:36).
- He built the altar and renewed the offering of sacrifices as the beginning of worship in Jerusalem, the temple wasn't built yet. (Ezra 3:3-5).
- Zechariah refers to him in messianic terms as the "branch" (Zechariah 7:12).

D. Haggai (Means – festival) – 538 B.C. arrived – 520 B.C. begins prophecy

- He was a prophet who spoke to the leaders of the restoration effort.
- Since he is first mentioned by Ezra in the period of 520 B.C. it is supposed that he came back to Jerusalem as a child in the first group around 537 B.C. and grew up during the work of the restoration.
- If this is correct, he would have witnessed firsthand how the work of rebuilding the temple was opposed and eventually stopped as the people turned their attention to rebuilding their personal homes and businesses.

- His book contains four prophecies that included:
 - A rebuke to the people for having abandoned the rebuilding of the temple.
 - A word of comfort for the people who mourned the loss of the original temple and its splendor.
 - A teaching about ritual purity showing how the new temple will remove the "uncleanness" left by the desertion of the old temple. He establishes spiritual legitimacy of the new.
 - A promise to Zerubbabel that he would be kept safe despite problems and disturbances in the Persian empire which he relied on to do his work.

E. Zechariah (Means - Remember God)

520 B.C. - begins prophecy

- Zechariah was the other prophet of this time period who, like Haggai, is believed to have arrived with the first group and grown up as the rebuilding was begun.
- Both he and Haggai were relatively young men who served as God's prophets during a critical time in their nation's history.
- His many prophecies occur between 520-518 B.C. as the temple is being rebuilt.
 - They include a series of visions that promote the idea that the rebuilding of the temple and those who serve there are part of God's plan to eventually bring the Messiah and salvation to the world.

F. Ezra (Means – to help) - 457 B.C.

- Ezra was sent to Jerusalem by the Persian king Artaxerxes I in 458-457 B.C.
 - This was now roughly 80 years after the first wave of Jews had returned.
 - During this time the physical rebuilding of the city and the temple have been completed and a regular worship has been reinstated.
- His task as an expert teacher of the Law is to enforce universal observance of Jewish Law and appoint qualified people to serve at the temple.
- In his book we note that he brings with him not only priests and Levites to serve, but also brings gifts from the king and the people to provide support for the worship and teaching taking place at the temple.
- Ezra probably returned to Babylon to report to the king concerning his mission.
- In 444 B.C. we see him back in Jerusalem again, this time for the dedication of the newly built wall around the city completed by Nehemiah.
- In Nehemiah 12:36 we read that Nehemiah led one procession around the walls and Ezra led a second group as they dedicated the wall together.

G. Nehemiah (Means – God comforts) 445 B.C.

- Nehemiah is probably the most familiar character because his book reads like an historical narrative.

- He is a cupbearer (like a consultant) to the Persian king Artaxerxes and is given permission to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the protective wall around the city.
- He is named governor in 445 B.C. and sent along supplies to complete the task.
- Despite fierce opposition he completes the building of the wall in 52 days.
- He returns to Babylon after this but is forced to come back in order to resolve disputes and make needed reforms.
- Nehemiah along with Ezra tried not only to reestablish proper worship, but also worked to establish order in the rebuilt Jewish society of that day.

These are the main characters who we read about in the period of the rebuilding of the city, temple, and walls of Jerusalem.

They are also key leaders whose lives and actions teach us much about leadership today.

I. Key Leaders Bring Something Special to the Table

God stirred up many people among the Jews when the return to Jerusalem was first being prepared. But certain ones among the Jews were chosen, by a succession of pagan kings, to actually lead the effort to rebuild because each of these men brought something special to the table – certain qualities that were obvious even to those who were not Jews and were not followers of their God.

These pagan kings, Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and Darius saw something special in these men that transcended culture, position, and religion. As leaders themselves, they recognized the special qualities that these Jewish men had that would enable them to carry out this task. As we read about each

of these leaders in Ezra, Nehemiah, and the prophets, we catch a glimpse of what these ancient kings first saw in them.

In the rest of the lesson, I'd like to share some of these with you.

A. Sheshbazzar – Trustworthiness

He's not mentioned often but in Ezra 1:8 we see the king's treasurer count out a fortune in temple vessels into his care. He is the one who is responsible for not only the vessels, but also the money given to start rebuilding and relocation of the people, as well as to serve as governor.

We don't know if he had political influence, talent at organizing, personal wealth, or knowledge of the Scriptures as a teacher. All we know is that he was worthy of the king's trust and apparently also had the people's confidence, because they accepted him as leader.

The first ingredient in any new venture, any project that requires faith and sacrifice from people – is confidence in the leadership. You may have a dream and an action plan. You may be able to make convincing, well documented presentations, but in the end, people make their decisions about what you dream based on who you are in reality.

The king was moved by God to free the Jews and send them home, but the plan only went into action when He found a man He could trust.

B. Zerubbabel - Perseverance

We have more detail about Nehemiah building the wall around Jerusalem, but the true building feat belongs to Zerubbabel. He may have come with Sheshbazzar as a boy and participated in the general rebuilding of the city and the laying of the basic foundation of the temple.

In time, he took a leadership role in this and was the focus of attack when he refused to allow the neighboring peoples to help build the temple. Political pressure eventually stopped the work for over a decade. However, Zerubbabel was encouraged to continue despite political

pressure and eventually completed the building of the temple four years later.

A true leader's keenest insight is that no matter what the task, there will always be obstacles. Zerubbabel's "task" could not have been more inspiring – rebuilding the temple where God dwells – talk about motivation! He was sure that his project was right, good, noble, and the will of God. But he faced opposition from his neighbors, apathy from his people, and interference from his political masters.

It was unkind, unfair, unspiritual, and dangerous. Why would God give a leader a task and then allow so many trials and obstacles? Perhaps it was because God is more interested in completing the person than the person completing the task. Paul says in Romans 5:3-4:

"...but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope..."

Zerubbabel was building God's physical temple in Jerusalem, while God was building His spiritual temple in Zerubbabel. Leaders need to understand that followers don't do what leaders say, they do what leaders do. The kings and people provided all the money and resources necessary to rebuild the temple, but in the end, it was Zerubbabel's perseverance that finished the job.

C. Jeshua/ Haggai / Zechariah - Vision

I group these men together even if one was a high priest and the others were prophets because they shared the same trait – vision. In Jeshua's care it was the vision of the end at the beginning.

- He didn't wait until the entire temple was rebuilt, dedicated, and functional before he began to minister.
- He replaced the central object of his ministry (the altar) and began immediately offering sacrifice and organizing the worship for the people (Ezra 3:1-11).

- Spiritual vision enables God's leaders to use what they have at hand, even if it is not all that they see with the eye of faith.
- Vision is what gets us started, perseverance gets us finished.
- This is why Jeshua and Zerubbabel made a good team.

Haggai and Zechariah's vision had the added element of courage.

- They were not afraid to both rebuke the people and encourage them to work when this was not a popular thing to do.
- Both prophets spoke of the future and what the rebuilding would eventually accomplish in God's plan for His people.
- This was not an easy message at a time where the people were unmotivated, the enemies were threatening, and their support from the king was unsure.
- It's easy to be a prophet when there is no risk.
- But men with vision are not afraid to speak God's truth even when it's unpopular or inconvenient.
- Their vision of God's will and purpose kept the task on its proper course until completion.

Leaders need to have a vision of not only the end and the beginning, they need to see the course set for their followers so that they can lead during every step of the way.

D. Ezra - Credibility

Ezra was a professional scribe (Ezra 7:6). In the Old Testament, scribes were "scholars" who supervised the copying of the Law. His task was to re-establish the professional class of religious workers (magistrates, judges, etc. Ezra 7:25). He was well trained and had great ability, as well

as the highest level of judicial authority (he could impose the death penalty Ezra 7:26).

But what gave him utmost credibility as a religious leader was not his knowledge, training, or authority – it was his piety. We don't use this word much anymore, but it's an extremely important spiritual quality – especially for leaders. Piety is respect for the people and things of God. Ezra had the utmost respect for the Word of God and His people.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.
- **Ezra 7:10**

It was because of this extreme piety that Ezra had credibility with the king and led the king to grant him such extraordinary power and authority. And Ezra did not disappoint. Once arrived in Jerusalem he set out to organize Jewish society according to God's word. He taught the word, established the religious hierarchy that was to rule the people.

We read of revolutions and rejection of some of the leaders in Jerusalem, but not Ezra. He was accepted by the people, and the Jewish leaders, as well as the king because He had credibility in all of their eyes. He was not only a teacher of the Law, but his deep piety confirmed that he placed no greater burden on anyone than he himself was willing to carry.

In the end, our leaders inspire us to believe in their leadership because their lives offer us a credible witness that they are worthy of our allegiance.

E. Nehemiah - Humility

I could say a lot about Nehemiah and what he brought to the table as a leader:

1. **Organizational skills** – the way he organized the actual building of the wall itself, getting all the people involved in one way or another.

2. **Courage** – the fact that he didn't allow his enemies' threats to stop him or his mission.
3. **Inspiration** – We read the way he encouraged everyone to keep working – even in the darkest hour.
4. **Zeal for the Lord** – How he came back and reinstated proper conduct when the people were falling away from the Lord.

But if I were to pick one outstanding characteristic as God's leader, God's champion, it would be his humility. Not many people equate humility with leadership.

We see our leaders as bold, decisive, well-organized, multi-talented, but not usually as humble. This is because we don't understand what spiritual humility is. We sometimes equate humility with shyness, quietness, being self-effacing, softness. A humble person does not crave to be seen, first, right, honored, or praised.

In a spiritual sense a humble person seeks to know and do God's will rather than their own. This effort to know and do God's will creates patience, wisdom, meekness, stillness of spirit – all signs of a person's humble character. You know a leader is humble because he is:

- Willing to wait on the Lord to know a course of action before beginning.
- Is more eager to give praise than receive it.
- Is more aware of his own weakness than that of others.

Nehemiah was this kind of leader, and his humility is evident at the very beginning of his book. After he has the burden for his people placed on his heart and praying fervently to God, confessing his and his people's sins – he does an extraordinary thing – he waits!

Nehemiah 1:1

He prays in the 9th month of "Kislev" and only in the month of "Nisan," nearly 4 months later does God begin to work out his plan. Humility enabled him to wait on the Lord and then step out in faith in approaching the king. It doesn't matter what other skills you bring to the table in serving God, without humility, courage, expertise, or zeal will be wasted. All of God's leaders have to first realize that their leadership is given and directed by God, not themselves. Nehemiah succeeded as a leader not because he brought many leadership skills to the table – He succeeded because his humility enabled him to see how God wanted to use his skills.

Summary / Exhortation

Every person here today who has been called out for leadership in God's kingdom in one way or another needs to remember two things taught to us by the leaders we have studied today:

1. We don't need to have all the gifts mentioned to lead God's people, we simply have to place the talents we do have at God's disposal. So many people do not rise to lead God's people because they're waiting for more experience, more talent, more ability, and their time never comes. But God is able to make a great leader out of those who surrender whatever small abilities they have to His will and purpose.
2. What is missing in the world is not great dreams or missions – it's great leaders. God is always looking for great leaders in order to do great things in the kingdom of God. God is always building His church, always looking for those who will step out to do His work.

The question that begs to be asked today is this: Are the leaders of God's people only to be formed in the pages of Ezra and Nehemiah, or can they be formed in this room?

Remember this: Before the people can ever rise up to build, leaders must first rise up who will be able to inspire them to greatness.

4.

Building up Without Compromise or Fear

PART 1

So far in our series we've concentrated our lessons on the people of Ezra/Nehemiah. Our thoughts and teaching points have largely dealt with how people reacted, or the qualities that people had during this period.

In this chapter, I'd like to look at the general process used for this project, and how it affected the Jewish people. You see, the basis for the story in Ezra/Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the city, wall, and especially the temple in Jerusalem. This is the backdrop against which the characters, their lives, and their decisions are played out for good or evil. Therefore, let's work our way through the different "stages" of the re-building process and see what happened to the people who were involved in it.

In the Bible, from managing the garden to establishing the church, God molds and shapes people's lives as they work out some process of His design.

Stage 1 – Beginning – Ezra 3:1-13

¹ Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one person to Jerusalem. ² Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, rose up and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God.

- **Ezra 3:1-2**

It is 516 B.C. and after researching those who could return as well as priests and Levites who could legitimately serve, the men are gathered to begin the work in Jerusalem. This work is led by Jeshua the son of a priestly line and Zerubbabel the son of a kingly line. The excitement of the beginning is a clear vision of what is to be! We see in our mind's eye the glory of the finish line and what it will mean for us.

For these Jews, being freely released from forced exile and returned to their homeland by the order of a pagan king who would underwrite their travel and cost of rebuilding their holy temple, was nothing short of miraculous!

For those who agreed to return (because many chose to stay in comfortable exile) and rebuild not only the temple, but their homes and society, this meant that after many generations of silence, God was with them again! They were truly His people again! And more importantly, He would accept their worship offered according to the Law of Moses at God's true temple. This was truly an exciting start!

We also learn that they started by organizing the Levites (temple servants) so they could begin the actual construction of the temple on the foundation that they initially laid. The chapter ends with the scene of rejoicing as the people are moved when they see the outline of the temple in the foundation. (Like building plans or drawings). Their joy is mixed with sadness, however, at the thought that this temple when finally finished will still not be able to match the grandeur of Solomon's temple

which they remember from the past. Although they were afraid of their enemies, they suffered no interference yet, but as with all new beginnings, this next stage was soon to appear.

Stage 2 – Opposition – Ezra 4:1-24

Like all projects, it wasn't long until the first of many obstacles would derail the process.

¹ Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for like you, we seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

- **Ezra 4:1-2**

The "enemies" that are spoken of here are those who would later be referred to as Samaritans. They claimed to also be legitimate worshippers of God, but their historical reference is the king Esarhaddon who was the son of the Assyrian king Sennacherib (the one who destroyed the Northern Kingdom and dispersed the people to foreign lands). The Assyrian policy was to dilute their nationalistic fervor and fidelity by mixing them with other nations.

The Babylonians, who succeeded them in world domination, had a different policy. Their approach was to retrain and immerse the leaders of defeated nations in Babylonian culture, art, and politics and then return them to their former lands to govern under Babylonian control.

These two systems produced the different results we read about in Ezra/Nehemiah.

A. The Assyrians, under Sennacherib and later his son, Esarhaddon sent a people back who were no longer Jewish. They had not only been mixed culturally, because they had been forced to take foreign wives and

husbands but were mixed religiously because they had also adopted the gods of their pagan spouses. In approaching Zerubbabel and other Jewish leaders, they could claim some historical connection, but their bloodline and religion had been compromised in such a way that they would no longer be allowed to participate in temple worship.

B. The Babylonians, on the other hand, had permitted the Jews they captured to maintain their cultural and religious integrity. When they permitted them to return, there were still many Jews who had not married outside their nation and had maintained their religious heritage. The result was a people who had the historical, religious, and cultural resources to actually restore their nation and their religious practice to its original form.

This explains why Zerubbabel refuses the offer of his neighbors to participate in the building (and by extension) the leadership of temple worship (vs. 3). This was not pride or selfishness on the part of Zerubbabel and the others, it was a matter of obedience to God and proper procedure.

The reason that Judah had been defeated by the Babylonians in the first place was that nations fall into spiritual adultery by the mixing of people and religions together. This time they take no chances and refuse from the outset to mix with foreign peoples and their gods. They resist the temptation to trade peace and security for religious purity – they refuse to compromise.

⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, ⁵ and bribed advisers against them to frustrate their advice all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

⁶ Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. ⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.

- **Ezra 4:4-7**

The opposition first begins as public pressure. Negative talk and social pressure are used to stop what they are doing because it is offensive, or could cause war, etc.

It becomes political when the enemies begin to lobby successive kings to stop the work. Peer pressure and threats don't work so they appeal to the king with a false accusation.

In verses 8-16, Ezra provides the details of the letter sent to the king in which the Jews are accused of rebuilding their city and temple as a first step to rebelling against the king and claim independence. The enemies claim that the Jews' end game is to refuse taxation and conquer neighboring nations as they had done in the past. They encourage the king to verify Judah (and Israel's) history to confirm their accusations. Their argument is summarized in a neat equation - rebuilding the temple = independence.

In that era, pagans believed that the defeat of a nation meant that your own gods were more powerful than the gods of your defeated enemy. This is why victorious armies would tear down temples and carry off images and vessels to their own temples as "trophies".

When the king read of Israel's past glory and power, he did not want to risk allowing the God of the Jews to be re-established. For him, this simple equation made sense. Stop rebuilding the temple of the God of the Jews = stop the God of the Jews = stop the power of the Jews.

Of course, this letter and attack only confirmed how unsuitable these men were to share in the building of the temple in the first place. So, the king writes back to order a halt to the reconstruction.

²³ Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' decree was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in a hurry to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by military force. ²⁴ Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem was discontinued, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.
- **Ezra 4:23-24**

Note that Rehum and Shimshai only have the courage to use force once they have the backing of the king for their scheme. For about twenty years the construction was stopped until the Lord stirred up the prophets to signal a new beginning.

Stage 3 – Renewal – Ezra 5:1-17

What we know about the downtime in the rebuilding effort we learn from Haggai's preaching.

¹ In the second year of Darius the king, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ² "This is what the Lord of armies says: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt.'"

³ Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴ "Is it time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses while this house remains desolate?" ⁵ Now then, the Lord of armies says this: "Consider your ways! ⁶ You have sown much, only to harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but there is not enough for anyone to get warm; and the one who earns, earns wages to put into a money bag full of holes." ⁷ The Lord of armies says this: "Consider your ways! ⁸ Go up to the mountains, bring wood, and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be honored," says the Lord. ⁹ "You start an ambitious project, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?" declares the Lord of armies. "It is because of My house which remains desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.

- **Haggai 1:1-9**

The Jews did what comes naturally to human beings – they took the path of least resistance. Once the king's decree came, they stopped. They knew that what was written was not true, was out of context, but they didn't

appeal it. It was easier to give in to their fear and pursue the lesser dream of simply rebuilding their homes and their lives and avoid trouble with their neighbors. And yet, they did not prosper as they should have.

Now that they didn't have the time and effort to invest in the rebuilding of the temple, you'd think that all this extra energy, time, and money would help them make a better life for themselves, but it didn't! God asks them to evaluate the last 20 years – are they really ahead? Are they really better off? The answer, of course, is no. They are not better off because God has not permitted them to prosper.

He has not permitted them to prosper because they've neglected to do the work they were originally sent to do. At the first obstacle they reverted to their own plan instead of trying to figure out another way to accomplish God's plan.

Haggai's preaching works a tremendous result on the people because in two short weeks. Verse 1 says he started on the first day of the sixth month to preach; and in verse 15 it says that on the twenty-fourth day of the same month the people acted. In two short weeks the people responded to his preaching.

Now, in describing the restoration of the building Ezra mentions what was at stake here.

¹ When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, ² then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. ³ At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the Euphrates River, and Shetharbozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them as follows: "Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?" ⁴ Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building. ⁵ But the eye of their God was on the elders of

the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report could reach Darius, and then the decree concerning it could be sent back.

- **Ezra 5:1-5**

So, they began rebuilding and the obvious happens, the officials show up and demanded to know what is going on. Who gave you permission? Note that in verses 3b-4 the officials take the names of the leaders. The reason they did this is to make sure they knew who to execute if the king refused to permit the rebuilding once again. The Jews decide to do what they should have done twenty years before – fight for their project and respond to the accusations.

In the meantime, someone had to take responsibility in case it didn't work. In verses 6-17, Ezra provides the details of the letters sent by the officials renewing their accusations against the Jews; and the letter the Jews send in defense of their work. The Jews' letter summarizes the story of their exile, their return to Jerusalem and the permission they received from Cyrus to rebuild their city and their temple.

It's interesting to note that in their letter, the Jews make no reference to the accusations against them, no defense of their actions, no counter charges against their enemies. Their letter is simply a witness of their faith in God, their own history, and an appeal to the king to verify their claims. God's prophets energized the people, not only to renew their original tasks, but also ignited their original faith and dependance on God for success.

Summary

In this lesson we see examples forecasted in the sub-title, "Building without compromise or fear."

1. Beginnings – like the start of any communal project, personal improvement, or spiritual growth effort starts with high hopes and enthusiasm. Why?

- A. Because we see the goal clearly.
- B. Because we understand the benefits of achieving the goal, whether that be improved ability, function, or comfort (for projects), or increased faith, spiritual power and offering to God something holy and blessed.
- C. A third reason for our optimism at this stage – no opposition or suffering – yet! Which brings us inevitably and surely, in efforts like these, to stage #2.

2. Opposition – The anguish, anxiety, or frustration we experience in every instance of "up" or "on" which is shorthand that refers to build up, grow up, carry on, or push on – is opposition of some kind. It takes so many different forms.

From obscure building regulation and lack of critical trades, people, or supplies, to that universal spiritual growth killer, weakness of the flesh, not to mention the discouragement of worldly non-believers, especially when they are among those we love and/or respect.

3. Now we can either stumble or crumble at this stage:

A. Crumble – We fall apart. We die inside, we have no answer to the criticism and opposition. We have no courage to fight, struggle or die trying, accepting martyrdom, so that others can continue in our place instead of saving ourselves at the cost of denying our own dream, plan, project, or belief. You see, to crumble is like a knock-out in boxing. You are out, unconscious or deemed so damaged by the referee that you're not allowed to continue (less embarrassing for the loser, but still a defeat).

B. Stumble – A stumble, on the other hand, is like a "knock-down" – not a knock-out. In a knock-down, the breath is knocked out of you for a moment, or your opponent hits you with a punch where you lose your balance and fall down. Here, the referee does a mandatory eight count to make sure you can continue the match and talks to you to confirm you are fully conscience. You lose points from the judges because of a knock-

down, but you don't automatically lose the match – you can still come back and win the fight if you're able to get back up and box.

In the crumble/stumble stage a decision needs to be made – is this a knock-out punch that ends everything for good? Or is it a knock-down, a stumble where I have to accept a temporary set-back and take the time for an 8 count so I can:

- Reassess my plans, approach, team, and resources before carrying on or
- Seek God's guidance and help in prayer or find a fellow believer who can walk with me through this difficult moment.
- Either way, the strategy to avoiding the knock-out, or crumbling is to expect opposition right from the start.
- Boxers train hard in order to come back from the occasional knock-down that all boxers experience.
- As Christians, we also must always expect and prepare for stumbles.
- I have all the resources to "get back up" when I'm knocked down or stumble.

When sin knocks me down, I have the blood of Christ to forgive me every time.

⁷ but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- **I John 1:7-9**

When discouraged by opposition, doubt, or criticism I have the assurances of the Holy Spirit and His Word that strengthens me.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

- **Philippians 4:6-7**

When I am weakened by the length of the match and the power of the opposition, I have the comfort and encouragement of the church, which is the embodiment of Christ here on earth.

For I have had great joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

- **Philemon 1:7**

Knowing, expecting, and having these resources fully enables me/you/any brother or sister to overcome any and every stumble that will surely come our way whether we are trying to build up the church in some way, or build ourselves up in order to better reflect Christ in this dark world.

One last note about my boxing analogy. In regular non-championship matches, there is the "three knock-down rule." This means that if a boxer is knocked-down three times in a single round, he automatically loses – even if he gets up and is able and willing to continue – this type of loss is called a TKO – technical knockout.

However, in a championship fight, where who will be the champion is decided, there is no 3 knock-down rule. So long as you can get up after a knock-down and are willing and able to continue – you can keep fighting. You see, in a championship fight they not only test for speed and boxing ability, they also measure what they call a fighter's heart...does he have the heart to be a champion?! Here's the point, in this life each one of us are in a championship match. No 3 knock-down rule. It's a long and

grueling fight with lots of opposition from beginning to end, and it takes many forms.

- Temptation
- Anger
- Illness that goes on and on
- Death of loved ones
- Disappointments, frustrations, loss
- Endless suggestions, to just quit

Each can be a potential knock-out shot, however if we train properly (regular prayer, Bible reading and study, worship, service in the name of Christ, conscience attempts to grow spiritually in various ways) we can avoid a clear knock-out and reduce the attacks to glancing blows or at worse a knock-down or "stumble" that we can recover from in order to carry on – after all, ours is a championship fight for the crown of eternal life!

Thanks be to God that He has promised us the victory so long as we get back up to fight after every stumble. Remember, it doesn't matter how many knockdowns you suffer – the crown goes to the one who is still fighting when the Lord comes for us in death or at the end of the world.

¹⁵ For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

¹⁸ Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

- I Thessalonians 4:15-18

5.

Building up Without Compromise or Fear

PART 2

In our last chapter we looked at the various stages that the Jews went through as they returned from captivity and began the process of "rebuilding." Briefly, the first three stages were:

Stage 1 – Beginnings – Ezra 3:1-13

We see that despite hostile surroundings, they begin to build in the proper order – God's house first. God was the One who permitted their return (Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years of exile completed – Jeremiah 25:9-13). They rebuilt the altar of sacrifice, without which, the priests could not offer sacrifices, which were the central part of their religion. There was much else to do but this was the correct starting point.

Stage 2 – Opposition – Ezra 4:1-24

Of course, their return and work were noticed by their neighbor, the Samaritans who were Jews also, but ones who had been carried off by the Assyrians and assimilated by various pagan nations. These had also wandered back to their former lands in Northern Israel but brought with them their pagan gods, worship, and lifestyle. Seeing the temple and its worship restored, they wanted to participate as long lost kin, and claimed this right. They were rebuffed by the exiles for the following reasons:

- Pagan worship was polytheistic (many gods) and forbidden by God.
- It featured one's own personal gods. For example, the gods of your land (each city had a version of the god of Baal).
- They held to powerful gods found only in one's region and considered the God of the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem as one of these.

The Samaritans wanted to participate and, thus, infiltrate their neighbors through marriage and the mixing of their religions. The Jews of Jerusalem refused their cooperation knowing that this is what led to the destruction of the temple and their exile in the first place. Sensing the revival of a powerful deity as a future threat, their neighbors opposed the building psychologically, politically, and militarily.

Stage 3 – Renewal – Ezra 5:1-17

God's prophets helped the people stand firm in their work and commitment to build. The Jews learned the difference between a knock-down and a knock-out. They realized that what God has sent them to do was worth fighting for.

In this chapter we'll review stages four and five in the Jewish effort to rebuild their temple, their nation, and their lives as the chosen people of God.

Stage 4 – Completion – Ezra 6:1-22

Chapter 6 in Ezra's account details the tremendous turn of events that occurred once the people put their faith in God.

1. The King finds the original decree granting permission for the rebuilding of the temple during the reign of Cyrus (vs. 1-5).
2. The present king Darius rescinds his previous orders and permits the building to go on (vs. 6-7).
3. The king also instructs that the money for the rebuilding is to come from the taxes paid by the people of the region. This means that the enemies of the Jews will now be underwriting the rebuilding of the temple with their own tax money (vs. 8-10).
4. The king adds a promise to the decree which imposes the death penalty for anyone interfering with the work or opposing his law (vs. 11). This guaranteed the safety of those working on the project.
5. Finally, Darius praises and permits the worship of the God of the Jews (vs. 12). This was important because it legitimized the Jewish religion in the empire and protected its practice.
6. Ezra says that the work on the temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius' reign – about twenty years after it was begun (vs. 13-15).
7. The project wasn't completed, however, until the temple began to function as the central place of worship.
8. In verses 16-22 we see the people gathering animals for sacrifice, organizing the priests and Levites for their service, and celebrating the feast of the Passover.
9. The people are full of joy and thanksgiving as they acknowledge how God has not only worked in their lives, but in the lives of powerful kings and officials to bring about this day.

The nation enjoys a mountaintop experience because they have achieved the completion of their project, but this is not necessarily the end of the process – you and I know that life, especially life in God's kingdom, doesn't work like that.

There's still another stage in God's process.

Stage 5 – Maintenance – Nehemiah 13:4-31

The word "maintenance" doesn't sound very noble, spiritual, or lofty – especially as a last point in Almighty God's process, but I couldn't find a better word to describe what happens after completion. Once you've created, built, birthed, or purchased something – you have to maintain it. It's as simple as that. This is true because in this fallen and sinful world things, whether they be temples, religions, or people deteriorate, and therefore need to be maintained.

We see this phenomenon work in the story of the rebuilding of the temple and restoration of worship in Jerusalem. The people completed their task and rejoiced on the mountain top for a while, but it soon became evident that their temple as well as their faith would require serious maintenance.

The "maintenance" part of the process is described by Nehemiah in the 13th chapter of his book. Once the temple was rebuilt and worship began there remained one task – the rebuilding of the protective wall around the city.

Nehemiah, a cup bearer to the king, is sent by God to complete this task and follows the same process that Zerubbabel and others had experienced with the rebuilding of the temple.

1. An enthusiastic beginning as God works in the heart of the king allowing Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the wall.
2. Opposition from enemies who threaten them.

3. Renewal as Nehemiah rallied the people to work on.
4. Completion of the wall with the ensuing parade and celebration.

Nehemiah returned to Babylon to take up his former position with the king but soon he heard that things began to deteriorate back in Jerusalem. This is where the maintenance part of the process kicked in.

In Nehemiah chapter 13 we get a glimpse of what was going on:

A certain priest permitted one of his pagan relatives to use a storeroom in the temple as a personal residence. Of course, that a pagan actually lived in the temple courts, defiled the temple itself.

The people stopped providing support for the work of the ministry in the temple. As a result, the Levites no longer served at the temple and returned to their homes and family.

A lack of presence at the temple produced a lack of commitment in keeping the Sabbath. People worked on the Sabbath. There was buying and selling in the temple area even on the Sabbath because there were no Levites to guard the gates.

Even the priests who were charged with leadership, began to violate the law by marrying foreign wives. This was a dangerous first step back into idolatry which had caused their previous 70 years of forced exile.

In this we see a common failing of human nature repeatedly played out in the pages of the Bible: People learn, people grow, people forget, people regress.

Nehemiah knew this and returned in order to do maintenance work on God's people:

- He removed the intruder from the temple and restored its purity.
- He reinstated the offerings to support the temple and its workers.

- He assigned Levites to keep stricter controls in order to enforce Sabbath regulations.
- He rebuked the priests for their actions and made them swear not to give their children in marriage to foreigners.

God's process always includes maintenance – for the temple then and for the church today. In every generation there are those who are tasked with maintaining the work and people of God. In the Old Testament the job usually fell to the prophets. In the New Testament God at times uses elders, but usually evangelists are called to admonish, encourage, and rebuke the church in order to maintain its purity and process.

Summary

I've tried to show you that in serving the Lord, especially when you rise up to build something (a church, a relationship, a new ministry, or a new life) there is usually a process.

- Beginning
- Opposition
- Renewal
- Completion
- Maintenance

It helps when you know what stage you're in when things start to happen.

Another point about the process – it's not necessarily a straight line from beginning to maintenance. Sometimes opposition forces you back to begin all over again. Sometimes renewal is followed by several periods of opposition before completion happens. Unfortunately, the process is not always obvious or tidy.

Finally, try to remember some of the lessons taught by the process experienced by Ezra, Nehemiah, and the people who rebuilt Jerusalem and its temple:

Lesson 1 – You don't usually meet opposition until you disturb or threaten the status quo. Unbelievers don't like it when God's people build.

Lesson 2 – Your enemies won't always play "fair." Bad things happen to people who are trying to do good. Someone will use your past mistakes to accuse you in the present. Others will misrepresent your intentions (they will say that you think you're the only one going to heaven, etc.).

Lesson 3 – If you can't work or move forward, wait patiently on the Lord. There's a big difference between waiting and quitting. After all, it is God's process, not yours – He controls the timing.

Lesson 4 – God is always working even if you're not. The Jews had twenty years of downtime in their process. God was preparing them to learn a great lesson. As a result of God's work, when Haggai preached to them, they were ready to respond in two short weeks.

Lesson 5 – God can and does provide for you no matter where you are in the process. He is just as interested in the beginning as in the end and every step in between. Even when they didn't work, God provided protection and care for the Jews.

Lesson 6 – You might die! The officials took note of the names of those who would be first to be executed if things didn't work out. Your service might cause your death – or death of your energy, or opportunities, or savings account, etc. It's important to count the cost before you start the process.

Lesson 7 – Don't be surprised that "maintenance" is always part of the process. So many people become discouraged because their service to a perfect God is not perfect. This is why God has always provided a maintenance manual for His people and His projects.

If you keep the process in mind and remember some of the lessons that we've learned from Ezra and Nehemiah's experience – you will better be able to finish what God has set in your hearts to build or rebuild, and you will work to His glory!

6.

When Ordinary Men and Women do Extraordinary Work

PART 1

The title of this chapter is, "When ordinary men do extraordinary work," and is a study of Nehemiah's efforts at rebuilding the defensive wall around Jerusalem. – Taken from Alan Redpath's book entitled, *Victorious Christian Service*.

I think a more exact title would be, "When ordinary people do extraordinary work" because the Bible is filled with examples of men and women, old and young, from different cultures, who despite their "ordinariness," managed to achieve great things.

- From Abraham, the nobody in UR...
- To Moses, the disgraced orphan son of a queen.
- From David, the least of Jesse's 8 sons...
- To Esther, the adopted child of a man living in exile.

It seems that God has a fondness for those who are small in the eyes of men, those who are not considered great – even by the standards of this fallen world – to exercise His will and purpose through their small lives in order to bring honor and glory to Himself and bless with "extraordinariness" the lives of ordinary people.

And so, it was with Nehemiah. Oh, yes, he was a "cupbearer" to the king, a counselor of sorts. Perhaps this had a measure of importance in the world. But the reality of the situation was that he was enslaved, part of the exiles who had been removed from Judah by the Babylonian army after the destruction of Jerusalem. Some scholars believe he may have even been a eunuch because there is no mention of his family and the easy proximity he had to the king.

His story demonstrates so well how God can use powerless, and yes even damaged people to do great things in His name.

In addition to this, and what's more pertinent for us here today, Nehemiah's experience teaches us what to expect from God when He calls on us to rise beyond our ordinary circumstances and build in His name.

Note that we will re-trace some material we've already covered to go more deeply into Nehemiah's experience.

I. Nehemiah – Background

Before we begin, let's summarize some of what we've been studying about this period. We know that Jewish people had been taken into Babylonian captivity for 70 years. In approximately 538 B.C. the power of the Babylonian empire was broken by Persia and upon assuming supremacy, the king of Persia encouraged the Jewish remnant to return to their own country. Some 50,00 did return and they set about the immense task of rebuilding their city and their temple which was the center of Jewish life. They faced opposition from their neighbors and after laying its foundation, they were forced to stop rebuilding the temple.

It lay unfinished for almost twenty years until God raised up prophets to encourage the people to rise up and finish the building of the temple and

reinstate worship. Sixty more years passed, and another group of exiles returned with Ezra, the priest. This man, who could trace his priestly lineage to Aaron, set about re-establishing the moral and spiritual life of the people that had fallen into a neglected state.

In 445 B.C., twelve years after Ezra had returned to Jerusalem to minister to the people, God raised up another servant to match the need of the hour. God called Nehemiah to come and rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah lived and served in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes I. He obtained permission and supplies from the king in order to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its protective wall and gates.

We read in his book that he encountered much opposition from the enemies of the Jews but that in a remarkably short time the wall was built. The rest of his memoir recounts how he had to return to the city later on in order to re-instate religious order among the leaders and people.

In studying Nehemiah's calling we can learn much about the way that God's servants respond and work once they are called.

II. Cupbearer to Fortress Builder – Nehemiah 1-2

Please open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 1 and let's see how one goes from being an enslaved cupbearer to a successful fortress builder!

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

- **Nehemiah 1:1-3**

Nehemiah's brother and others visit him with news of home. The problem of broken walls and burned gates was twofold:

- A. **A safety issue** – They were quite vulnerable to attack from their unfriendly neighbors as well as roaming bandits and thieves.
- B. **An honor issue** – Their city and society were ashamed because of the condition of their wall, the first thing the people saw when they approached the city.

When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

- **Nehemiah 1:4**

Nehemiah is touched by this report. The condition of the wall symbolizes the discouragement and fear of the people. They were as broken as the wall. He is troubled by this news that he goes to bed in fasting and prayer. We learn that later in his prayers he is asking God what can be done about this situation.

⁵ I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, ⁶ let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

⁸ Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹ but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I

will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' ¹⁰ They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.

- **Nehemiah 1:5-10**

In his prayer he acknowledges that the condition of the wall and of the people are due to their sins and disobedience. He also appeals to God to fulfill His promise to bless and restore His people.

O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

- **Nehemiah 1:11**

At the end of the prayer, we see that Nehemiah has a specific request in mind – something he wants to do to resolve the problem, but he needs God's help to do it. We're not sure what this is until the very last line where he mentions what his role is. In normal circumstances one would put this information at the very beginning to describe who the author is and his position.

- He's a Jew first, then a cupbearer. This is how his priorities lie for his life and identity.
- He also uses this condition to reveal what his ultimate plan is – to appeal to the king for help.
- He's asking God to turn the king's heart toward him in a favorable way.

¹ And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart."

Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" ⁴ Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

- **Nehemiah 2:1-4**

Note that four long months have passed since Nehemiah received the news of the walls and made his initial prayer. In the meantime, he has continued in his usual duties before the king. Nehemiah has probably continued to pray and by this time is beginning to wonder if God has really called him or if his prayers have been in vain.

It seems like the stress and anxiety has begun to show on his face. Now, we need to understand that Nehemiah wasn't "acting" sad to get the king's attention, he wasn't trying to "make something happen." Being sad or engrossed in your own problems, or distracted in the presence of the king was a capital offense! Cupbearers were expendable! The king wasn't Oprah!

Nehemiah had good reason to be afraid. Instead of the subject coming up during the discussion of politics or in some normal way, the king was asking him a personal question and he was being forced to respond. So, Nehemiah tells the truth (if you're going to die, you might as well tell the truth). He reveals the condition of his city. The king responds by allowing Nehemiah to make a request of him. Note before Nehemiah does this, he makes another prayer.

Nehemiah was not allowed to approach this king, but God was, and did on Nehemiah's behalf and answered his prayer at the proper time.

⁵ I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." ⁶ Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. ⁷ And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of

the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me. ⁹ Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. ¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

- Nehemiah 2:5-10

Nehemiah requests permission to return to Jerusalem to personally supervise the rebuilding of the walls. He also asks for royal permission to travel with protection and letters to governors authorizing his work. To top it all off he requests that the king provide the materials for the project.

The king agrees and sends him on his way with the condition that he return at a certain time. After all, Nehemiah was still a slave. Once Nehemiah arrives, he is greeted by neighboring leaders who question his mission and begin immediately to oppose him.

¹¹ So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. ¹² And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. ¹³ So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. ¹⁵ So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews,

the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

- **Nehemiah 2:11-16**

Once in Jerusalem he quietly surveys the work that needs to be done, quietly or secretly because he does not want to provoke an attack from his enemies, or opposition from the people before he has a chance to speak to them.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate, and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." ¹⁸ I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰ So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore, we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

- **Nehemiah 2:17-20**

Note in this passage Nehemiah's method of inspiring his followers:

1. He shares his vision.

They who live next to the ruined walls are too close or too burned out to see the situation clearly. Nehemiah conveys the true meaning of what has happened – they are a reproach (a disgrace) in the eyes of others because of their condition. The wall's condition reflected the people's condition, and it was a shameful thing for God's people to be this way.

Most times people don't see themselves; they are so used to their weakness, sins, and reproaches that they just ignore them and learn to

live with them. Nehemiah's vision was not of the future (he was not a prophet) his was a clear vision of what was actually happening.

He doesn't berate or rebuke the people; he simply shares the clarity of his vision and offers the natural solution – Let's rebuild! People are more likely to respond to an action plan for fixing a problem than continual harping and complaining about the problem at hand.

The second step in Nehemiah's method to inspire the people...

2. He provides motivation.

Now if he were a modern motivational speaker, he would've said things like:

- Just do it!
- Believe in yourself and all things are possible.
- Buy these tapes and books and I'll motivate you to do it.

But, of course, he didn't. He was God's servant and God's servants are motivated by God – not themselves or other men. "Why do this?" Nehemiah asked.

- Because this is no ordinary wall – this is God's wall.
- Because this is no ordinary work – this is God's work.
- Because you are not just ordinary people – you are God's people!

When it comes to building anything for God let's remember that it's the Spirit of God that moves men to action – not slogans or surveys.

3. Nehemiah Provided a Response to Opposition.

Remember a few chapters back I said that any project has stages?

- Stage 1 – Beginning
- Stage 2 – Obstacles

Godly vision and motivation are no guarantee that there will be no obstacles! On the contrary – Godly vision and motivation guarantee that there will be opposition.

In every generation Satan opposes the people and the plans of God – especially when they are motivated to put those plans into action. Once the people were up to build, the opposition was immediate and could have killed their movement before it began. Their threat was that they would report their plan to the king as being an act of rebellion. That was the previous ploy that had stopped the temple rebuilding for 20 years. But it didn't work this time because Nehemiah had a ready answer.

So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore, we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

-Nehemiah 2:20

Note that he doesn't rely on his decree from the king or letters to the governor giving him permission. He appeals to a higher authority – the Lord! This is the Lord's work that we are doing, and no one can stop his servants from carrying it out. So many good works are never finished because the leaders don't expect opposition or do not respond firmly to it when it comes.

Of course, we know the end of this part of the story. An incredible construction feat, to build a wall as high as a house with a thickness that would enable a person to walk on it, a complete series of massive doors, all surrounding a city – completed in 52 days! God called Nehemiah to perform a task and from his experience we not only see how Nehemiah responded and worked, but we also see what God can provide to those He calls upon for service.

7.

When Ordinary Men and Women do Extraordinary Work

PART 2

We've been studying a portion of the lives of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as other leaders that God raised up in order to guide a remnant of the Jewish nation that had been held in exile in a foreign land for 70 years. While there, many abandoned the idolatry that had initially caused the destruction of their nation and Temple. They also drew closer together and maintained their cultural and religious integrity by not taking foreign spouses. For these reasons, when God called them to return, there remained culturally pure Jews along with priests and Levites able to rebuild Jewish society and religion, and complete the task of bringing the Messiah to mankind.

In this final chapter I would like to describe the things that we, as God's people today, can expect when He calls us to take on a great work.

What to Expect

What's interesting about Nehemiah's story is that once he accepted the call of God to serve, he was fully confident that God would provide, he never doubted. We need to understand that when God calls us to build, and we accept that call, we can expect certain things:

1. Expect – Resources

When God gives you a job to do, He doesn't send you out empty handed – He will provide the resources you need to finish the job. Now, most people believe and understand this, but get tripped up in the way God provides.

A. He provides from His sources not just yours.

Nehemiah was a slave, an important slave, a well-positioned slave, but a slave nonetheless – he had no freedom to leave or gather wealth. To give him the job of rebuilding the wall seemed illogical because he had no resources. God, however, provided the key resources for the job through the King of Persia, Nehemiah's master, and a pagan at that!

God demonstrated that the work was His to commission and all the resources belonged to Him as well, even the resources controlled by a pagan king. We sometimes get discouraged because our strength, our experience, our money, or our numbers are not equal to the job, but God is not limited by our personal resources. He provides from His resources, and we are always amazed and humbled when we see where He finds what we need to do the job.

B. He provides at His pace.

Nehemiah first received permission to go, then a letter permitting him to use the king's forest for wood. He began the job with the basics and as he moved from stage to stage in the building process, God would supply his needs at every step. Sometimes what he needed were the words to inspire His people who were afraid and ready to quit, and God supplied these as well, through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

We always want all the money up front; we always want assurances on the table that everything will go smoothly before we take on the job that God gives us to do. It's not that God is slow, miserly, or possessive with His resources, it's that He uses them to build our faith. The goal wasn't just building a wall to protect the Jews, it was to build their faith in God Who, in the end, was the only One who could truly protect them.

C. He provides the full amount.

Study each person that God called upon to do a job; Noah, Moses, Solomon, the Apostles, each one had enough to finish the task. God provides from unexpected and unusual sources at times.

- Joseph provides for his long-lost family in Egypt.
- 300 men defeat 300,000 in the story of Gideon.
- The angel wipes out the Assyrian army without a single Jewish soldier lost in Hezekiah's story.
- Jesus multiplies the bread and fish for thousands.
- The early church sells its personal property to provide for the poor.

God does not dishonor Himself by giving us a job to do and not providing enough resources. The resources are always there but we have to open our eyes and hearts in order to recognize them at times.

2. Expect - Opposition

Just because it is God that gives the job and the objective is to honor Him, this doesn't mean that it will be easy. Nehemiah continually faced opposition to his plan from everyone, the neighboring kings, as well as his own people. I used to complain to God about these types of problems, when trying to accomplish things.

- "Why don't You just let me do it?"
- "Why all this trouble, it's for You isn't it? It's right, isn't it? It will accomplish good, won't it?"
- "Why all the hassle?"

Then I realized, God doesn't cause the hassle, Satan causes the hassle, because when God gives a person a job to do, Satan will be there to frustrate his plans in every conceivable way.

- He uses the outside influences of evil men.
- He uses the inside influences of our weaknesses to sin.
- He uses division, indifference, laziness, lies, and discouragement to thwart any plan that will honor God.

That's what it's all about. Any job you get from God is an opportunity to honor Him in some way and Satan is determined not to let that happen. Therefore, if God gives us a task to perform you can be sure that the “snake” will be there also, causing trouble from the beginning.

3. Expect - Victory

Nehemiah used resources and withstood the enemy, the threats, the internal divisions, the fatigue, the discouragement, and in 52 days he built the wall! When God gives us a job to do, He provides the resources, sustains us through trouble, and He expects victory. So should we! Nehemiah's victory was dramatic, inspiring, and had the advantage of happening in a short amount of time, but in the work of the Lord the victory is not always accomplished in 52 days or even in 52 years.

- Abraham died never seeing the nation.
- Moses died never entering the Promised Land.
- David died never seeing the temple.
- Paul died never seeing Christianity becoming the religion of the Empire.

Sometimes the job is a long term one and you may not see the victory in your own lifetime, but if God calls on you to rise up and build, expect the victory sooner or later because if it comes from the Lord, nothing will be able to stop the victory - nothing.

Summary/Exhortation - I

Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others took on the task of rebuilding the city, temple, and wall for an ultimate purpose they were not aware of – the coming of Jesus Christ some 400 years later! That was part of the job that no one but God knew at the time. All that work and effort to protect a group of people who would later produce the Savior from their midst.

Today we are charged with preaching the gospel to the entire world, to grow the kingdom, and be a constant witness to all for the return of Jesus Christ who will judge the world and exalt the church at the end of time. Our task today points to this ultimate purpose. Our advantage today is that we have not only been called on to build the kingdom on Earth, but we also know why God has asked us to do this.

There is not much left of what Nehemiah and the others built. Only a small portion of one wall remains near where the temple once stood. They call it the Western Wall, or the Wailing Wall. It's a place where tourists visit and Jews go to pray and weep, remembering the glory of a past era.

We, on the other hand, are building to eternity because the job we've been given to do is to build the kingdom that will last forever. Let us, therefore, arise and build that kingdom in whatever place and time the Lord has called on us and do so remembering that:

- He will provide the resources.
- He will provide the power to overcome opposition.
- He will grant us the victory to His honor and glory forever, Amen.

One last point and this book will be yours. This is a bit of harsh wisdom for those who feel they have been called to build – whatever that may be. The following ideas contain the simple truths necessary if you are to complete any great work for the Lord. I refer to them collectively as, "The art of finishing".

The Art of Finishing – Summary 2

If you, as an individual or a group, want to finish what you start, you must:

1. Understand that finishing is always harder than starting.

So many of life's great ideas, projects, plans, businesses, careers, relationships, missions – have been left unfinished because people didn't understand this simple but import truth. The first wave of people returning to Jerusalem were excited to get things going but they quickly abandoned the work at the first sign of opposition. So many people don't realize that the "rush" and enthusiasm that accompanies the beginning of a project, rarely lasts until the end.

People are propelled along with that first flush of excitement when they begin but when their jets cool down so do their dedication and commitment. With time, most of their energy is spent looking for a way out of the project instead of a way to finish the project.

A testimony to this fact is that there are a lot more unfinished projects and neglected causes in the world than completed ones. A great "modern" example of this phenomenon of this is the marathon run. We have one in Montreal every summer. 10,000 runners from all over the world start the 26-mile race on the Jacques Cartier bridge (which is shut down for the event). The TV cameras always show how charged up everyone is at the starting line. Loosening, smiling, high-fives, stretching, etc. But what a difference at the halfway and three-quarter way mark: gray faces, puking, falling from exhaustion

Then look at the few hundred that manage to complete the race: eyes glazed, legs like two dead weights, and total burn-out of the lungs.

The ones who crossed the finish line knew from the beginning that the end was going to be much, much harder than the start. This is one of the reasons Nehemiah succeeded. His starting line was the wall, and it was a 52-day adrenaline rush. But read chapters 7-13 in his book and you'll see

that his task was far from over when the wall was done – that was the beginning. He had to persevere through:

- The reorganization of that society.
- The re-establishment of their feasts and covenant to obey God.
- Re-instate the collection of tithes to support the service of the temple.
- Organize a national feast day to dedicate the wall.
- He even had to return for a time to rebuke the people for their backsliding and unfaithfulness.

Nehemiah was as fervent for the task God had given him at the beginning as he was at the end. When we begin something with the understanding that it will be harder to finish than to start – we have a much better chance of reaching our goal because we go in with our eyes wide open.

2. You must resolve that nothing will stop you from finishing.

Finishers keep trying every day until the job is done. Whatever the challenge, task, or struggle:

- Training to master a sport or making the team,
- Breaking a sinful habit,
- Building a relationship, wall, or a congregation...

No matter what the obstacles, you are not going to quit. Thomas Edison examined over 1500 formulas and experiments before getting his invention of the light bulb to work. The difference between failure and success is not just strength, wealth or talent, the real difference between individuals is the resolution not to quit under any circumstances. Oh, yes, God provides the resources, the direction, and the victory, but we are the ones that decide if we are going to persevere or not.

Actually, the true point of victory happens at the moment you decide not to quit, no matter what the cost. People can treat you unfairly, make life

difficult; circumstances can work against you, but only you remain in control of the decision to quit or not.

3. Remember that rewards are only given to finishers, not starters.

Quitters have stories, excuses, complaints – but the prizes go to those who finish. Examples:

- Salespeople get a commission if they close the deal, not just show the product.
- Marathoners get to say, "I ran the Montreal Marathon" only if they cross the finish line.
- God preserved the history of Nehemiah's ministry because he finished his task, otherwise the book would be about someone else.

Of course, the consummate finisher was our Lord Jesus Christ. When He began His ministry, the crowds were with Him, they tried to make Him king because they saw His miracles and heard His wisdom. At the end of His life, however, He was alone, beaten, humiliated, totally rejected, and was nailed to a Roman cross. And yet, He was able to say, "It is Finished" (John 19:30). He began gloriously, struggled though the obstacles, and finished on a bloody tree, all done to receive His reward. His reward was not His resurrection; His resurrection was never in doubt because He was without sin. No, His reward was the possibility of our resurrection through His sacrifice on that cross (I Peter 1:3). Jesus finished His difficult course in this life, so that all of us would have the opportunity to resurrect into the next life.

²⁴ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

- I Corinthians 9:24-25

No matter what you are building in the name of the Lord, I pray that you will, with God's grace and mercy, complete the task and receive the imperishable crown of life as you cross the finish line.

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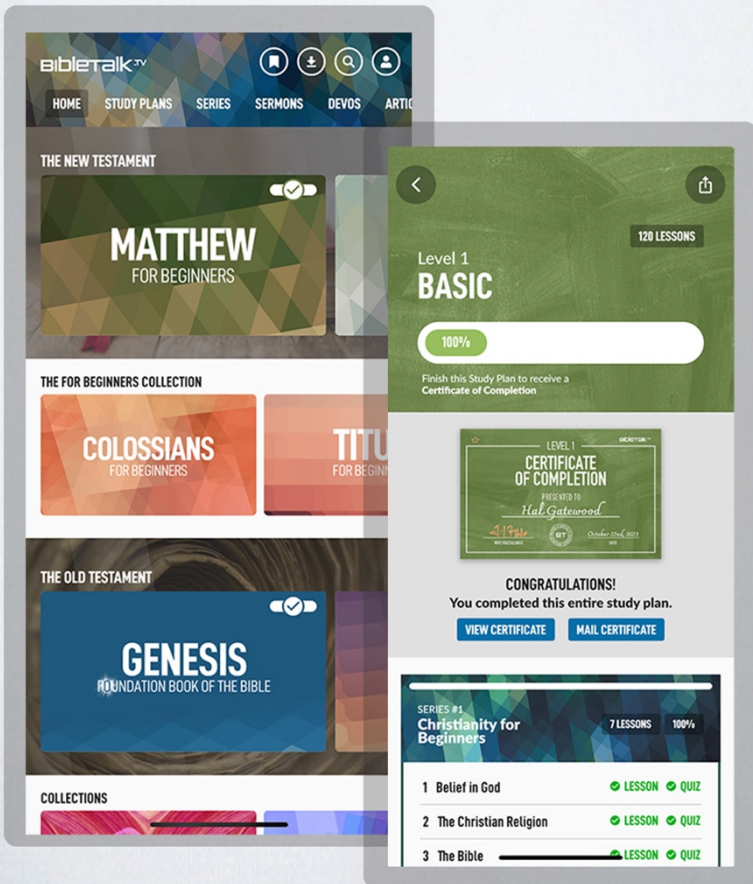
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The image displays two overlapping screenshots of the BibleTalk TV mobile application. The background screenshot shows the main menu with navigation icons for Home, Study Plans, Series, Sermons, Devos, and Articles. It features a 'THE NEW TESTAMENT' section with a 'MATTHEW FOR BEGINNERS' card, a 'THE FOR BEGINNERS COLLECTION' with 'COLOSSIANS FOR BEGINNERS' and 'TITUS FOR BEGINNERS' cards, and a 'THE OLD TESTAMENT' section with a 'GENESIS FOUNDATION BOOK OF THE BIBLE' card. The foreground screenshot shows a 'Level 1 BASIC' study plan with a 100% progress bar and a 'CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION' for 'Hal Gatewood'. Below the certificate, it says 'CONGRATULATIONS! You completed this entire study plan.' with buttons for 'VIEW CERTIFICATE' and 'MAIL CERTIFICATE'. At the bottom, a 'SERIES #1 Christianity for Beginners' section shows a progress bar at 100% and a list of lessons: '1 Belief in God', '2 The Christian Religion', and '3 The Bible', each with 'LESSON' and 'QUIZ' status indicators.