

Zerubbabel — Ezra 1-4, John 17:1-4



Michelangelo, Zorobabel, Abiud and Eliakim

Zerubbabel is a king like Christ whose glory was temporarily hidden. Though the kingship was diminished, a son of David was still king. The royal line continued, and Zerubbabel was Christ's ancestor. The story demonstrates to us that after times of discipline and repentance, God's kindness was generously poured out in faithful love.

Zerubbabel led the return of the first group of exiles. The king's abundant provision encouraged them and perhaps explains why they made a detailed list. He led the group through the difficult process of temple rebuilding. Zerubbabel's faithfulness to make worship the center of the return is something to admire.

Zerubbabel, the king, and Jeshua, the priest, led a Festival of Shelters, and before Ezra's arrival, they led Passover. This is the last Passover celebration of the six described in the Hebrew scriptures: when they left Egypt, in the desert, preparing to enter the promised land, under Hezekiah, under Josiah, and now under Zerubbabel. Christ's Passover observance becomes the seventh in the series.

In light of despair from the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the misery of a long captivity, this is an important reversal of fortunes. In our lives we may find that we go through dark times, but these stories remind us to hold on to hope.

Is corporate worship central in my life?

Cyrus — Ezra 5-6, Luke 19:5



Ferdinand Bol, Cyrus Hands over the Looted Treasure

Just as Christ called Zacchaeus by name, God called Cyrus by name. Isaiah predicted Cyrus would restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. As the 70 years of exile ended, Daniel, taken into captivity at the beginning of the exile, remained as an advisor when Cyrus came to power. Perhaps he influenced Cyrus to pay for temple supplies and allow exiles to return. When opposition arose in the transition to a new King, records were searched, and this authorization was found. The temple rebuilt gave the people great joy, and we too have times in our lives when God's acts in fulfilling a vision fill us with overwhelming joy.

Isaiah 45:1 calls Cyrus the “Lord’s anointed,” a phrase that means Messiah, or is translated into Greek as “Christ.” The phrase was applied to four people in the Hebrew scriptures: Saul, David (numerous times in I Samuel), Zedekiah, and Cyrus. Daniel prophesied of a future Messiah, the anointed one who we recognize as Christ.

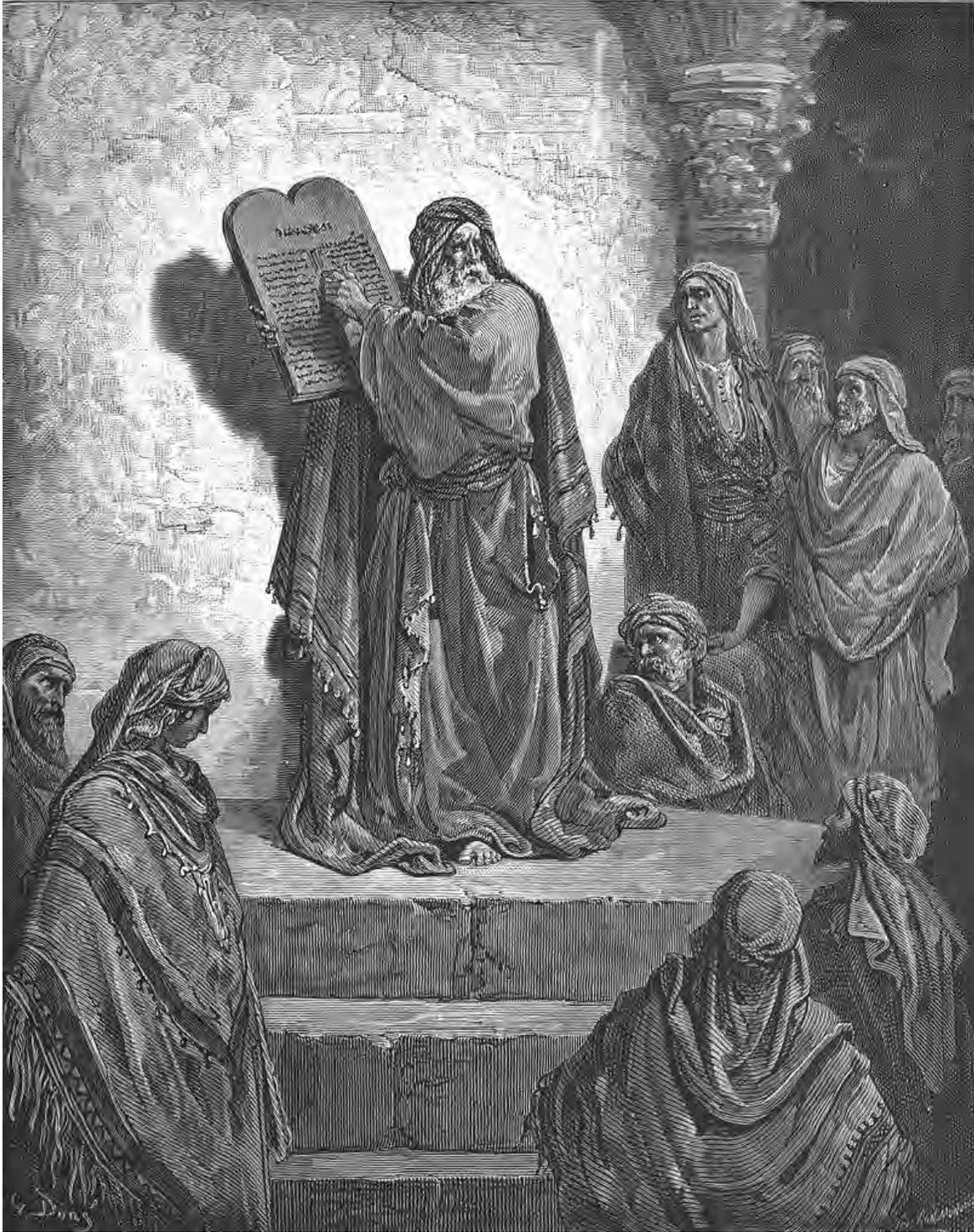
What a statement that a Gentile king served to fulfill prophecy and served as an image of Christ. No one knows all of his motives in allowing the captives to return, but both Ezra and II Chronicles say he fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC by diverting the Euphrates and entering through the lowered river. Under Darius, Babylon flourished as a center of learning with advancement in astronomy and mathematics. It served as the capital of the Persian Empire for two centuries. Remarkably, it is estimated that Cyrus ruled over 44% of the world’s population, a higher proportion than any other emperor in history.

It is reassuring that God knew how he would use an unbelieving king to accomplish his great purposes, and reminds us to pray for our political leaders.

Do I trust that God can use unbelievers for his purposes?

Ezra — Ezra 7-10, Mark 10:17



Gustave Doré, Ezra Reads the Law to the People

Ezra foreshadows Christ as teacher. Both recruited disciples to become leaders in the new community. He called for separation and a holy life, and injected new life into temple worship. Ezra repeatedly referred to God's gracious hand which encouraged him and can encourage us as we see God act on our behalf. He gives as

an example of asking God for protection for us, our children, our possessions and our journeys. Ezra's prayer points out that God's grace allows us to survive, to be secure, to have relief from trouble and to be revived.

Chapter 7 starts 57 years after the temple dedication in 515 BC. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC, and Nehemiah would arrive 13 years later.

There is much of God's undeserved mercy and favor in Ezra's story, and he saw grace in several things: first, the king of Babylon gave him everything he asked for; second, because he and his group arrived safely in Jerusalem after a four-month journey; third, because he was honored before the king, his council and all the powerful princes; and fourth, because their group was protected from enemies and bandits on their journey.

When Nehemiah arrived to rebuild the wall, Ezra continued as a leader. At the Festival of Shelters he read aloud from the Law for seven days. Ezra is credited with compiling much of the Hebrew scriptures, and writing not only the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but perhaps I and II Chronicles as well. This love and dedication to teaching God's word, and being the author of scripture points toward the New Testament writers, who left us accounts of Christ's life, and epistles of instruction.

His example of loving and teaching scripture inspires us today to take seriously the written account we have of centuries of seekers of God recording their experiences.

Do I live with gratitude for God's gracious hand?

Nehemiah — Nehemiah 1, Ephesians 4:9



William Brasey Hole, Nehemiah's petition

Nehemiah foreshadows Christ incarnate. Leaving the palace out of love, building his people up, creating protection, sacrificing his rights to privilege, advocating for the poor, teaching the word, and purifying the community, are all part of Nehemiah's story that parallel Christ. God kept his promise of unfailing love for those who love him by putting concern for Jerusalem in Nehemiah's heart.

Nehemiah was so grieved by Jerusalem's suffering that he wept and prayed, much as Christ was grieved for the city. The empathy Nehemiah felt for the suffering of his people, while knowing it was a just judgement, caused him to take responsibility, confessing that even he and his own family had sinned. How similar to Christ who took complete responsibility for all of our sins.

Nehemiah's compassion evoked the King's sympathy, resulting in financial support and a decree to rebuild. Remarkably, this king had commanded the city to stop rebuilding and not to start again without his express commands. Nehemiah's position of influence as the king's cupbearer, made change possible.

Nehemiah's example of prayer and a vision for the progress of the Kingdom can serve as an inspiration for us. His prayer is a beautiful model.

What can I learn from Nehemiah's prayer?

Rebuilding the Wall — Nehemiah 2-6, Matthew 6:13



Gustave Doré, Nehemiah Inspects Jerusalem's Walls

Nehemiah's actions on behalf of the people as he led rebuilding, parallel Christ's protection for us from danger, opposition, and slander. As Christ taught us to ask for deliverance from evil, Nehemiah taught that God will both protect us from enemies and defeat them. God gave him favor with the king, and he encouraged others with the reminder that God is great and glorious.

This passage serves as an important hinge between the economic ideals of the law, and Jesus' denunciation of the rich and support for the poor. Nehemiah challenged them to reverse their disobedience in economic matters, and made the necessary changes. But by the time of Christ, the negative patterns were once more entrenched and called for drastic reform.

Since we live in a day when cities do not depend on walls for protection it is hard to understand the depths of Nehemiah's despair that Jerusalem's walls lay in ruins. Cities were built on hills, walls were either double or extremely thick, and the gates of iron served to protect from enemies. Ruinous walls not only left the people unprotected, they indicated an uncivilized place, completely inappropriate for the city that was to be God's earthly residence.

As I intercede for people I care about, the imagery of needing a wall of protection around them is a useful one, recognizing that good boundaries, gates that open and close, safety, alertness to opposition as one is building security, are all relevant to our spiritual and emotional lives.

Where do I see a need for walls of protection?

Hearing God's Word — Nehemiah 7-9, Hebrews 4:12



Marc Chagall, Tabernacles or Sukkot

The people paid close attention to God's Word as it was read, and listened to an explanation of each passage. As we have seen in these meditations, the meaning pointed to the coming Messiah, Christ himself.

As they listened they were convicted of sin, and wept and repented. But they were told to rejoice because the Festival of Shelters they were celebrating was to be a time of joy, acknowledging God's presence with them as a pilgrim people. The festival looked forward to Christ's presence with us. We claim the promise they received that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Though normally the time of repentance would precede this time of joy in the festal calendar, this was reversed and the Levites led them in a great prayer of confession several weeks later. This great prayer in Nehemiah 9 tells the story of Israel, using "they" for the disobedient actions of their ancestors. But at the end, it becomes a personal prayer of confession, using "we", an example for us.

What can I learn from the prayer of repentance?

Called by Name—Nehemiah 10-12, Luke 6:12



Salomon de Bray, Triumphal Procession with Musicians

Christ called his disciples by name, and he calls each one of us by name. In Nehemiah, four and a half chapters are largely names: chapter 3 lists families working along the wall, chapter 7 repeats Ezra 2 listing settlers, much of chapter 10 lists signatories of the covenant, half of chapter 11 lists those resettling Jerusalem, and half of chapter 12 lists priests, Levites and musicians.

It raises interesting questions. Is there another ancient literature that so faithfully gives us the names of individuals? More commonly in old stories the focus is on the hero and his enemies.

The culture of appreciation for the individual and respect for each person, each family, seems to be deeply rooted in Hebrew thought. All are important. All of the names in Nehemiah represent “pioneers,” “founding fathers,” “signers of the constitution.” We even learn the names of seven trumpet-playing priests, eight singers, and the conductor.

With so many publications of scripture, think how many times these obscure names have been highlighted! We may feel unimportant, but as members of the community of faith, our names are important.

What is the significance of my own name for me?

Purification — Nehemiah 13, II Peter 3:11



John August Swanson, Procession

Purity was Nehemiah's concern as he revisited Jerusalem. We see this same concern for purity in Paul and the other apostles as they began to build a community of faith. Christ promised that those who were pure in heart would be blessed and would see God. Over the centuries we have needed constant renewal and a return to the identity God has for his people.

Nehemiah's intense anger over foreign wives came from his horror at the possibility of repeating the sins that led to exile. Children were losing not only their faith, but even their language. Strong commitment was needed in this community of just under 50,000 if it was to retain its identity. His zealousness in maintaining their identity made a difference. By the time of Christ there were 7 million Jews, 2 million in Palestine. Nehemiah's goal for them to retain their identity as messengers of God's word succeeded.

The discipline of the exile had finally cured the people of idolatry, thus preparing them to receive God in human flesh. Before the exile, archaeologists find hundreds of small figurines of household gods throughout Israel. After the exile, there are none to be found at all. The dramatic loss of land finally ended their attachment to idols.

It serves as a model for us to follow Christ's call to maintain our distinctive identity in the world, to be salt and light that are influencing the people around us in a positive way, rather than being pulled into the wrong thinking that surrounds us. We can claim Christ's promise that there is a blessing in inner purity.

Is my identity as a believer in Christ something I am unwilling to sacrifice?

Esther — Esther 1-5, II Timothy 4:18



Azor masters, Esther before Ahasuerus

Esther foreshadows Christ as mediator and deliverer, risking her life to save her community. It is beautiful to have a woman prefigure Christ, at the side of the most powerful emperor of that time. It also encourages us to follow her example and boldly speak up for what is just.

To place this story in history, not all Jews from Babylon had moved back to Jerusalem after 538 BC. Many remained in the Persian kingdom, and some moved over 1700 miles away to where Cyrus built a winter palace in Susa. Located in southwestern Iran, it is the modern city of Shush. As immigrants, Jews were vulnerable, and the story reflects the racism to which immigrants are so often subject.

Persia's wars with Greece had begun around 500 BC and lasted for 50 years. In the midst of this Xerxes I, known also by his Hebrew name King Ahasuerus, invaded Greece in 480 BC. Possibly the banquet that resulted in deposing Queen Vashti took place during the six-month summit at Susa to plan his war against Greece in 483 BC.

For women especially, the example of the bold, clever, and beautiful queen inspires. Her faith, influence and obedience encourage us in whatever challenge we are facing. Her success in stopping a genocide is celebrated in Israel with floats, costumes and fun. Today we have many female role models who have worked for justice, inspiring more women to join their ranks.

Do I celebrate the leadership of women?

Mordecai — Esther 6-10, John 17:12



Azor Masters, Mordecai is led through the City by Hamaan

Mordecai foreshadows Christ as protector and defender of the people. He took in his orphaned niece, just as Christ adopts us. He raised her and nurtured her as a godly woman, remained near her to protect and guide her, and checked on her every day. She continued to obey him even as queen. He encouraged her to fulfill her calling through the opportunity she had been given, and inspired her courage. Mordecai shows us a godly person who worked for the good of his people.

The figure of evil in the story is Haman and Mordecai overcame him. Mordecai won the conflict to the point Haman was forced to bow. Mordecai became the king's advisor when he had removed Haman and his evil advice, and the king responded to Mordecai's advice to undo the damage he had done. Mordecai was raised to honor with a royal robe and crown, and his rise to power helped preserve the Jewish people to fulfill God's promises.

Instead of being killed by their enemies the tables were turned, and thanks to the rigidity of the legal system, the Jews defeated their enemies in an incredible reversal of fortune. God's blessing was on the Jewish leader Mordecai, and still today they are important in his purposes for the world. Anti-semitism, such an ugly part of Christian history, should have no part in our hearts today. We need to honor the excellence God has given in faithfulness to his own promises.

Do I honor the Jewish people from whom Christ came?