

Chapter Twelve: The Way Back: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (one book-in the Hebrew Bible) trace the story of the return of the people of God to the land of Israel after the 70-year captivity in Babylon. Scholars differ as to the chronological order of the books, some maintaining that the events of Nehemiah occur before those of Ezra. Other historians place the return under Zerubbabel (recounted in the first six chapters of Ezra) as the earliest return, dated approximately 537 B.C., with Ezra and Nehemiah leading later returns in that order. Be that as it may, we shall follow the biblical order so that we might learn the meaning of these events in the spiritual parallel of our individual lives.

The book of Ezra begins with the same words which close the book of 2 Chronicles. They recount the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia, to reestablish and restore the house of the Lord at Jerusalem. This gives us our clue to the meaning of Ezra, for it is a book which recounts the method of God in restoring a heart which has fallen into sin.

The book divides naturally into the ministries of two men: Zerubbabel, chapters 1-6 and Ezra, chapters 7-10. Both of these men led expeditions of Jewish captives back to Jerusalem from Babylon. Zerubbabel was a descendant of David and thus of the kingly line. Ezra descended from Aaron and is therefore a priest. This suggests immediately that in the work of restoration both a king and a priest are needed. The work of the king is to build, or in this case, to rebuild. The work of the priest is to cleanse. Restoration in an individual life always requires these two ministries. There is need to rebuild the character through a recognition of the kingship and lordship of Jesus Christ in the human spirit. Such building involves the recognition of God's right to own and direct us and to change us according to His will.

But restoration also involves cleansing. The spirit and the soul are to be cleansed by our great High Priest, who is able to wash away our guilt, tidy up our past and restore us to a place of fellowship and blessedness before God.

ZERUBBABEL

Under Zerubbabel an early return takes place. This kingly descendant led about 50,000 people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. This is far fewer in number than those who have returned to the land in our own day, but the biblical record attaches great importance to this first return. Cyrus, the king of Persia, may have known of Isaiah's predictions concerning his instrumentality in the hands of God, for he gave willing aid to the Jews who returned, putting in their hands again the vessels of the Temple and giving them goods and animals (Ezra 1:7).

When they came to Jerusalem it was the seventh month of the year and they arrived in time to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast (also called the feast of ingathering) was the time when Israel dwelt in booths to remind them of their pilgrim character. This feast also looks forward to the eventual regathering of Israel from their vast worldwide dispersion to celebrate the personal reign of Messiah upon the earth in great power and glory.

The careful list of those who returned, given in chapter 2, indicates that not only did various families and clans go back but also a company of priests, a smaller number of Levites, certain servants who were to assist the Levites in their service, and a number of people whose genealogy was somewhat uncertain.

Their first act upon return was to build an altar on the original Temple site, in the midst of the ruins. Under the

open sky they erected an altar to God and began to worship and offer sacrifice as the Law of Moses had bid them. This is most significant, for the first act of a heart that really desires to return from wandering in darkness and the ways of the world to real fellowship with God is to erect an altar. The altar is the symbol of divine ownership and involves sacrifice, worship and praise. The sacrifice is that of our right to run our own lives; worship is the enjoyment of the restored relationship where the heart is ministered to by the only One who can fully meet its needs; praise is that of a rejoicing heart.

The second thing they did was to lay the foundation of the Temple (3:10). This work when finished was met with mixed feeling, for some of the people shouted with a great shout of joy and others, including those who had seen the first Temple built by Solomon, wept with a loud voice, so that it was impossible to distinguish the shouts of joy from the sounds of weeping (3:13). Perhaps you too may have felt this way. Have you ever returned to God after a time of coldness and withdrawal, with a great sense of joy as the foundations of fellowship were re-laid by the Spirit, yet with regret for the loss of wasted years? This is what is portrayed here. Tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow as the people saw the Temple being rebuilt.

The third factor in the return of Zerubbabel was the immediate opposition which developed to the restoration of the Temple. Here we see portrayed the force at work in every human heart which immediately rises up to oppose everything God attempts to do. There is a great lesson here in how this force reveals itself. The opposition first appears as friendly solicitude. The people of the land approached Zerubbabel and said, "Let us build with you, for we like you seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here" (4:2). This apparently friendly and openhearted desire to participate in the work marked a very subtle attack upon the returning exiles. It is not difficult to say no to an enemy who breathes fiery threats of slaughter, but when he comes dripping with solicitude and offers to help with your project it is difficult to say no.

But this Zerubbabel did, for he declined their offer of help and stated the Jews would do the work alone. It may have seemed a bit churlish, but it was not mere caprice, for God had commanded Israel not to fellowship with other nations or engage with them in joint enterprises concerning faith. It meant simply that God rejects utterly the philosophy of the world in carrying out His work in the world. There is a worldly religion, and a worldly philosophy which tries to interject the concepts and methods of the world into the lives of God's people. God has made it clear that these are to be rejected. The thinking of the world reflects the spirit of the devil, who is the god of this age. His philosophy is, "Advance yourself; do this for your own glory. Use religious ways to advance your own purposes and thus win admiration, power and fame." But God rejects this principle in its totality.

When the offer of friendship was rejected, it quickly turned to hatred. The people of the land began to mock and taunt the Jews, thus discouraging Israel from doing the work that God had commanded. These so-called "friends" even used legal means to undermine Israel's authority and right to build, for they obtained from Artaxerxes, the king, a decree to stop the rebuilding of the Temple in view of the rebellious history of the Jews. The work was stopped for a period of six years and the Temple lay with only its foundations completed, overrun with weeds and grass (4:24). It was during this period that, according to the prophet Haggai, the people turned instead to building their own homes with many luxuries and comforts. Those who attempt a return to fellowship with God may often find that the record of their past rises again to haunt them and impede their progress, but a determination to go on with God would overcome even this handicap.

To aid the people, God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who proved to be God's instruments to turn the people back to their work (5:1). God also moved the heart of Darius the king to search for the original edict of Cyrus which allowed the restoration of the Temple. When it was found a decree was sent to Israel to permit the rebuilding to continue.

At last the work was finished, and in chapter 6 we read of the celebration of the Passover, marking the beginning of their new life under God. Since the Passover pictures the conversion of a Christian, it is clear from this that our new birth will never be a source of delight to us until we are restored in the temple of our spirit to fellowship with the living God. Unless we are enjoying the glory and the light of heaven upon our hearts we have nothing for which to give thanks, nothing to celebrate.

EZRA

Chapters 7-10 concern the ministry of Ezra the priest. He too led a band of captives back to Jerusalem, though the exact dates are difficult to determine. It is said of him that "he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him" (7:6). What kind of a man is this whom a Gentile king regards so highly that he will give Ezra anything he asks? The secret is given in 7:10, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." He was not only a Bible reader; he was also a Bible doer. As a result, Ezra could ask anything of the king and it would be granted.

Ezra's specific assignment by Artaxerxes the king was "to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem" (7:27). To achieve this Ezra gathered a great company about him, taking special care to include among them a company of Levites. After prayer and fasting they set out on their journey, committing themselves to the overruling providence of God to keep them safe on their way. In due time they arrived in Jerusalem and there Ezra found an incredible condition. The Jews and the Levites had again begun to marry with their ancient enemies, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites.

Centuries before, God had given specific orders that the Israelites were not to intermingle with these tribes. Now they were starting the whole wretched mess over again. It was this intermarrying which had broken the strength of the nation before. It had undermined the power of God among them and finally divided the people, broken up the tribes and separated them into two nations. At last, as they succumbed to the idolatrous practices of those whom they had married, God delivered them into the hands of their captives. Now it appears that after 70 years of captivity they had not learned a thing. This is a vivid reminder that the flesh within us never changes. No matter how long we may walk in the Spirit, we will never arrive at a place where we cannot revert to the worst we have ever been, if we depart from dependence upon the Spirit of God.

When Ezra heard that the people had disobeyed God in intermarrying he tore his garments, pulled the hair from his head and beard, and sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. It was unbelievable to him. But as the book nears its close Ezra prayed to God and confessed this great sin of the people. In graciousness God moved the hearts of the people and the leaders came in brokenhearted contrition to Ezra and acknowledged their wrong. A great proclamation was issued and the people assembled together. It happened to be a day when it was raining, but despite the rain the people stood, thousands of them, in front of the Temple and confessed their guilt and agreed to put away the wives and children they had acquired outside the will of God (10:9-17).

This was not an easy thing to do, but it is surely what Jesus meant when He said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children...he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). It does not mean that a man must put away his wife today, for this is symbolic teaching. It means that we are to put away whatever comes from the flesh (which is always pictured by the Canaanite tribes).

The book closes with a listing of the men in Israel who were faithful to the Word of God, and obeyed Him in this painful matter. Thus the work of Ezra was completed and the task to which he had been assigned, that of beautifying the Temple, went forward. So it is also in the parable of our lives.

NEHEMIAH

As the book of Ezra recounts the building of the Temple, so the book of Nehemiah gives us the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. This is a significant order, for always the way back to God after a period of declension and captivity to evil must begin within the human spirit--the temple of man. But the next step is to begin a reconstruction of the walls, since walls are universally the symbol of strength and protection. This is a clear picture of the process of rebuilding the defenses of the spiritual life to protect against the attacks of any enemy. Many human derelicts drift up and down the streets of our cities, hopeless and helpless, because their defenses have crumbled away; but frequently God in grace reaches them, against all the expectations of those

who have known them, and their walls of defense are rebuilt again. This is the story of the book of Nehemiah.

REBUILDING THE DEFENSES

The first step in this process is given in chapter I where a report is brought to Nehemiah in the city of Susa concerning the ruin and decay of Jerusalem. When Nehemiah heard these words he wept and mourned for several days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven (1:4). Thus the first step in rebuilding the defenses of any life is to become greatly concerned about the ruins. Have you ever taken a good look at the ruins of your life? Have you ever stopped long enough to assess what you could be to God, compared to what you are? Have you looked at the possibilities that God gave you and seen how far you have deviated from that potential? If you have, then like Nehemiah, you have received word in some form or other of the desolation and ruin that is present. If you will begin to be concerned and weep over those ruins, you will have begun the process of rebuilding.

This mourning is immediately followed by confession (1:5-9). Nehemiah prays a great prayer in which he acknowledges the sin of his people and the justice of God in having fourfold the words of Moses, given in warning centuries before. Also in Moses' words, recorded in Deuteronomy, was the promise that when anyone, even in a distant country, would begin to pray to God, a recovery and restitution to the place of blessing would begin.

The prayer of confession is followed by a great commitment (1:10, 11). Nehemiah asked for divine success to be given him, for a plan is already forming in his mind even while he has been in prayer. He has something definite which he wants to ask and he prays that God will grant him mercy in the sight of the king.

Here is a man who, out of his concern and after the confession of his heart, commits himself to a project. Invariably in an enterprise like this there are factors over which man has no control and God must arrange them. So Nehemiah prays about his appearance before the king.

When, in his work as cupbearer, he comes before the king (2:4-8), his face shows concern over the city of his fathers. At the king's request he makes known to him what is troubling him. The account especially notes that the queen was sitting beside the king. Our Bible scholar has identified the king as Ahasuerus who appears also in the book of Esther. If this is the case the queen here is Esther herself. The names Artaxerxes and Ahasuerus are not proper names but are really titles meaning the great king (Artaxerxes) and the venerable father (Ahasuerus). If Esther is the queen then it would explain why the king in Nehemiah is willing to restore Jerusalem; for Queen Esther is also a Jewess.

The next need in rebuilding the defenses of a city, or of a life, is that of courage to face the opposition that immediately arises. Encouraged by the king, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem (2:8) where he found certain Canaanite leaders who were greatly displeased that someone had come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel. Whenever a man like Nehemiah says "I will arise and build," Satan always says, "Then I will arise and oppose."

Such opposition requires not only courage but caution. Nehemiah rode out around the city of Jerusalem by night (2:15), surveying the ruin that was there and taking careful note of what needed to be done. He made an honest survey of the facts and then began to lay his plans. There was no public announcement of what he intended to do, for that would have stirred up even further opposition. But without conceit or ostentation he began his work.

PRINCIPLES OF RECONSTRUCTION

If the walls of your life are broken down or your defenses have crumbled so that the enemy is getting at you on every hand, and you easily fall prey to temptation, it would be well to pay special heed to the principles of reconstruction set forth in chapter 3 of this book. We learn, first of all, that the people were willing to work. Second, that they became personally involved and began right where they were. Each began to work on the part of the wall that was nearest to his own house, and so called forth the deepest of personal involvement on his part.

It is noteworthy that the reconstruction of the walls centered about the 10 gates of the city. Again, in one of the marvelous hidden revelations of truth which is frequently found in Scripture, the names of these 10 gates, in the order in which they appear, is most instructive.

First, there is the Sheep Gate (3:1). Through this gate the sacrificial animals were brought into the city to be offered on the altar. This clearly pictures the Lamb of God, whose blood was shed on the cross for us, and therefore stands for the principle of the cross. That is always the starting place to regain strength in your life. You must recognize anew that the work of the cross is to cancel out your selfish ego and put to death that which is for your own glory and advancement.

The account then moves to the Fish Gate (3:3). When we remember that Jesus said to His disciples, "Follow Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1 :17), this gate suggests the witness of a Christian. Every Christian is called to be a witness. If you can never give an account of what the Lord has done for you, then this wall is broken and the Fish Gate needs to be rebuilt.

In verse 6 the Old Gate (3:6) represents the unchangeable truth of God upon which everything new must rest. As someone has well said, "Whatever is true is not new and whatever is new is not true. " In many places today the old truth is being forsaken, but if you allow this old truth to go you will find that the wall crumbles and enemies outside gain access to your soul.

The next gate is the Valley Gate (3:13). This suggests the place of humility, the place of lowliness of mind and humbleness of heart. On almost every page of Scripture God speaks against the pride of man. He looks always for the lowly, the humble, the contrite and those who have learned that they are not indispensable. This gate seems to be frequently in need of repair with many of us. But we need to be reminded that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jas. 4:6).

Next in order is the Dung Gate (3:14). This is not a very beautiful name but it represents an essential process in life: you need to eliminate that which is corrupt and defiling. No life can be strong or healthy that does not have an often used elimination gate within it.

The Fountain Gate is mentioned next (3:15). This name reminds us instantly of the words of Jesus to the woman at the well: "The water that I shall give [you] shall become in [you] a well of water [a fountain] springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). This speaks of the Holy Spirit who is to be like a river of life in you, enabling you to obey God's will and His Word. To drink from that flowing fountain is to be refreshed in spirit, and to find power to do what God requires.

The Fountain Gate is followed by the Water Gate (3:25,26). Water is always, in Scripture, the symbol of the Word of God. The interesting thing about this Water Gate is that it did not need to be repaired. Evidently it was the only part of the wall that was still standing. The people who lived near it are mentioned, but nothing is said about its repair. Thus the Word of God never breaks down nor does it need repair, it simply needs to be reinhabited.

The eighth gate is the East Gate facing the rising sun (3:29). This is, therefore, the gate of hope, anticipating that which is yet to come when the trials of life and the struggles of earth end, and the glorious new sun rises on the day of God. This gate needs to be rebuilt in many of us who fall under the pessimistic spirit of this age and are crushed by the hopelessness of our times.

The ninth gate is the Horse Gate (3:28). The horse in Scripture is the symbol of warfare, that is, the need to do battle against the forces of darkness. It too is often in need of repair. As the apostle Paul says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world-forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness" (Eph. 6:12).

The final gate is the Muster Gate (Neh. 3:31). The Hebrew word means literally "the examination" gate. This is evidently the place where judgment was conducted, and speaks of our need to take a good look at ourselves now and then and evaluate what we are doing.

That brings us around again to the Sheep Gate (3:32), the gate of the cross. The cross must be at the beginning and end of every life.

PRAY AND WATCH

The derision and scorn of their Canaanite neighbors continued to mount, and threats were made against the lives of Nehemiah and other leaders. In response, Nehemiah did two important things: He went to prayer, and set up a guard. From then on, the workers labored with their weapons beside them, keeping watch and building at the same time (4:16). It was a practical demonstration of, "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition."

Seeing his persistence, his enemies tried various approaches to stop the work. Nehemiah retained a single eye to the work to which God had called him. The end result was the finishing of the wall and the gaining of the respect of surrounding nations when they saw the hand of God at work.

When the walls were completed the people were encouraged to move back from the suburbs to homes within the city walls (chap. 7). The register of peoples is almost identical to the list in Ezra, which lends confirmation to the theory that it was Nehemiah who first returned from Babylon and Ezra who came later. This also is strengthened by the fact that it is only at this point in Nehemiah that Ezra appears in the book.

When the walls were completed, the time came to reaffirm the spiritual strength of the nation. In a great gathering of the people, the Law was read to them anew, accompanied by exposition given by Ezra the priest (chap. 8). It is especially significant that when the people were convicted by the reading of the Law to the point of weeping, Ezra and Nehemiah comforted them with reassurances that the Lord Himself had made provision for their forgiveness, and that "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10).

Chapters 11 through 13 conclude the book, with first a recognition of certain gifts among the people. Levites, gatekeepers, singers and various other ministries were recognized. This is similar to the New Testament which sets the church to discover the gifts of the Spirit that are given among them, and put them all to work. In chapter 12 is the story of the dedication of the wall. The people gathered and marched around the wall with instruments, singing and shouting, playing and rejoicing.

During the reading of the Law, it was learned again that the people of God should give no official place to either an Ammonite or a Moabite. Nehemiah, who had gone back to Persia and apparently had returned for the dedication of the walls, reminded the high priest that Tobiah was an Ammonite and had been given a place to live within the very Temple itself. This is the Tobiah who had done so much to hinder the work of building the wall. To correct this, Nehemiah went in and threw Tobiah's furniture out into the street. Further, he found that the priests and Levites had been cheated, so he restored the money that belonged to them. Then discovering that the people were violating the Sabbath, he commanded that the doors of the city should be shut when the Sabbath began and kept shut until it was ended. Finally, he dealt with some violence with the problem of intermarrying with forbidden races again. When he learned that one of the priests was the son-in-law of Sanballat, who had done so much to oppose Nehemiah's work, he chased the young man from his presence.

To us it may appear that Nehemiah was overly severe with these violations, but here is a man who has learned that there can be no compromise with evil. He manifests one of the greatest lessons the Spirit of God can ever teach us: to say no when it needs to be said and to say it with firmness and determination. Those who have made a mark for God throughout the history of the church have been those who have learned to say no at the right times.

Thus the book of Nehemiah has given itself to a clear demonstration of how to rebuild the walls of strength in our individual lives, and to maintain those walls in strength by unceasing resistance to allurements and attacks which attempt to force us to compromise. How important it is to be ruthless against the forces that undermine and sap the vitality of our lives in Christ.

ESTHER

The book of Esther is an historical incident that occurred during the days of Jewish captivity in Babylon. Some Bible scholars feel that the Persian king, Ahasuerus in the book, is Xerxes the Great. One great Bible scholar, however, identifies him with Astyages--also called Artaxerxes in Nehemiah and Ezra, the father of Cyrus the Persian.

Esther doesn't appear to be a religious book because nowhere does the name of God appear--nor any mention of heaven or hell. However, the name Jehovah does appear four times in the original Hebrew in a hidden way: in the form of acrostics. It is interesting to note that Jehovah declared in Deuteronomy 31 that if His people forsook Him He would hide His face from them.

As in our study of other Old Testament events, the greatest lesson in the account of Esther is in its spiritual parallel to man himself. This pattern appears in the Tabernacle, is repeated in the Temple, appears in the three-fold division of the nation Israel and now is the key to the book of Esther.

Ahasuerus, the king, depicts the soul of man, comprising mind, emotions and, especially, will. His capital city, Susa, is the body in which all his decisions and actions will be most immediately felt. His empire is the sphere of influence which each one of us exerts on all whom we contact. His queen is the spirit of man, closely bound to the soul in such a way that no division or separation can be felt. The queen, bound in marriage to the king, depicts the place of fellowship, refreshment and communion with God which is intimately related to our soul.

Ahasuerus's empire was in a time of peace and blessing, fullness and fruitfulness. No enemy threatened his kingdom from the outside; there was nothing to do but display the lavish glory of his kingdom. Unfallen Adam in parallel, was just such a king. His whole empire, the Garden of Eden, lay at rest and he was free to do nothing more than manifest the riches, fruitfulness and glory of his kingdom while enjoying unhindered communion with God.

During a six-month long feast, which began in joy and merrymaking but ended in tragedy, the king was lifted up in pride and sought to disgrace his queen. Her refusal to submit to his demands resulted in her being deposed from the throne. This decree became a law which could not be changed. When Adam chose to assert the desire of his will over what he knew in his heart that God wanted, he laid the groundwork for the eventual fall of the entire race. His disobedience caused him and all his descendants to enter a fallen state, losing communion with God, which they were helpless to change.

In his loneliness, Ahasuerus sought a new queen. Esther one of the Jewish captives, who was under the control of her cousin Mordecai, was chosen and was exalted to second place in the kingdom. In the spiritual parallel of our life, fallen man, in loneliness and restlessness, also searches for a new place of communion and fellowship with God, even though he himself hardly knows what he is looking for. The new queen depicts our moment of conversion. At this moment we receive a new spirit who, though we do not yet understand it, is under control of another--the Holy Spirit. Throughout this book, "the little man," Mordecai, is the power behind the throne, thus depicting the humility and self-effacement of the Spirit of Christ.

When Haman, a descendant of Amalek--who always pictures the aspects of the flesh--convinced Ahasuerus to decree that the Jews should be destroyed, Esther risked her life to save her people. She told the king that his decree would mean her death as well as her people's death. The king, in consternation, had Haman hanged; Mordecai is exalted to a place of power and instantly everything begins to change. Another decree by the king removed the threat of death from the Jewish captives and allowed them to kill their enemies, just as in Romans 8:2 Paul tells us that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

The book ends with the establishment of the feast of Purim as an enduring memorial to the events of this story. There is a tradition among the Jews that the feast of Purim is the only feast that will be observed after

the Messiah comes. This reflects the truth that to walk in the Spirit is normal for both time and eternity. It is the greatest lesson which God wants us to learn.

In this book we have the same king and the same kingdom at the end as we do at the beginning. The only difference is that Haman is out and Mordecai is in. But what a difference! Just as the king and kingdom remain the same, so the Christian remains the same person when the Spirit is given the place of control in his life. Personality does not change, but it is cleansed and enhanced by the presence of the Spirit. So Paul can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The person remains the same; the principle upon which he lives and acts is entirely different. That is the secret of the Spirit-filled life. As Mordecai, through the will of the king, brings power and peace to the kingdom, so the Holy Spirit, through our human will and never beyond it, brings peace and prosperity into our lives.

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