

Come Follow Me
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Week 30
Ezra 1-7; Nehemiah 2-8

This week in our studies there are some very neat stories and more importantly some very profound principles that we are going to learn about. But first please allow me to give you some background for what is going on.

Israel has been captured by Babylon. Most of the children of Israel have been moved from their home land of Jerusalem to live under the rule of the Babylonian Kings after they lost battles against them. This process of carrying captive Israel away from their homeland happened 3 times. First in 605 B.C., then in 597 B.C. then finally in 586 B.C.

Because of this we will also have 3 waves of the children of Israel returning back to Jerusalem. First under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2) Who was of the lineage of David. He led just under 50k Israelites back to Jerusalem to start constructing the temple under the Direction of Cyrus the King of Persia. Then Ezra was next; Ezra is short for the Hebrew name Ezriha which in Hebrew means "God helps me". He was a Priest or a Scribe. Then finally to bring them all home we have Nehemiah who was a butler of sorts for the King of Persia.

The Book of Ezra is also referred to as the second Exodus. The first being when Moses led them out of Egypt. This second Exodus happens 1000 years after the first. But we still see God's hand in delivering his people. In fact in the first chapter of Ezra we see his spirit stirring in the heart of Cyrus the King. In chapter 1 verse 1:

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of **Jeremiah** might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of **Cyrus** king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and *put it* also in writing, saying,

2 Thus saith **Cyrus** king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an **house** at Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah.

3 Who *is there* among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he *is* the God,) which *is* in Jerusalem."

Now you might be wondering why the King who was not a Jew and had a history of Idol worship would allow the children of Israel to go back to Judah to build a temple to God. My theory is that as we learned a few weeks ago, the Lord uses unusual means sometimes to bring about His work. In Isaiah 44 verse 28 the Lord declared

"That saith of **Cyrus**, *He is* my **shepherd**, and shall perform all my **pleasure**: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be **built**; and to the **temple**, Thy foundation shall be laid."

This is very interesting because even though the Book of Isaiah comes after the book of Ezra in the old testament, Chronologically the book Isaiah was written over 100 years before Cyrus the King was even born. Some even believe that it was because of this verse that when it was read to him that is when the spirit of the Lord began to stir in him. Could you imagine seeing your

name in the scriptures prophesying that you were going to do something that long before you came to this earth? To me that would be pretty amazing.

We see this same principle in Nehemiah. A stirring or a prompting that he is to do something great, something he was predestined to do before the World was created.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem is not going so well. Lots of challenges and persecutions, we see the adversary trying very hard to keep the Temple and the city from being completed and protected. Nehemiah still living in the Babylon as a servant of the King inquires of some visitor how the progress is coming in rebuilding the city and they tell Nehemiah in chapter 1 verse 3:

“The **remnant** that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and **fasted**, and prayed before the God of heaven”

He then records this beautiful prayer, pleading to God for his brethren. And God calls him to go and lead his people in completing His work. And under Nehemiah's direction they do, they built the wall in record time.

There is an important principle contained in this story that I want to point out. In Nehemiah chapter 4 we read that the Jews are being persecuted and mocked by their enemies. As humans we have 2 natural reactions when things like this happen to us. There are tons of studies about fight or flight reactions. Meaning when we are attacked we will either turn and fight our enemies or we will turn and run away. But here we see something amazing. When Nehemiah gets mocked by these evil men he doesn't do either. He doesn't fight or run, instead he prays. Verse 4:

“Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked *thee* to anger before the builders.”

I love that. Did you hear what he said? Nehemiah gets it. He is there doing God's work, with God's people. He doesn't take offense to these men trying to destroy them. But rather points out that “they have provoked **thee**”, it is God that they are persecuting.

This same principle is contained in the story of Paul, remember when he was on the road to Damascus and the angel appeared to him, he was going about killing the saints and God says: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?”. Even though he thought he was persecuting the saints it was God that he was truly persecuting.

So this bears the question: “what does this have to do with us?” I believe that this principle is more applicable in our day than you might think. The current status of our world is that like unto Babylon just before it was destroyed. Elder Bruce R McConkie in his book Millennial Messiah distributes Babylon in this way:

“In prophetic imagery, Babylon is the world with all its carnality and wickedness. Babylon is the degenerate social order created by lustful men who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. Babylon is the almighty governmental power that takes the saints of God into captivity; it is the false churches that build false temples and worship false gods; it is every false philosophy ... that leads men away from God and salvation. Babylon is false and degenerate religion in all its forms and branches. Babylon is the communistic system that seeks to destroy the freedom of people in all nations and kingdoms; it is the Mafia and crime syndicates that murder and rob and steal; it is the secret combinations that seek for power and unrighteous dominion over the souls of men. Babylon is the promoter of pornography; it is organized crime and prostitution; it is every evil and wicked and ungodly thing in our whole social structure” (McConkie, *Millennial Messiah*, 424).

Doesn't that sound like the world we are living in today? And what do we see because of it? We see some that are fighting against it, speaking out against evil and dedicating their lives to preaching and teaching the truths of God! We love and support these great warriors of faith. We also see those that are running from it. Fleeing from the battle, hiding and hoping it all passes without any harm to them or those they care about. But, my call today is that we all take the advice and example of Nehemiah. First when the enemies of God came to attack the saints he armed them. He armed everyone as they worked. For us this is the sword of faith and the shield of righteousness. And secondly they turned to God in prayer for this is his work, Nehemiah said:

“I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye **afraid** of them: remember the Lord, *which is* great and **terrible**, and **fight** for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your **wives**, and your houses.

And it came to pass from that time forth, *that* the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side”

I believe that this is God's call to us today. May we all keep our sword of faith girded about our sides as we labor in His work. Turning constantly to him in prayer for His protection and His grace. May He turn the vengeance of our enemies onto their own heads. And may we have a mind to work, in His work as the time of Him coming is drawing closer. Then perhaps when we have become sufficiently humble and reliant on Him, then will come the day of His great deliverance. Look to Him, our great deliverer, our savior and King. For He is mighty to save.

In His sacred name I pray, even the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.