



LESSON 8

EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles record the history of God's people from the time of the Judges to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. God's prophet, Jeremiah, had foretold that His people would be captives in a foreign land for seventy years (*Jeremiah 25:11,12; Jeremiah 29:10*). The period of captivity began in 606 B.C. when many of the king's family were taken to Babylon. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were among these captives.

Ten years later, in 596 B.C. a second group were taken as captives to Babylon. This group was made up of priests and skilled craftsmen. Ezekiel, one of the greatest of God's prophets, was among them. Then, after another ten years, in 586 B. C., when the Jews in Judah continued to rebel against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem with his army. He destroyed the city, including the beautiful temple built by King Solomon. He took the rest of the people to Babylon to be slaves.

In 539 B.C. the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Medes and the Persians. They were led by Darius and Cyrus. Soon after this, King Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland. He also gave them permission to rebuild the temple of God (*2 Chronicles 36:22,23; Ezra 1:1-4*). The first group of captives returned in 536 B.C. They were led by Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of King David. It is important to remember that the seventy years of the Babylonian Captivity lasted from 606 B.C. until 536 B.C.

There were three different times the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon. There were also three different times that Jews were permitted to return to their homeland. The first group of Jews who returned were led by Zerubbabel. This was in 536 B.C. The second group of Jews returned in 458 B. C. They were led by Ezra, a scribe of God's law. The third group to return were led by Nehemiah in 444 B.C.

Each one of these three leaders had an important job to do in rebuilding the nation of Judah. The temple of God was rebuilt under Zerubbabel's leadership. Ezra reorganized the temple worship. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

The three books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther tell the history of God's people during the rule of the Persian Empire. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the captives who returned to Judah. Esther tells what happened to God's people who remained in Persia.

Ezra

Ezra is one of the greatest men in the Old Testament. As a leader and writer, he ranks next to Moses. He was a priest. His great-grandfather was Hilkiah, the high priest when Josiah was king (*Ezra 7:1-5*). It is likely that Ezra's parents were among those who were taken to Babylon. Therefore, he must have been born in Babylon.

Many Bible students believe Ezra wrote the books of First and Second Chronicles and Psalm 119 as well as the book of Ezra. They also believe God inspired him to begin synagogues as a place to worship. This was necessary because the Jews were in Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Also, Bible students think Ezra was used by God to collect together all the books of the Old Testament to form the one book we have today.

Ezra was an effective servant of the Lord because he had prepared himself to do God's work. In *Ezra 7:10*, we read: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." Ezra also organized the priesthood according to the teaching of the Scriptures. In Ezra's day many of God's people had broken God's law and had married pagans. Ezra demanded that the people come out of these unscriptural marriages (*Ezra 9-10*).

Nehemiah

Nehemiah wrote the book which is named for him. He was a "cup-bearer" (butler) to King Artaxerxes of Persia. Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. In 444 B. C. Nehemiah took his journey to Jerusalem. He remained as governor there for 12 years. At the end of this time, he returned to Persia. A short time later, he came back to Jerusalem to continue his work (*Nehemiah 13:6*). Nehemiah was a strong, courageous leader. He worked with Ezra the scribe and Malachi the prophet to keep the Jews faithful to God.

When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, he found the walls in ruins. Therefore, the city was defenceless before its enemies. He began the task of rebuilding the walls. Sanballat and Tobiah rebelled against him. When they failed to get Nehemiah to fight with them, they tried to get him to compromise. He refused. The walls of the city were rebuilt very quickly. The people of Judah "had a mind to work" (*Nehemiah 4:6*). Because of the fear that their enemies might attack them, the Jews worked with a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other (*Nehemiah 4:17*).

Besides rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah also stood with Ezra in opposing unscriptural marriages with the pagans (*Nehemiah 13:23-29*).

Esther

The book of Esther tells what happened to the Jews who chose not to return to Judah. It is one of the two books in the Bible which bear the name of a woman. The other book is Ruth. The book of Esther tells how a Jewish girl came to be the queen of Persia. God was able to use Esther in her position as queen to save His people from destruction.

The name "Esther" comes from a Persian word which means "Star of the East." Her Jewish name was "Hadassah." Esther's parents must have died when she was quite young. She was raised by a relative named Mordecai. Mordecai was a man who feared only God and refused to bow before any man. When Vashti refused to obey her husband, King Ahasuerus, she was removed from being the queen. Esther, a very beautiful girl, was chosen to take her place.

Later, Haman, one of the top officials in the king's government, became angry because Mordecai would not bow down to him. When he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to get revenge by plotting to have all the Jews killed. Haman tricked the king into making a law that all the Jews would be killed by the Persians on a certain day. When Mordecai learned this, he appealed to Esther to go before the king and plead for her people. He said to her: "**...who knows but whether you are come to the kingdom for such a time as this**" (*Esther 4:14*)?

If one approached a Persian king without being asked, the king could have him killed. Esther feared to go to the king for this reason. However, she overcame her fears and approached the king. The laws of the Medes and Persians could not be changed, but the king gave the Jews the right to defend

themselves. God gave them a great victory over their enemies. Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai on. God's people were saved by the courage of a Jewish girl who had become the queen of Persia.

According to history, Esther was the queen of Persia from about 497 B.C to 466 B.C. During this time, Persia was the greatest nation on earth.

The history of God's people in the Old Testament closes at the end of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. God's people were back in their homeland. The temple had been rebuilt. The worship had been restored. It would be 400 more years before the Saviour came into the world.