

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 39

We are reading the Bible in a chronological manner, moving from book to book to ensure that the historical account is kept in order. We are also, from time to time, diverting to other books so that we emphasize a major theme. When books of the Bible are read piecemeal, with no particular strategy, the events become disconnected. The historical account was straightforward up to the exile because of the link to the kings of Israel and Judah. The return from exile is a little more difficult because chronology is linked to the rulers of Babylon and Persia. This is further complicated because of the various names of these rulers and minor differences of opinion as to when they ruled. In addition, we have read from the Prophets in the context of the history, and there are further differences of opinion as to when some of the Prophets ministered. If we add to this the fact that different calendars were in force in different parts of the world then exact chronology is not certain. Minor differences of opinion by historians do not seriously affect our studies. It is very useful to order our studies as best we can. Let us, therefore, pause to reflect a little on a good approximation of the chronology.

Babylon was the main city of the Babylonian Empire. This is where the kings resided. When the Persians rose to be the chief world empire, their kings ruled from the main cities of the empire. While Babylon was in what is now modern-day Iraq, Persia is now modern-day Iran. The capital of Persia was called Susa or Shushan. Much has been discovered about these cities and empires through archaeological finds, pieced together into the historical accounts that are available today. More information is unearthed as the years go by to correct and enhance the perceived historical records. Here is a brief overview of the chronology covering the period of the return from exile:

- Cyrus was the head of the empire of the Medes and Persians which overthrew the Babylonian Empire. Persia was prominent in the alliance of the Medes and Persians and so the Empire is usually simply known as the Persian Empire. There are different opinions as to whether Cyrus is the same person as Darius the Mede who is mentioned in Daniel 11:1. It is reasonable to assume that Cyrus ruled the extended Empire of Persia from Susa, the capital city of Persia. Now, because Persia included the City of Babylon, a ruler was needed there. Cyrus' relative Darius was commissioned to be king in Babylon, subordinate to Cyrus. This was around 530 BC.

- Zerubbabel took the first company of exiles back to Jerusalem at this time, in approximately 538 BC.
- Cambyses followed Cyrus as the chief ruler of the Persian Empire. He ruled between 530 and 522 BC. It was during this time that orders were given to cease building of the Temple. The ruler named in Ezra 4:23 is Artaxerxes. This seems to be another name or title for Cambyses. This was also at the time of a ruler named Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6). Again, it is likely that the names or titles are interchangeable, referring to the same person. Possibly more than one person was named, but this does not affect the chronology.
- Darius I came to power in 522 BC, ruling until 486 BC. This was a different Darius from the time of Daniel. During the time of Darius I, Haggai and Zechariah Prophesied, and permission was given for the rebuilding of the Temple to commence. 516 BC is thought to be the date of completion of the Temple, which is exactly 70 years after the destruction in 586 BC. This fits with Jeremiah's Prophecy of 70 years of exile. This is based on an understanding that the exile was *primarily* separation from God on account of the fall of the Temple, and *secondarily* separation from the Land.
- After the Temple was rebuilt there was a period of possibly 60 years before Ezra came back to Jerusalem. The next ruler of Babylon was Xerxes. He ruled from 486 to 464 BC. He is thought to be the ruler at the time when Esther was in Shusan (Susa). Ahasuerus is another name for Xerxes.
- Artaxerxes I ruled the Persian Empire from 464 to 423 BC. This was not the same Artaxerxes that ruled at the time of Zerubbabel, whom we have associated with Cambyses, above. During the reign of Artaxerxes I, both Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. Ezra returned in approximately 458 BC and Nehemiah in approximately 445 BC.

Thus there are about 60 years between Chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra. During this period we must take account of Esther and two more Prophets. It is uncertain when Joel and Obadiah prophesied. It could have been at the time before the exile of Judah. It could have been after the return from exile, around 550 BC; this is where some scholars place them. Their Prophecies are relevant to both of these times. God gave these two short Prophecies to be read at any time, so even if the chronology is uncertain it is appropriate to read them at this point of our studies. Then we will read Esther before returning to the account of Ezra and Nehemiah, keeping our studies in a meaningful chronological relationship.

Day 1

Joel Chapter 1. This Chapter would fit with the time before Babylon invaded Judah. Amos had interpreted the signs in Israel as judgments from God, by reference to Deuteronomy 28. Joel might have understood the blight on Judah's crops in the same way. If the vision of the devouring locusts was in hindsight, it was a reminder of the reason for Judah's exile, and a wake-up-call for their return to the Land. Since the exile was a shadow of future events on the earth, this Chapter is also an ongoing warning to Judah to be vigilant in their obedience to God. Recalling God's

fulfillment of the terms of the Covenant recorded in Deuteronomy 28 brings resolution for the future.

Chapter 2. Babylon fulfilled the imagery of this Prophecy in the invasion of Judah. It is also a rallying cry for the future when the confederation of armies will descend on Judah once more, this time under the antichrist. Joel speaks of the former rain and the latter rain. This referred to the seasons of Israel's harvest. This is also a metaphor for the outpouring of God's Spirit as He brings forth the harvests of people into the Kingdom. If we meditate upon this we see various ways to interpret the metaphor. One interpretation would point to Yeshua bringing in the early harvest of His people at His first coming, and the final harvest at His second coming. If the Feast of Firstfruits, soon after Passover, represents the beginning of the harvest of God's people then this refers to His Ascension following His Crucifixion and Resurrection. The harvest is celebrated more fully at Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits. The second major Harvest Feast is Sukkot, which foreshadows Yeshua's return. Joel's Prophecy was fulfilled at the return from exile, after the time of repentance and mourning in Babylon. This is a shadow of the redemption of the faithful remnant through the sacrifice of Yeshua. Joel contains both these layers of interpretation. Verse 28-29 were fulfilled when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the gathered pilgrims at the Feast of Shavuot (Pentecost) recorded in Acts 2. Verses 30 to 32 are, similar to other Prophecies, pointing to the end times. This would confirm the view that the return from exile was a preparation for the coming of Yeshua, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (former rain) and the final outpouring on the remnant of Jews in Jerusalem in the tense few years before the Lord's return (latter rain). This is confirmed through Zechariah, who also called this the *latter rain* (Chapter 10, Verse 1). In Zechariah 12:10, the Prophet shows that, at this time, the Holy Spirit will cause repentance resulting in saving faith: *I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication: then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.* Zechariah and Joel are in complete harmony, both building a picture of the coming of Yeshua, His fulfillment of the Covenant and the nature of His return. Joel confirms Zechariah 14.

2 Chronicles 20. Review this incident from the days of King Jehoshaphat. Judah was about to be invaded by an overwhelming alliance of armies advanced to defeat Judah. Jehoshaphat sought the Lord and proclaimed a fast. The armies were defeated. In the context of Joel, this is seen as a shadow of the end-time battle when the armies of the world will invade the Land of Israel and Judah. They will be judged in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

Joel Chapter 3. God used the battle against Jehoshaphat as a shadow of the way He will deal with the invading armies in the last days. Verse 10 is the opposite to Isaiah 2:4. Before Yeshua brings in His reign of peace symbolized by swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the opposite will occur as one last mighty battle is used to judge the nations and bring

salvation to the Children of Israel: *Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of violence against the people of Judah, for they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall abide forever and Jerusalem from generation to generation. For I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I have not acquitted; for the Lord dwells in Zion.* (Verses 19-21) There will be much bloodshed in that last battle. Also, in that day, there will be forgiveness for those whose forefathers said, when Yeshua was crucified, even after Pilate had declared Yeshua innocent: *His blood be on us and on our children* (Matthew 27:24-25). The blood that Yeshua shed will be the means of grace for those who turn to Him in faith during these last tumultuous days, known as *The Day of the Lord*.

Obadiah. Obadiah complements Joel as a reading of the Prophets in the context of the return from exile. Edom is synonymous with Jacob's brother Esau. Esau settled in the land of Edom to the East of the Jordan River. *Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated*, said Malachi (Chapter 1, Verse 2) God chose Jacob and his physical descendants to be His servant. He made Covenant with them. He was, and always will be, faithful to the Covenant. This has brought suffering to the Tribes of Israel because of sin, but God will use that suffering in the process of fulfilling His Covenant purposes, never forgetting His own commitment. By contrast, Esau has been neglected like all the Gentile nations, until as individuals we come to faith in the God of Jacob through Yeshua. Then we are joint heirs of the Covenant promises (Ephesians 2). These are hard truths to consider and to keep in balance.

While Joel prophesied to Judah, Obadiah prophesied to Edom. The Prophecy is contained in just one short Chapter. It is another confirmation of the coming judgment on the nations at the end of time, when God restores the fortunes of Jacob. The physical descendants of Jacob have suffered among the nations for centuries, so their restoration has not been without pain. Since the Crucifixion of Yeshua the Gospel has gone to all nations and there is a large family of faith drawn from all nations.

Alongside the good news of salvation, the Bible contains prophecies that point to the great days of God's wrath. It is not that we should frighten people with the Gospel message, but the truth has been revealed as a warning to those who resist the call of God to salvation. While multitudes will turn to God in faith, God also knows that there will be multitudes who will resist His invitation to repent and believe. This will be so whatever He does, whether it be a "flute song for a dance" or a "mournful sound of lament" (Matthew 11:17). A vast army will seek to destroy the Jews in the end days, and then will come the judgment foretold by the Prophets. Obadiah speaks to the Gentile nations, focusing first on Edom, Jacob's brother. The reason for God's judgment on Edom is clear: *For violence against your brother Jacob....you shall be cut off forever. In the day that you stood on the other side – in the day that ... foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem - even you were one of them. You should not have gazed on the day of your brother in the day of his captivity: nor should you have rejoiced...on the day of their destruction...* Read all the details carefully. They should be a rallying cry for Christians to mourn over the calamities of the Jews and not gloat or take part in their persecution. This is a warning to every nation, to

consider God's Covenant purposes centred on Israel, through Yeshua, and be careful of our actions in these last days.

Day 2

We now turn to Esther. It is an incident that seems to stand on its own, but it is integrated into the history of Judah and has meaning for today. It seems to stand alone because, like no other Book of the Bible, the name of God is not mentioned. Neither is there a single word of Prophecy in the Book, yet the Book *is* prophetic, speaking reassurance to any generation of the Jews. It must not be considered in isolation. God has spoken through the Prophets in various ways to confirm His Covenant purposes. In the letter Jeremiah sent to the captives, where the seventy years of exile were announced, He also said: *I know the thoughts that I think toward you ... thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.* (Jeremiah 29:11) In Ezekiel 11:16, God said: *Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.* All of God's promises were understood by a faithful remnant during the time the Jews were in exile, first under the Babylonians and then under the Medes and Persians. There are times, therefore, when God confirms His promises not by a direct word but through His actions. Just as Daniel was placed in the court of Nebuchadnezzar so Esther and her uncle Mordecai found themselves in the court of Ahasuerus (Xerxes).

We, in our day, can review the history of the Jews with much hindsight. The real exile of all people of the world began when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden. The ultimate return from exile, that God has in mind, is a restoration of a remnant of people from all nations. This is not to a land in the world as we know it, but to the Eternal Kingdom. In the midst of the years of human history, God chose one nation through whom we would all learn fundamental principles. The Twelve Tribes of Israel make up this nation. Through their history we learn about God. It is a real history of real people. We also learn lessons about God's eternal plans through the types and shadows of their life on this earth. Judah's exile, first under the Babylonians and then through the Romans, is in one sense all one exile. The ultimate return from exile for the Jews is to the Eternal Kingdom through faith in Yeshua HaMashaich. They are God's prophetic people who stand as signs and evidence of His faithfulness to all His promises. Thus, when God does not speak clearly, we are to consider His promises and note how they are being fulfilled. For those who deny Him and pay no heed to the Bible it seems that God is silent, and some would even say that He does not exist. For those who believe in Him and remember His promises they see that it is He who, sometimes in mysterious ways, is bringing about His purposes. Nebuchadnezzar had a personal revelation from God through dreams and visions. Ahasuerus was treated differently, though God was still fulfilling His promises to the faithful remnant among the Jews. The Jews themselves did not hear a specific prophetic word at the time of Esther, so their faith was being tested through the events that occurred.

This is why the Book of Esther is so important today. It is evidence that, even when God does not speak directly, we should be holding fast to His promises and interpreting the signs of His fulfillment of those promises. We cannot understand just how He is working out His promises, but we do not need to know all the details. At times we must simply obey the impulsion of His Spirit in the circumstances that He places us. The Book of Esther is the only Book of the Bible that is not among the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran. Possibly the religious community who lived there 2000 years ago did not consider this Book as authentic because it did not contain the Name

of God. We do not know, but we thank God that He has ensured that it has been preserved in the Tanach and passed on as part of the entire Christian Bible. God speaks to us through it today, to ensure that we know that He is faithful to His promises for Israel, Judah and all who come to Him in faith from any nation, even when there seems to be a silence from Heaven. This has been important through the years of suffering of the Jews, and will be important as the end times come upon the entire world. Indeed, the Book of Esther has types and shadows that point to these days.

Bear in mind that satan's gross evil rises from time to time, especially coinciding with something special that God is doing. Satan will not be victorious in the end, but while he is *the prince of the powers of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience* (Ephesians 2:2) and the *prince (ruler) of this world* (John 14:30, 16:11), we can expect times of trouble. Consider how Pharaoh murdered the babies when Moses was born, and how the young children were killed by Herod when Yeshua was born (Exodus 1:22, Matthew 2:16-18). At the time of Esther, the Jews were returning from exile. In the 70 weeks Prophecy, Daniel foretold that this would bring troubled times (Daniel 9:25). Zerubbabel encountered resistance to the building of the Temple and now an evil man was to arise to seek to annihilate all the Jews. This evil was repeated by Hitler during the Second World War, prior to the reestablishment of Israel as the homeland for the Jews in 1947/8. The time of Jacob's trouble prior to the return of Yeshua is also to be understood in this context. God's purpose in troubled times is always redemptive, allowing His people to be tested and refined, whilst satan is heaping up judgment on himself and his army of fallen angels.

Esther Chapter 1. So then begins the account of Esther. It is set out in plain language that is easy to follow. We are taken to the Palace in Shushan (Susa), where the story begins. Archaeologists have uncovered remains of this ancient palace and much of the history of the Persian Empire is known. It was a vast and ornate palace just as we imagine it from the account in the Bible. Vashti disobeyed her husband and so the process began whereby Esther would be brought into the King's courts as a means of God protecting the Jews.

Chapter 2. We cannot tell how God chooses a person even before they are born, ensuring that the circumstances of their life, their physical appearance and their human characteristics, fit exactly with His purposes. We are not told these things. This young girl, Hadasseh, meaning *Myrtle*, was renamed Esther, meaning *star*, just as many other people were given different names in those days. The Hand of God guided her into the court of the King, using the circumstances created by Vashti's disobedience, the troubled mind of the King and the counsel of his wise men. Mordecai, her uncle, was also in the right place to discover a plot hatched against the King. Mordecai's response in warning the King was later used by God in the process of helping the Jews.

Chapter 3. This story is an earthly parallel of a heavenly reality. We saw, in the account of Daniel, how he was shown the spiritual background that paralleled his experiences in Babylon. We can

assume that there are similar parallels here. This also helps us to understand the mysteries of the Book of Revelation, where we look into the spiritual battles behind the incidents in this world. Haman is a type of antichrist, moved by the spiritual powers that seek to destroy God's people. He is a type of Judas who was close to Yeshua, when it was known in advance that he would betray Him. Haman was allowed to come to prominence in the court of Ahasuerus, and to hatch a plot to destroy, not only Mordecai who offended him, but all of the Jews. Was it possible that this was, in part, a test of the Jews? As we have said, God was silent except through the signs and through promises already given through His Prophets.

Mordecai was a faithful Jew who would not bow to this antichrist figure called Haman. It is an interesting coincidence that it was in the month of Nisan that Haman hatched his plot. This is the month of Passover, when the Jews would be remembering their exodus from Egypt. A decree went out that all the Jews would be annihilated throughout the entire world on a certain date. Imagine yourself in the situation of the Jews. God was seemingly silent. God had made preparation through the letter that Jeremiah had sent decades before (Jeremiah 29), promising return from exile after 70 years. What would you do in these circumstances? We are about to discover what faithful Mordecai did. Mordecai typifies every person of faith, throughout the trials of both Jews and Christians over succeeding generations. We have our Bibles and in them are the promises of God. There will be another seeming silence from God in the last days (Zechariah 13:3-5). It will be at a time of great trouble on this earth. Let us learn from faithful Mordecai. He is like a prophet to us and, symbolizes the presence of God among His people even when it is hard to discern.

Chapter 4. Young innocent Esther was in the most important position of all the Jews. She alone could approach the King, yet to do so might be at the cost of her life. The words of Mordecai echo to us over the centuries as a challenge to our faith, just as they challenged a response in Esther: *Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* (Verses 13-14) We may like the last sentence of this exhortation, interpreting it as a call to prayer, being members of the Kingdom of Heaven, but Esther was in a different kingdom – that of the powerful Persians! Mordecai knew the promises of God and was confident that there would be deliverance from evil Hamon. He suggested that Esther was put into the palace for this precise time. Esther was left to test this. She considered for a moment and made her decision. Surely God foresaw this moment and prepared her and Mordecai for it. This time there was no deliverance through dreams and visions given to the King, but through the faith of the Jews. The call went out for fasting and prayer, just as it will go out when difficult days come in the future. Let us note this carefully.

Day 3

Chapter 5. Are we reading an account of Esther's good ideas or an account of God's guidance? To the human eye, as so many times in the works of God, it can be interpreted either way. The believing Jews had prayed and fasted for three days, so should they not expect that God would answer? They were praying according to His Word given to Jeremiah and the other Prophets. We are all capable of praying and being surprised at the answer! It happened at the time when Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:5-19). The disciples prayed and then were surprised when Peter was freed by an angel and stood knocking at their door!

Surely Esther was strengthened by God and inspired to propose the plan that would result in the salvation of the Jews. She was given boldness to enter the inner court of the Palace, where she would either be accepted or lose her life. Surely God moved the King to extend the sceptre to her, and Haman was lured into a trap.

We cannot pass on from this Chapter without noting some parallels. During the time of the Temple in Jerusalem only the High Priest could go into the Holiest Place once a year. This was on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. He was to intercede with God regarding the sins of the people. When Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, approached God in the wrong way they were consumed by fire (Leviticus 10:1-3). If the High Priest came to the Most Holy Place in the prescribed manner, the sins would be atoned for and he would then go out and announce this to the people. It is a parallel to Esther approaching the Persian King. One might ask, if Ahasuerus could extend his scepter to the Jews, then how much more will God hear the intercessions of His people?

Haman was a manifestation of satan. He thought that Esther's invitation to a banquet was going to be his means of executing Mordecai, and a confirmation of the destruction of all the Jews. When Yeshua went to the Cross satan may have thought that he had been victorious. Instead it was the means of his own downfall and the salvation of all of the covenant family of God: all those from among both the Jews and the Gentiles who join the family of faith as joint heirs of the Covenant (Ephesians 2). When Yeshua ascended into Heaven it was as if the Father extended the scepter to Him. He is our High Priest in the Holy of Holies, and He will return to fulfill the Day of Atonement. We cannot force the parallels with Esther too far, but they are there as an encouragement and a point of meditation.

Chapter 6. Without being named, God disturbed the sleep of the King, not through vision but through a desire to check certain palace records. This was God's way to bring honour to Mordecai and embarrassment to Haman.

Chapter 7. There is now a sense in which Esther reminds us of the time when God's people will judge angels. If 1 Corinthians 6:3 refers to fallen angels, Haman is a shadow of those who will have their evil intents turned back on them. Yeshua went to the Cross to take the sins of the

world upon Himself for all who will believe. The powers of darkness set up the Cross for Him. In Mordecai's case a gallows was set up for him, which became the means of Haman's destruction. Mordecai was not hanged but was saved by the intercessions of Esther. The punishment suffered by wicked Hamon was exactly what he intended for Mordecai. We see parallels in the Cross of Yeshua. The people who do not accept the sacrifice of Yeshua will remain under condemnation manifest in the Cross. There seem to be many points of reflection here. God used Esther, Mordecai and the King of Persia to save the lives of the Jewish people, whom Hamon had falsely accused.

Chapter 8. The dark threat lingering over the Jews was replaced by rejoicing. Not only did God save the Jews but honoured them, so much so, that many people wanted to convert and become a Jew (Verse 17). A day of mourning was turned to a day of feasting. This deliverance has been an encouragement to the Jews ever since, especially during the ongoing persecutions they have suffered from their enemies over many years. This is what God intends; by reading the account in the context of the exile and return, we are encouraged to remember all of God's promises and stand firm through trials. We learn that God will bring about all His plans and purposes and we are encouraged to *watch and pray* as Yeshua commanded us (Matthew 25:13, 26:41), just as they did in Persia.

Chapters 9 and 10. Mordecai and Esther were greatly honoured in the Palace and this enabled all of those who had plotted against the Jews to be destroyed. This is another shadow of Judgment Day which we must not force too much, but nevertheless is there for us to consider. We have studied how God will judge those who have sought to bring harm to the Jews. Obadiah reminded us of this. Haman plotted the destruction of the Jews on the day determined by the lot called the pur (Chapter 3, Verse 7). This is why the Jews, since that day, celebrate the Feast of Esther, also known as Purim, on the 14th and 15th of Adar. This is for the two days following the day that was allotted for their annihilation. They have added this to the Feasts of the Lord found in Leviticus 23. They also added the Feast of Hannukah from the time when the Temple was cleansed after desecration by the Greeks at the time of the Macabees. At Purim, the Book of Esther is read. Since it is not a biblical Feast, Jewish traditions have come into the celebrations. It has become something of a carnival atmosphere when the memory of Hamon is mocked. Might it be preferable to see this as a more meditative and prayerful time, looking forward with thankfulness and joy to the future? If Haman was the agent of satan, then it is better to be careful, as Jude advised (Jude 1:5-9), not to stir up the powers of satan, but to say, *the Lord rebuke you!* It is very important to keep a constant reminder of God's deliverance through Esther and Mordecai so that we, in humility and faith, look forward to His completing all His promises in the end times.

Day 4

God was with His people in Shusan (Susa). He was also with them in Jerusalem. The needs were different in every place where the Jews lived, and He helped them according to their individual needs. This encourages us in our own day. God is not confined to a Temple, a Synagogue or a Church building. He is to be found everywhere and will make Himself known if we seek Him with integrity.

Let us now return to Jerusalem. Many years passed, just as Daniel prophesied, before the Jews were resettled. A new ruler reigned in Persia. His name was Artaxerxes I. He reigned from 464 to 423 BC. God stirred Ezra to go to Jerusalem to restore Torah observance. Let us read the account, followed by the account of Nehemiah. Study the historical account in its own right, whilst also considering, prayerfully, any lessons for today. Order was coming about step by step in Jerusalem. The rebuilt Temple opened the way for restored fellowship with God, but not in just any way. Restored fellowship implied a restoration of the covenant principles that God brought through Moses. Ezra's arrival was another stage whereby God's presence came to His people more fully. *Return to Me, and I will return to you*, God said later through Malachi (Malachi 3:7). This principle was outworked when Ezra went up to Jerusalem to restore an understanding of Torah. His anointing was the presence of God in the midst of His people.

Ezra Chapter 7. It was the seventh year of Artaxerxes. Ezra returned to Jerusalem with a second group of exiles in approximately 458 BC, nearly 60 years from the completion of the Temple. He was a Scribe, a direct descendant of Aaron, *skilled in the Law of Moses* (Verse 6). Verse 10 is memorable, an inspiration for all of us who set out, with resolve, to serve God: *Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law (Torah/Teaching/instructions) of the Lord, and do it, to teach statutes and ordinances to Israel*. To seek, to do and to teach: these three resolutions were bound together for Ezra, just as they must be bound together for us. These same principles apply to the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. Read carefully the letter that Artaxerxes wrote. It is wonderful to have a record of the exact words. God appointed Ezra, and Artaxerxes was moved to send him back to Jerusalem with gifts to help with the work.

Chapter 8. The company was gathered. The remnant of Jews, which God had promised would return, included leaders sufficient for every task. It was like the days when the Tabernacle was built. God had ensured, before the Israelites left Egypt, that all necessary materials were available, and also skilled craftsmen. This is how the Sovereignty of God works within the freewill of His people. He ensures that all provision is made for His own purposes and for the needs of His ministers, within the freewill response that they make. Sometimes it seems that our freewill lets us down, but at key moments of history God shows us that He has not forgotten His ultimate purposes. He always keeps His promises.

King David had prescribed an order for the service of the Priests and Levites (1 Chronicles 24), which Solomon had put into practice (2 Chronicles 8:14-16). Sherebiah understood this order (Verse 18) and joined Ezra's company. They were to set off, with provision and understanding, to bring order to Temple worship, remembered from the days of David and Solomon.

Verse 22 is an insight into the humanity of Ezra. He had boasted to the King that God would take care of them on the road to Jerusalem, so he did not need an armed guard. Now he realized that there would indeed be danger. We can imagine a wave of doubts assailing him - but just for a moment. He knew what to do, and called for fasting and prayer prior to the journey. Those of us who have embarked on our modern-day ministries might take heart from this account of Ezra. It is like this, still, today, when doubts assail us. God indeed protected them on the journey and so they arrived in Jerusalem and rested for a few days before beginning the task they had been assigned.

Jude. We will turn aside for a moment to the short Epistle of Jude. This will bring relevance to the situation that Ezra found when he went to Jerusalem. There are a number of ways that satan can weaken or seek to destroy the Covenant people of God. We have studied how the Jews were prevented from completing the Temple by trouble-makers in the land. Also, Haman, a type of antichrist, sought to have all the Jews murdered. There is another, more subtle attack to consider. This is when the identity of God's people is lost through alliances with unbelievers and those who follow false gods. Even King Solomon was weakened through his marriages with wives who served other gods. Jude has a strong word of warning to Christians, as well as Jews, concerning the spiritual battle being waged to compromise our faith. If satan can seduce us into compromising with the sins of the world then we will be subject to the same judgments as Sodom and Gomorrah. Sexual immorality was a besetting sin in these two wicked cities. Acts 15 brought another strong warning about this, especially since the pagan temples of the past had temple prostitutes to seduce men into alliances with them and their gods. Jude recalled the sin of Balaam and the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16). Peter also referred to the sin of Balaam (2 Peter 2:15). Jude warns us about the consequences of allying with the sinful world, and allowing unbelievers to partake of our spiritual fellowship. This will be a means of satan destroying God's people from *within* their ranks. We have two sorts of spiritual battles: those *from without* and those *from within*. The strongest alliance is through marriage, and that is why we are told to be protect our families from spiritual adultery. Jude is a latter day warning to help us to understand the root of Ezra's concern when he returned to Jerusalem to find many Jews had married pagan wives. Jude recalls Balaam, who is also mentioned in Revelation 2:14. Balaam put stumbling blocks before the Children of Israel, causing them to eat food sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. This takes us back to Numbers 25 and 31. Both at Acacia Grove and after a victory over the Midianites, some of the men intermarried with both Moabites and Midianites, thereby being tempted to follow false gods. Balaam was the one who caused this seduction. The end result would be complete seduction into the ways of Balaam and loss of identity of the Jews. God dealt with this through a plague and through the execution of the offenders, but the problem is still in the background for every generation. It is especially important that the Jews retain their identity. Not only must they keep away from spiritual adultery, but they are also a living witness to the Covenant faithfulness of God. The incident with Balaam is relevant to Ezra's ministry, and Jude broadens this to a warning for all congregations of the Lord's disciples.

Ezra Chapters 9 and 10. The Temple was built and soon Ezra would order its services. The beginning of Ezra's ministry began, however, with the families of Judah. The people of God are the Living Temple of God and so this is why the priority of Torah is to strengthen families. Ezra discovered that a lot of people had intermarried with the pagans. This, if left unchecked, was the beginning of the loss of Jewish identity. If this continued, the Jews would soon merge with other nations and adopt their customs. Ezra was full of sadness, but he responded to the problem without haste. He sat down in mourning and prayer (Chapter 9, Verses 3 to 15). This was the key to revival. It was inspired by God and God's Spirit fell upon the Jews, leading them to listen to Ezra and leading them to repentance. By the grace of God, the Jews retained their identity, separating themselves from their pagan wives and the spiritual seduction that had begun.

This incident from Ezra is relevant to the time we are in. After 2000 years of being scattered among the nations there is still an identifiable Jewish remnant. This remnant is called to faith in Yeshua but not to lose their identity even among Christians. Most importantly, they must not assimilate with the world and so lose the special ministry of being a prophetic people. A world leader once asked if someone could prove there is a God and that the Bible is true. *Consider the Jews*, was the telling reply. God will speak through the testimony of Israel concerning His covenant faithfulness centred on Yeshua HaMashiach, the King of the Jews.

Day 5

Nehemiah Chapter 1. Nehemiah led the third group of Jews back to Judah. This was in 445 BC, approximately 13 years after Ezra. His task was different. He rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. We can discern a step-by-step process over the years prophesied by Daniel. First the foundations of the Temple were laid and then the Temple itself was completed. With the return to God through Temple worship, God returned to His people, next reminding them of Torah. Finally this brought God's protection. Physical protection was manifest through the wall, symbolizing God's spiritual protection through Torah and through His presence among His people.

Nehemiah received news about the broken wall and immediately turned to God in mourning and prayer. This is another of the prayers, recorded in Scripture, which brings insight and encouragement in our own works of service. Read the words carefully.

Chapter 2. God had placed Nehemiah in the King's palace. We recall Mordecai's words to Esther – *for such a time as this*. Nehemiah shouldered a big responsibility immediately he heard of the problems in Jerusalem, and obtained permission from the King: *I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father's tombs, **that I may rebuild it***. Not only was permission granted, but protection was given for the journey and authority to receive building supplies! Already, however, plans to oppose the building were being hatched by Sanballat and Tobiah (Verse 10). Always, it seems, God's people must expect opposition. It is the same in Jerusalem today, with modern-day Sanballats, and there is constant spiritual opposition wherever God's people are at work for the Kingdom. It must have been a sad sight for Nehemiah when he walked around the city, quietly making his survey. Despite the mocking of their enemies, Nehemiah began to form the strategy whereby the building would commence. He was like a modern-day civil engineer with a great building task, to be accomplished through careful planning and organization.

Chapter 3. It takes a leader with authority to rally others and encourage them to engage in a difficult task. Nehemiah was such a man, anointed by God for the work. The first stage was to repair what could be repaired. With delegated responsibilities, others set out to take their part in the building. The immensity of the task is illustrated to visitors to Jerusalem in our day. *The Broad Wall* is mentioned in Verse 8. The Babylonians had demolished the walls of Jerusalem, leaving the foundations and the fallen rubble, so Nehemiah could identify the location of the old wall. The walls of modern-day Jerusalem are not the same as in Nehemiah's day. The city has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, each time on the remains of the old city, according to the customs of the time. In Nehemiah's day the old city was rebuilt in its former position. The old Broad Wall passes through the modern-day City and can be viewed by tourists. The first impression of this wall is how enormous it is. The wall was first built by Hezekiah to keep Sennacherib's army out. The part that can be seen in Jerusalem today is 7 meters thick, 3.3 meters high and 65 meters long. This gives us an idea of the enormity of Nehemiah's task!

Chapter 4. This is a wonderful chapter, often used metaphorically as a rallying cry to complete a task. Mostly our tasks are less than was accomplished by Nehemiah, so let us not get out of balance! Read the words for yourself and meditate upon what was accomplished, how it was accomplished and what lessons we might learn. Listen to the taunts from the Jews' adversaries. Read about Nehemiah's response in prayer and practical actions (Verse 9): *nevertheless we made our prayer to God, and because of them set a watch against them day and night.* Here is a manifestation of *watching and praying* that Yeshua told us that we must do. There is certainly a parallel for us, being builders in the Kingdom of God, sometimes with practical tasks, sometimes with spiritual. Each family was assigned their position. Some people were appointed to arms, some to building. Those who carried burdens ensured that they carried a weapon too. The trumpet was the rallying call to gather together, with the trust that: *our God will fight for us* (Verse 20). There is no end to the applications of this strategy, and we might all come back to this passage from time to time. Our weapons of warfare are the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17), but let us not so spiritualise this account as to forget that this incident happened to real people in a real circumstance.

Day 6

Chapter 5. Once more there were disputes to settle, this time among the Jews. Nehemiah must have been a commanding figure to organize the building of the wall and to settle disputes, with a prophetic shaking of his outer garment! He was also a humble man, as we perceive through his short prayer: *Remember me , my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.* (Verse 19)

Chapter 6. Next Nehemiah was confronted by a different sinister scheme from Sanballat and his friends. How important it is that we are sure, like Nehemiah, of the task that God has set us. We will have adversaries, but if we are sure of our role we can ignore the adversaries with confidence; we can answer their accusations, just as Nehemiah did. Listen again to his prayer: *Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.* (Verse 9). Read and reread Verse 15. The wall was completed in 52 days! It was an incredible feat! Still Tobiah's taunts and lies were sent to bring discouragement: how strong and clear-sighted we must all be in the ministries God gives us! Any doubt is a doorway for the enemy.

Chapter 7. Next came the registering of all the returned exiles so that the City and Temple could be ordered for life and service. With everything in order and gifts received for the establishing of the Temple, the Seventh Month came round once more. The people went to their own cities. As you read the list in this Chapter, do so carefully and reverently, to capture what it was like for the Jews on the day when they were established again as a nation.

Chapter 8. Ezra and Nehemiah had different tasks. Nehemiah completed that which he set out to do and now Ezra came to the fore once more to teach from the Torah. Did he think that he was fulfilling Isaiah 2, so that once more the Word of the Lord would go out from Zion? He was obedient to the task whether this was so or not. In hindsight, we know that Isaiah 2 points to a future time when Yeshua will return to establish the Kingdom of God. It will be a parallel to what we are reading in Nehemiah, but with New Covenant manifestation of the Torah, taken from the scrolls and written on our hearts. Nevertheless, we should not jump to conclusions about how Ezra interpreted Torah. The Holy Spirit was with the exiles and their leaders when they returned to rebuild Jerusalem. The New Covenant was promised but not manifest until the sacrifice of Yeshua, so there was no other way than to centre worship to God in the Temple. When Ezra taught the people the principles of Torah, Temple worship was central, but that was not all. We can only imagine what he taught about the building up of individuals and families through faith, but we must not think that he taught dry ritual. What made the people weep when they heard his teaching? It was not only knowledge based; he gave them understanding as well (Verses 3 and 8). The people wept in repentance, just as in any revival God has brought to the Christian Church. We can only guess at what Ezra said, but surely he read the Ten Commandments and understood this as God's contract of betrothal. Surely he interpreted the Torah in the pastoral way that

Moses had done in Deuteronomy, remembering the two greatest principles of Torah, to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18). He would not have been commissioned for this important task if he did not have the understanding of Micah, that a summation of the purpose of Torah is to *do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8). He would also have the heart of the Psalmists and convey the beauty of Torah as it is in Psalm 119. He knew God as Creator and could understand Psalm 19. All this and more surely underpinned the teaching of Ezra.

He reestablished the Jews into a Torah framework that had life as well as ritual. We know that this was to be temporary: the New Covenant, whereby the Torah is written on our hearts, was not yet manifest. When Ezra gathered the people together to hear and understand Torah, surely it was as close to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 that could be experienced in the days of the Old Covenant. It was a magnificent day for Judah: it will be more magnificent when Yeshua returns. What a weeping it must have been when the people, now restored, forgiven by God, given a new start, heard the words of Torah explained clearly to them (Verses 3 and 9). Then followed a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles - better than at any time since the days of Joshua (Verse 17).

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

We are coming to the end of the history of Israel recorded in the Tanach (Old Testament). Pause and reflect on what we have studied. Soon we will move on to the New Testament, built on the foundations of the Tanach, with the same themes continuing and merging into God's plan, widened out through Yeshua to include the Gentiles who come to faith. Meditate prayerfully on the history of Israel, and ensure that you retain a grasp of both the past history and the future application.

Read some more of the Psalms today. Read Psalms 75, 76, 77 and 78.
