

Purpose

- To learn about 1 & 2 Chronicles.
- To learn about Ezra.
- To learn about Nehemiah.

Materials

- Bibles
- Handouts

Background Information**1 & 2 CHRONICLES**

Chronicles is the third set of paired books in the Old Testament. Pretty much Chronicles is a rerun of Kings. These two books cover the same material but with new facts and a fresh approach. These two books were written after the exile in Babylon had ended. Some of God's people had returned to Jerusalem, the temple had been rebuilt, and the walls of the city had been restored. The southern kingdom of Judah had survived but the northern kingdom of Israel had not. These two books have its focus on Judah.

In 2 Chronicles you can read and learn about Amos and Josiah. After the death of Josiah a series of kings ruled Judah; they all were evil and kept adding to the spiraling down of Judah. The people had turned from God and they even mocked God's messengers. God allowed the Babylonians to take control of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar took all of the articles and treasures out of the temple and into the land of Babylon. After burning the temple and tearing down the walls of Jerusalem the people of Judah were exiled to Babylon.

EZRA

The book of Ezra is about survivors-men and women who survived Judah's exile to Babylon. Their parents and grandparents had survived the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the march in chains to Babylon. The people in Ezra's story survived a different challenge. They survived in the prosperity of Babylon and willingly sacrificed convenience and comfort to return to the city of their fathers – or at least to what was left of the city.

When the Jews first arrived in exile in Babylon, they had to work hard just to stay alive. But over the decades they settled in. In fact, they prospered in the land of their captivity. When the Babylonian Empire collapsed under the attack of the Persians from the east, the Jews were thriving. The Persian ruler, Cyrus gave his permission for the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem.

In Ezra 1-6 Ezra describes the first return of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem – this happened before Ezra was born. This trip was under the leadership of Joshua the

priest and Zerubbabel the governor. The main purpose of those who returned was the rebuilding of the temple. Jerusalem had been deserted for fifty years, and the walls and building had been leveled. Not many volunteered to go back, but those who did were pioneers. After twenty years the temple was restored. This enabled them to return to the worship of their God.

Between Chapters 6 and 7 there is a fifty-eight year gap. Remember this when we get to the study of Esther. The events concerning her happened in those 58 years.

The Persian king, Artaxerxes, appointed Ezra as his personal representative to the Jews in Jerusalem. The king decreed that the remaining Jews could return to Jerusalem. He (the king) also opened the royal treasury to help finance the trip. Six thousand Jews followed Ezra into Jerusalem. They made the three and a half month trip without soldiers. God protected them.

Ezra was a priest descended from Aaron. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. The book of Ezra is named after him, but he really wrote very little of the book. Ezra may have served as “secretary of state for Jewish affairs in the Persian bureaucracy.” Because Ezra knew the laws of Moses (10 commandments) so well he was a good choice to lead the Jews into rebuilding their lives in a God-like manner. He knew how the worship was done in the past. Ezra constantly told the people what they should do. Very few disagreed. Ezra demonstrated a new way to lead. When faced with the serious problem of intermarriage, he does not set out to solve it. Rather, he fasts, laments and confesses the peoples’ sins. Whatever the peoples reaction was to Ezra, they rallied around him and deciding to return to God’s laws. Ezra always projected an image of quiet, effective leadership that they people were not used to.

Ezra had a strong desire to teach God’s word to other people. No wonder we read three times that God’s hand was on Ezra! Ezra invested time in study, he modeled obedience in his life, and he touched people with his teaching. Maybe that’s why we don’t hear too much about him. He’s too intimidating! Maybe that’s why we have so few men and women who are making a significant impact for God in the corporate offices or in the halls of government or in television production meetings – because there are so few Ezras around.

NEHEMIAH

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. Although named for two principal characters, a priest and a governor, who led groups back to Jerusalem, neither one wrote the entire books. The story tells of three or four different waves of Israelite people who returned from exile in Babylonia to resettle Jerusalem. This is a very important but not well-known part of Israel’s history. Nehemiah’s commission and first governorship focused on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The wall was important for religious reasons as well as security reasons.

Thirteen years after Ezra was in Jerusalem Nehemiah comes on the scene. The community it at its lowest point. Nehemiah was a man on a mission!! He was moved by God to do an incredible task in the midst of impossible circumstances – and he did it for God’s glory. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. A cupbearer tasted the king’s food and wine to be sure it wasn’t poisoned. He was the king’s personal aide. All appointments to see the king were made through and approved by the cupbearer. He was the head of Secret Service, the chief of staff, and the king’s most

trusted friend. Nehemiah was powerful, influential, wealthy, highly respected – and Godly. This put Nehemiah in a perfect position to help his Jewish people.

When Nehemiah heard that Jerusalem's walls were still broken down and that the people were in distress, his heart ached for the reputation of the Lord. The city of Jerusalem in the OT was a reflection of the majesty and splendor of God, but a city without walls displayed very little glory. When the right time came, Nehemiah asked the king for an extended leave and headed toward a city he had never seen except in his vision of the work God had given him to do.

Nehemiah traded his grand robes for work clothes, a tool belt and a hard hat. He surveyed the scene (many times at night), called the people together and challenged them to do the work. Even though he was doing God's work he had a lot of opposition. Actually three times were of major importance.

The first opposition came before the project even got started. The people felt overwhelmed and would declare it can't be done. The response was not to give in but study it more to find a good way to accomplish the goal. Halfway through the project another group of opposition declared it couldn't be done. Nehemiah's response this time was to pray, but also post a guard. At the end of the project when it was almost done opposition came again. This time people criticized Nehemiah and attacked him. His reaction was to answer each accusation and pray.

Finally the project is done and in record time. Fifty-two days after beginning the wall was finished. The opposition had finally stopped and the work was done under God's blessing. Nehemiah then stepped into the background and Ezra brought out the law of Moses and read it to the people.

Nehemiah was the civil leader, but he joined with Ezra and the religious leaders to promote justice and obedience to God. What made the difference in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem and the city was leadership. God provided good leaders with vision and courage.