

***Nehemiah 1:1-3*** <sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, <sup>2</sup> That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> And they said unto me, 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.**

The year is 446 BC, and a full 90 years have transpired since one of the grandest moments in Jewish memory. Just under a century before, more than 50,000 Jews had been released by the edict of Cyrus, ruler of the Medo-Persians. Through the leadership of a remarkable and dedicated man named Zerubbabel, they had returned to Jerusalem. To say “they” returned refers to the Jews as a people, for in fact very few of the contingent who returned had ever been there before. The returning exiles were actually the children and grandchildren of people who had been taken captive during the conquest and ultimate destruction of Jerusalem by the renowned Nebuchadnezzar, dreaded monarch of ancient Babylon. Consistent with the methods of conquerors in that era, Nebuchadnezzar had not only leveled and burned their capital city, but his troops did everything possible to totally break the spirit of their captives. Soldiers corralled the vanquished by the thousands, drove them like cattle, and herded them from their homeland to Babylon. Their transport to a distant culture was a means by which the victors hoped to permanently dissolve their victims’ identity as a people and to smash their wills as individuals.

Prior to this destruction of Jerusalem, and the actual exiling of those thousands of Jews, Nebuchadnezzar had earlier gained dominion over Judea and its capital city, Jerusalem. For a season of nearly 20 years, He had installed puppet kings to govern the area, to keep it both accountable to and taxable by him. But due to recurrent resistance and sporadic instances of political rebellion against his government, he finally determined to sack the city and exile any remaining prisoners to his capital in Babylon. During the period of those puppet kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, God raised up Jeremiah the prophet, who relentlessly warned of certain judgment. A history of willful disregard for God’s laws was bringing down the curtain on the glory days of Judea’s past, and Jeremiah predicted a captivity that would last 70 years.

***Jeremiah 25:11*** *And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.*

However, he also promised hope – hope in the Name of the Lord God. For Jeremiah said that after this period of time, the exiled families would be released, and there would ultimately be a return to Jerusalem, as well as a restoration of their Temple and their worship of the Most High God.

***Jeremiah 29:10-14*** <sup>10</sup> For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. <sup>11</sup> For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. <sup>12</sup> Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. <sup>13</sup> And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the LORD; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

As the 70 years of prophesied captivity was drawing toward its close, an amazing combination of international events began to weave together. In this swirl of prophetic and historic activity, God was at work restoring His people while nations and their kings unwittingly bowed to the performance of His will! Consider it all: The balance of world power swung from Babylon to Persia, and with the fall of their majestic capital at the hands of Darius, it would seem that the fate of the exiled Jews would be even more complicated as their control went into the hands of those who had conquered their conquerors. Nonetheless, their deliverance came right on schedule. No human plan could have choreographed it all, but true to the great prophecies by no less than four mighty preachers – Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah and Haggai – they were released by the new political regime in Babylon. In the year 536 BC – exactly 70 years after the first contingent of exiles had been transferred to Babylon – Cyrus, the new monarch, issued the edict, exactly according to Isaiah’s prophecy – a forecast that is all the more phenomenal in that he is even NAMED by the prophet more than TWO CENTURIES before he was BORN!

***Isaiah 44:24 – 45:6*** <sup>24</sup> Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; <sup>25</sup> That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their

knowledge foolish; <sup>26</sup> That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof: <sup>27</sup> That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>1</sup> Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; <sup>2</sup> I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: <sup>3</sup> And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. <sup>4</sup> For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me. <sup>5</sup> I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: <sup>6</sup> That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else.

The impact of the Babylonian captivity on the Jews had one positive result: polytheism – the idolatrous worship of many gods – was forever expelled from their minds and habits. Henceforth, only Jehovah would be their God forevermore, and Moses' words would resonate in their souls: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!"

Upon the return of the exiles, their primary focus was on a major undertaking – to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. That part of their story is found in the small book of Ezra, which precedes the book of Nehemiah. Ezra records this rebuilding project, which took 20 years from its inception until the Temple was completed. It was then dedicated in the year 516 BC. God's promise of their return, and of their Temple's restoration, had been fulfilled. The forgiveness for the past was evident in their return, and their restored relationship with the Lord was symbolized in the rebuilt Temple. But two full generations had elapsed – 90 years since the first families' return, and 70 years since their completion of the Temple. As the Jews gathered for joyous worship, one thing was still missing – one very crucial thing. **The walls of their city still lay in ruins.**

- The city sits in embarrassment. **Here is a people who have been able to reestablish their WORSHIP (temple), but unable to reestablish RULERSHIP (walls).** THEY HAVE COMPLETE REBIRTH, BUT NOT COMPLETE RECOVERY. And as such, they are a type of those in the church who are saved – but still broken. They have been fouled up by accident, dented by disobedience, smashed by sin, ruined by rebellion, or injured through ignorance.
- They may well have been forgiven for the foolish seeds of sin sown "B.C." – before Christ – but the harvest of "sowing to the flesh" doesn't disappear overnight. There is still some "rubble" around.
- **YES!** Salvation does solve the problem of our relationship with God. **NO!** It doesn't dissolve all the problems in our lives. New life in Christ opens the doorway to the SOLUTION, but only by walking through that door and pursuing that way will those problems finally reach RESOLUTION.
- Like those in ancient Judea, so often with us: deliverance is so long in coming, the conviction grows that it is never going to happen. We get "weary in well doing."
- **But into this setting of despair comes a man named NEHEMIAH:**
  - Nehemiah means "consolation of God" and is derived from two words: "nacham" meaning "to breathe strongly, to pity, to console" and "Yah" which is the sacred name of the Lord
  - Nehemiah therefore means "the consoling breath or Spirit of God"!
  - Who is your only hope for deliverance? THE HOLY GHOST! The Comforter has come!
  - What exactly does the Holy Ghost want to do in your life? Establish God's RULERSHIP!
- **What happened when man fell?** (*Sunday School kid: "Did he bounce?"*)
  - Just by virtue of the words "THE FALL" we know that man was designed with a higher estate and superior destiny than he now generally experiences or realizes
  - Two things intended for man were lost in the fall – our relationship WITH God and our rulership UNDER God. Both were broken by the fall.
  - The most important part of Christian teaching and preaching must show us how to rebuild our relationship with God through salvation. But that is not God's only redemptive purpose – He also desires to restore His rulership in our lives on earth (before we get to Heaven!).
  - Rulership means the recovery of self-control, personal identity, stabilized temperament, outward holiness and inward character, all of which was lost in the fall. Rulership is not just being a believer, but one with maturity. Not just a city, but one with walls.
  - A city without walls was open prey to oppressors. With destroyed gates there was no way of keeping back an adversary and no focus of government, for in ancient times the city

gates were the seat of local rule. In short, they had a life with God in the temple, but had little evidence of it affecting the practical details of day-to-day living. Sound familiar?

- THIS IS NOT THE WILL OF GOD! A city without walls will eventually forfeit its Temple!
- BUT THIS REBUILDING IS STILL A PROCESS! Nehemiah worked at it for many years!

- Can you imagine the people of Nehemiah's day supposing that the completed Temple rendered the building of the city walls or the subduing of the surrounding countryside unnecessary?
- Yet this is what many believers think today! As long as their Temple (spirit) is saved, they think it doesn't matter what happens with their City (soul/personality/emotions/will) and their Land (body).
- Scripture teaches that our spirit and soul are not one and the same:

**Luke 1:46-47** <sup>46</sup>And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, <sup>47</sup>And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

**Hebrews 4:12** For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

**1 Thessalonians 5:23** And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The soul includes three essential functions that make up our personality:
  - The intellect – our mind, our thoughts, our reasoning powers
  - The emotions – our temperament, feelings, attitudes and moods
  - The will – our choices, decisions, determination or willfulness
- Most of what lures, drives, attracts, convinces, persuades or motivates you is generated at the thought or feeling levels. Your decision as to how to react is then made by the will.
- The human WILL is the most awesome feature of the soul, for it determines your DESTINY.
- The soul is therefore crucial in salvation – “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.”
- In the process of salvation, my soul (will) repents, my body is baptized, and my spirit is filled with the Holy Ghost. No longer merely manipulated by the evil forces in the world, my body is now subject to direction from my reborn spirit – through the “middleman” of the soul.
- If that soul is in any way dysfunctional or disobedient, the whole person is affected. It is my soul that determines the quality and character of my service to God!
- Just as broken walls hinder the control of a city, so the soul can hinder my progress as God's child.
- This is why Christian maturity is so important! We must let the Holy Ghost change us!
- **HOW DID NEHEMIAH ACCOMPLISH HIS TASK? MAINLY THROUGH PRAYER!**
- There are 17 prayers in the 13 chapters of Nehemiah. He was practical, but he was also prayerful!
- Josh Billings, the American humorist, used to say, “Never work before you eat your breakfast. But if you ever have to work before you eat your breakfast, eat your breakfast first!”
- Let's paraphrase that: “Never undertake any project before you pray; but if the project demands action before you pray – pray first!”
- **WE NEED TO KNOW THAT PRAYER ISN'T “EARNING POINTS”!** Time in God's presence isn't earning time, it's learning time! My relationship with God develops, not because He gets to like me more, but because I get to know Him better. I'm most likely to learn about me while I'm with Him!
- **NOTE NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER (1:5-11) ...**
- It begins with worship, declaring God's majesty (v.5). This is not just theological incantations. God does not need to be reminded of His greatness – we do! Praise calls attention to my own limitations, while letting me renew my amazement at God's sufficiency to handle my situation!
- It is from one who acknowledges sin (v.6-7). For God's will to be realized, I must be sensitized.
- It stands on the Word's promises (v.8-10). Praying the Word of God is praying the will of God!
- It is from one who is committed to obey (v.11). Nehemiah has not achieved perfection, but he is headed in the right direction – and God responds because of this obedient relationship.
- It brings SPECIFIC requests to God (v.11). Nehemiah prays specifically for his need of favor with the king, but this petition comes only AFTER he has taken the four steps above.

**Jude 20** But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost ...