

UNION BAPTIST CHURCH
BIBLE STUDY – CHRISTIANITY 101

TUESDAY, May 20, 2025

Stan Campbell, *Bible to Go: Genesis to Revelation in One Hour*, (New York: Faith Words, 2006)

Back Home – The Return to Jerusalem

The Bible doesn't say a lot about the people who were taken to Assyria after their exile, although the spiritual reason for their deportation are clearly listed (2 Kings 17:5-23). We read that the leader of Assyria carried them away and replaced them with people from Arab countries (2 Kings 18:11). But considerably more is said of the people from Judah who were taken to Babylon (2 Kings chap. 24-25).

If you happen to be following along in a Bible, you will notice that a couple of chapters back, we skipped over a few Bible books. The books of I and 2 Chronicles were not referenced because they contain much of the same content as the books of Samuel and Kings. But we saved the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther for this point. Chronologically, the events of these books took place during and after the people of Judah went into captivity – some of the final events of the Old Testament.

Esther

Ladies first: let's look at Esther. Her story takes place during the exile, and the other stories occur slightly later. Babylonians have conquered Judah, but not long afterward, the Medes and Persians then defeat the Babylonians (Isaiah 13:17; 21:1-10). A ruler named Xerxes comes to power. His wife defies him one day, so he banishes her and begins a search for a new queen (Esther 1:17). Esther has a relative named Mordecai who advises her to attempt to become queen. She does, and she is chosen above all the other hopeful contenders (Esther chap. 2). But Xerxes doesn't know she is a Jew.

As it turns out, one of Xerxes' top officials, Haman, is plotting to annihilate the Jews. Esther learns of the plot, and, at risk of her life, approaches the king to ask if she can schedule a dinner party for Haman. Xerxes is glad to grant her request. Later, on the very night that Haman is planning to get the king's permission to eliminate all Jews (Est. 3:5-15), Esther reveals her ethnicity and tells Xerxes: "*I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation*" – Esther 7:4. Xerxes is furious, and Haman is hanged that night (Est. 7:10). The Jewish feast of Purim commemorates this event. Although the name of God is never mentioned in the book of Esther, the many "coincidental" events and ironies of the story reflects his presence and protection.

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Ezra

The prophet Jeremiah had foretold that the Israelites' captivity would last only seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14). After Persia defeats Babylon, the Persian King, Cyrus is inclined to let the Jewish captives return to their homeland (Ez. 1:6). In fact, Cyrus allows everyone to leave who wants to and even returns many of the furnishings that he had taken from their temple (Ez. 1:7-8).

The problem is that the temple has been (2 Kings 25:8-17; 2 Chronicles 36:17-19). So, one of the first tasks of the returning Israelites is to rebuild it. Among the first groups to return to Israel is a man named Zerubbabel, who has been appointed governor. His group faces considerable opposition from the people who have settled in the area, yet they persevere and rebuild the temple (Ez. 3:1-13). Ezra is a priest who comes with a subsequent group of exiles to help attend to the task. A joyful dedication and celebration follow the completion of the rebuilt temple (Ezra 6:16-22).

But it was brought to Ezra's attention that many of the men, including certain priests, have intermarried with nonbelieving women. Ezra calls for a period of confession and repentance, which is followed by the discovery that over one hundred people have married foreign wives. These men agree to divorce their nonbelieving wives and send them away with their children (Ez. Chap. 9).

Nehemiah

Nehemiah returns to his homeland in yet another caravan (Neh. 2:11). His group sets out to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. They, too, face a number of troublemakers who try to thwart their efforts, going so far as to make attempts on Nehemiah's life (Neh. 2:12-3:32). Nehemiah is both faithful and practical, so "we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat (Nehemiah 4:9).

After the city walls are completed, Ezra assembles the people and reads from the Mosaic Law as "all the people listened attentively" (Nehemiah 8:3). The people weep as they realize how they have disregarded God's law for so long. But Ezra and Nehemiah tell them to eat and rejoice because the event is a celebration. So, they feast and worship for more than a week. It is the biggest celebration

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they have held since the days of Joshua, “and their joy was great” (Nehemiah 8:17-18).

Between the Testaments

As the Old Testament closes, the Hebrews people are allowed to return to their homeland, though they still are under Persian rule. About four centuries pass between the close of the Old Testament and the start of the New Testament. During that time, the Greeks defeat the Persians just as the Persians had conquered the Babylonians. However, the Greeks want to Hellenize the world: unify all territories under Greek language and Greek customs.

One particularly headstrong leader named Antiochus IV Epiphanes takes a personal interest in seeing that all Jewish writing and customs are destroyed. But he pushes too hard. One Jewish family rises up in defiance, and others follow. The elder of the family is named Mattathias and has five sons. The oldest, Judas (Maccabeus), gave name to the Maccabean revolt that lasted from 166 BC to 142 BC. The Jewish people are victorious and earn their independence.

But soon the Roman Empire comes to power. After a lengthy siege in 63 BC the Romans take over Jerusalem, slaughtered priest, and defile the Most Holy Place in the Temple. So, as the New Testament begins, many of the Jewish people still feel a lot of animosity toward Rome. Keep that in mind as we continue our journey through the Bible.

By the grace of God, Next Week’s Focus:

- **Jesus – His Humanity**
- **Jesus’ Birth (Matthew chapters 1 & 2; Luke chapters 1 & 2)**
- **Jesus’s Baptism and Temptation (Matthew 3:1-4:11)**

Note: Please continue to read from the above Scripture references in preparation of our Bible Study’s discussion. Your thoughts and feedback help to develop group understanding of the material covered. Please feel free to ask questions, send follow up questions by emails, text, or call for further discussion.