

### Proving the Birthright

#### Nehemiah 7:5-6

Nehemiah 7:5-6 & 61-64 - *“Then my God put it into my heart to gather the nobles, the rulers, and the people, that they might be registered by genealogy. And I found a register of the genealogy of those who had come up in the first return, and found written in it:*

*<sup>6</sup> These are the people of the province who came back from the captivity, of those who had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to his city.*

*<sup>61</sup> And these were the ones who came up from Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer, but they could not identify their father’s house nor their lineage, whether they were of Israel: <sup>62</sup> the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, six hundred and forty-two;*

*<sup>63</sup> and of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Koz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name. <sup>64</sup> These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but it was not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled.”*

#### Background Notes

Nehemiah took a census of the people in Jerusalem. These people were descendants of the Jews who had been taken away into the 70-year captivity in Babylon, and had been allowed to return to Jerusalem (v6).

In Daniel 9:2 we read, *“I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.”* But if the Jews of Jerusalem were carried into captivity in 586BC, and then some of them were allowed to return in 538BC - that’s only about 50 years. So how do we get “70 years” of captivity in Babylon? The answer is that the captivity took place in three different phases. And, in fact, the return from the captivity took place in three phases. Some historical background is needed here.

Phase 1 of the captivity occurred when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 605BC. We read about that in Daniel 1:1: *“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”* Daniel and other young men of the nobility and the intelligentsia were taken into captivity at that time. The Babylonians wanted to take away the cream of the crop as hostages, so that there would be no chance of a rebellion or an uprising. That was Phase 1.

A second phase came in 597BC. The prophet Ezekiel (and others) were taken into captivity at that time. That was Phase 2.

Phase 3, the final phase of the captivity, came in 586BC. The siege of the Jerusalem began in 587BC, and after a brutal 18-month period of starvation and death, the city finally fell in 586BC. The city and the Temple were completely destroyed, and the survivors were taken away as captives to Babylon. The city lay in ruins for many years.

Then there were three phases to the return. After the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonian Empire, in 539BC the Persian king Cyrus issued an edict that granted permission for foreign captives to return to their homelands. In 538BC about fifty thousand Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This group rebuilt the altar and began to rebuild the Temple in about 535BC. They finally completed the Temple in about 516BC. That was Phase 1 of the return.

Phase 2 of the return came in Ezra's time. In 458BC about 2000 more Jews returned. Finally, twenty years later, Phase 3 came when Nehemiah returned in 445BC. He led the rebuilding of the city walls, and then took a census of all the Jews who were living in Jerusalem.

There are two ways to calculate 70 years of captivity. From 605BC, when Daniel and others were taken captive, to 535 BC, when the Jews who had returned began to rebuild the Temple is 70 years. A second way to calculate the 70 years is from 586BC, when the Temple was destroyed, to 516BC, when the Temple was completed – that's 70 years.

## Doctrinal Point

### **There must be proof of the birthright.**

For Nehemiah's census, the people had to prove that they were really Jewish. Non-Jewish enemies were trying to infiltrate the ranks of God's people, so Nehemiah made the people prove their birthright as true Jews.

There's a spiritual lesson here for us. Just as the people of God then had to prove their birthright, so the people of God today must have a true birthright in God's family. Remember what the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3? "*You must be born again.*" You are only a Christian if you are truly born again – if you have "the birthright." No exceptions.

By birthright we don't mean being born into a Christian family, or being baptized in a church as a baby. We are born again when we put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, and receive new life in Him.

No one is born a Christian. You **become** a Christian, and that's when you get the birthright. When you trust Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you not only receive forgiveness of sins, you also receive divine life. 2 Peter 1:4 says that believers are "partakers of the divine nature." That's the birthright.

Notice that some of the people in Jerusalem were not able to prove their birthright as Jews. There were some who tried to get into the ranks of Jewish citizens of Jerusalem - but they could not show, by genealogy, their birthright (v61-61). Therefore they were excluded.

In addition, some who claimed the right to be priests were excluded, because they could not show their genealogy (v63). They could not prove their birthright.

In the same way, some people who claim to be Christians today do not have the birthright – they have never truly become members of God's family. These people may be infiltrating the church, and they may be attending services, but they're really not part of the true fellowship of believers. They are not part of the holy priesthood of believers, because they do not have the birthright.

Our Lord Jesus spoke many times about the people who only "professed" to be believers. (See Matthew 13, for example.) There would be those who made true professions of faith in Him, but there would also be those who falsely professed faith.

Remember what our Lord said in reference to the coming days of judgment? *"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:22).*

Think of it! People who had actually given prophecies, and had cast out demons, and had done miracles in the name of Jesus - and yet the Lord will say, "I never knew you!" The point is that these people didn't have the birthright.

So it doesn't really matter how many miracles or signs you're performing - if you don't have the true birthright – if you're not truly born again - you're not part of God's family. And the Lord will say to you in that coming day, "I never knew you." Not "I once knew you but now I don't." No. You never were part of God's family. I **never** knew you.

## Practical Applications

### 1. We need to make sure we have the birthright.

Are you a believer? We need to make sure that we're saved! Do you know that you "have the birthright"? Are you in God's family? It crucial to be sure!

2 Corinthians 13:5 addressed to believers: *"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail the test."* The Lord didn't include this verse in the Bible just to scare us! It's there to make sure we analyze our profession of faith.

Is our faith real? Just because we raised our hand when someone made an emotional appeal for salvation, or just because we walked down an aisle at a gospel service doesn't necessarily mean that we're true believers.

We need to take a good look at our faith. We need to make sure of our birthright. We need to make sure of our salvation.

## **2. We should emphasize the gospel in our ministry.**

The fact that there's an emphasis on the birthright in Nehemiah's census is a spiritual lesson for us. We should emphasize the gospel in our churches and in our ministries. We should emphasize the necessity of the birthright!

Many churches have gone down the tubes because they've shifted their emphasis from the birthright to social action, or even to political activity. Community involvement does have its proper place, and we do need to get involved in helping others, but we must never fail to emphasize the gospel. God's good news of salvation is found only in Christ.

Let's not shift away from that emphasis. We should emphasize the gospel in our ministry. In fact, let's share God's good news with someone today!