

HOW TO REACH THE JEW FOR CHRIST

by

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CHAPTER SIX

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

The captivity of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, marks a turning point in the history of the chosen people. During these trials, something happened to the descendants of Abraham; they returned seventy years later a different people. We will study this lesson under the following headings:

- A. The Nature of the Captivity
- B. The Story of Daniel and His Friends
- C. The Prophets of the Captivity
- D. The Results of the Captivity

A. THE NATURE OF THE CAPTIVITY

It was the custom for victorious ancient nations to systematically scatter the people of the countries which they conquered by enforced emigration. This ruse kept the people from uniting in a common rebellion. In this way the Assyrian kings had taken the ten tribes away, far to the north and northeast, never to return or to leave a trace of their existence. Assyria was in turn conquered by Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar, who adopted the same tactics. In three separate movements from 605 to 587 B.C., he carried off almost the whole of the people of Judah, and scattered them in colonies along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Babylonia.

It was a sad day for the Jews; they bewailed their lot, but their suffering was spiritual and mental, not physical. Nebuchadnezzar was a tolerant conqueror; he interfered as little as possible with his subject peoples. His only demands were that the Jews pay their taxes and perform the same duties to the Babylonian Empire that the Babylonians themselves had to do. In all other ways the Jews were free.

They engaged in business for their own profit; some of them were even employed in the governmental services. Indeed, their new home was so attractive that they might have followed the example of the ten Northern tribes and have been reconciled to their new home had it not been for their keen remembrance of the prophecies of Jeremiah before the Exile and for the leaders whom God raised up among them now.

These prophets stirred up the religious and national consciousness of the people. Instead of settling down at ease in Babylonia, the people longed to return to Palestine so that they could rebuild God's holy Temple and restore their ruined city.

B. THE STORY OF DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS

In 605 B.C., when Jehoiakim was king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar made his first invasion of the land and carried off many of the princes and nobles of Judah to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar ordered his master of eunuchs to select from among these nobles a number of young men of high intelligence and fine physique in order to train them for government service. Special food and drink were provided for those who were chosen.

Four of the Jewish young men, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fearful lest they be defiled by eating ceremonially unclean food, secured permission to eat plain vegetables and drink water. In spite of their simple diet the four friends showed perfect bodily development.

They studied diligently and God, rewarded their faithful study with intelligence which was **“ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm”** (Daniel 1:20).

Daniel, through the power of God, was enabled to interpret the king's dream of the gold-silver-iron-clay image. As a reward for this, he was made governor of the province of Babylon; his three friends were also given executive positions. In spite of their high positions, the four friends remained loyal to God. Nebuchadnezzar set up a gold image as a symbol of his power. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship this image and as a result were thrown into a **“burning fiery furnace.”** In the midst of the flames there appeared **“one like the Son of God”** who preserved them. Nebuchadnezzar was impressed by this miracle and commanded that all of his subjects respect the God of the Jews (Daniel 3:1-30).

Later, in the reign of Belshazzar, Daniel was called in to interpret the mysterious handwriting which appeared on the walls of the palace during the king's blasphemous feast.

The interpretation given by Daniel was that Babylonia would be immediately conquered by the Persians. After this prophecy had been fulfilled, Darius the Mede made Daniel one of the three presidents of the vast Persian Empire.

His fellow-rulers were intensely jealous of the favors which were bestowed upon Daniel.

They flattered the king into issuing a decree that eliminated all prayers except those which were offered to the king himself, for a period of thirty days. Daniel continued faithful to God and broke the law. Darius had to carry out the prescribed penalty. He cast his conscientious governor into a den of lions. God preserved Daniel, and, as a result, his persecutors suffered the fate which they had intended for the prophet, and Daniel retained his presidency (Daniel 5 and 6).

C. THE PROPHETS OF THE CAPTIVITY

1. The Book of Daniel

This book contains the dreams and visions of Daniel by which God disclosed to the prophet the future of the great world empires. Daniel prophesied of the Messiah, as the Son of Man, coming in the clouds of heaven to judge the world and to rule His kingdom.

2. The Book of Ezekiel

Because this book is full of symbolic language, it is very difficult to interpret it. However, there are many points which are clear:

- a. Individual freedom and responsibility before God (chapters 18 and 33)
- b. God longs for the salvation of all men (Ezekiel 18:23, 32)
- c. Ezekiel's Messianic teaching

- (1) The new heart (Ezekiel 11:16-20; 36:25-36)
- (2) The false rulers will give way to Him whose right it is to reign (Ezekiel 21:26, 27)
- (3) The overthrow of all the enemies of God (Ezekiel 38 and 39)
- (4) Unfaithful shepherds to be removed before the True Shepherds (Ezekiel 34:11-31)

D. THE RESULTS OF THE CAPTIVITY

Because of their sins, especially the sin of idolatry, God allowed His people to be taken into captivity. Unless the sins of the people were checked, the very existence of true religion was threatened. Looking back to the period of captivity, we can note several distinct blessings which resulted from God's chastisement of His people.

1. The Extinction of Idolatry

While in possession of their own land and their own Temple, the people of Judah repeatedly fell into gross idol-worship. During the captivity they saw at first hand the vileness of the heathen cults in Babylon. They longed to once more establish the true worship of the Lord at Jerusalem.

Their whole attitude toward God underwent a complete change. Never afterwards were idols openly tolerated among God's chosen people.

2. The Growth of Religious Education

During the Captivity, synagogues were established as places of worship. Here the Jews systematically studied the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets. This study tended to sharpen the people's sense of right and wrong and kept them in obedience to God.

3. The Deepening of the Messianic Hope

Faith in the coming of the Messiah filled many hearts during the Captivity. They longed for the Deliverer. This Messianic consciousness welded the Jews together. They realized that they were the people to whom God had granted His promises.

They were filled with zeal to return to Palestine.

They were willing to begin their careers all over again if they could once more assume their national existence and take their place in God's program. Meanwhile, they patiently waited for God to bring them home.

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FOR FURTHER VOLUNTARY STUDY

The autobiography of Dr. Leopold Cohn is called "*A Modern Missionary to an Ancient People*."

It is published by the American Board of Missions to the Jews. Read through this thrilling story at one sitting and note the influence of the book of Daniel in Dr. Cohn's conversion. What messages can you find in the book of Daniel for the Jews of today?

EXAMINATION

1. What was the status of the Jews during the Babylonian Captivity—
 - a. personally?
 - b. religiously?
2. What two prophets were active during the Captivity? Characterize their prophecy.
3. What three different benefits resulted from the Captivity?

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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