

Sunday, October 7, 2018—Ezra 5-7

The story of Israel provides countless lessons for God's faithful. These three brief chapters have several. One is: know your history. The people of Israel knew what King Cyrus had given them permission to return home and given them funding to rebuild the Temple. They faced great opposition that stopped the work for a time, but the prophets Haggai and Zechariah motivated them to return to the work, and they used their knowledge of history to defend themselves and restart the task.

Know yourself. The Israelites admitted their exile was a result of their sin. They were starting over because sin had destroyed what God had built, but His grace was greater than their sin.

Know your God. The kings of the Medo-Persian empire were gracious to God's people because they had a high view of Yahweh. Though they were not His chosen people, they wanted His people to be able to rebuild His home and reinstitute His worship. God's own people needed a fresh vision of His glory, majesty, and holiness.

Know your word. Ezra came to Israel a generation or so after Haggai and Zechariah led the rebuilding effort. With the building in place, the people needed to live daily in worship at the Temple and in holy obedience away from it. Ezra committed himself to knowing the word, obeying it, and teaching others to do the same (7:10).

Pray for a daily walk which grows in holiness, awareness of sinful tendencies, and dedication to knowing and doing the Word. Above all, pray to know God Himself more intimately.

Saturday, October 6, 2018—Zechariah 7-10

Legend says football coach Vince Lombardi, after a particularly bad game by his players, picked up a football and said, "Men, this is a football." He knew he had to revisit the fundamentals if his team were to see improvement. No one ever gets to a point of bypassing the essentials.

As Zechariah ministered to God's people through his prophecies, he was sharing the fundamentals God had taught His people throughout the generations. As the people prepared to fast in the fifth month, God asked them, "Are you fasting for Me or yourselves?" (7:5). The issue as always was not their religious practice but the condition of their soul.

God told them, "Make fair decisions. Show faithful love . . . Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless . . ., and do not plot evil in your hearts against one another" (7:9-10; also 8:16-23). This was God's desire for every generation. These were the non-negotiable essentials, and those who failed to live in this way faced His anger. He wanted to bless His people once again (8:15), and they had the pathway to experience it.

This rebuilding and blessing was in preparation for the coming of the King (9:9). God would weaken the powers of the world and strengthen Israel so the eyes of the world would see His chosen one experience the victory of righteousness and execute His wrath against sin (9:10-10:12).

Pray for daily faithfulness to the Lord and obedience to His call for righteousness. Thank Him for the victory and joy available in Christ.

Friday, October 5, 2018—Zechariah 3-6

Paul told the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (see Philippians 2:12-13). He knew God was giving them the desire to grow in Christ and the power to accomplish the obedience. God was sovereign and graceful but would not work without their partnership.

More than 400 years earlier, Zechariah received a series of visions that spoke of partnerships for growth as well. In Zechariah 3, he saw the high priest Joshua standing in filthy clothes, but an angel of the Lord removed those filthy clothes and cleansed him from his sin. He charged Joshua to

walk in the ways of Yahweh and obey Him (3:7). God was doing his part, and Joshua had the choice of whether or not to do his.

In Zechariah 4, God spoke to Zerubbabel, the governor, about rebuilding the Temple. The great task would not be accomplished by might or power but by the Spirit (4:6). Mountains become plains at the hand of Yahweh, so Zerubbabel could trust God would do mighty things if he moved forward in obedience. Zechariah 6 provided a vision to Joshua, the high priest, about rebuilding the Temple and the Branch who would help Joshua rebuild and the peaceful counsel between the two (6:13).

These two visions spoke of two partnerships—God and man as well as church and state. God wants every aspect of life to have His influence and presence, but He gives His people the choice of whether or not to trust Him and obey. He will not force their dependence.

Pray for joyful obedience in every area of life.

Thursday, October 4, 2018—Haggai 1-2, Zechariah 1-2

The final stages of the Old Testament play out in the words of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They provide perspective from the worlds of prophets, scribes, and governors. They all sought to rebuild the nation spiritually and physically, and they pled with the people not to repeat the mistakes their ancestors had made.

The people had returned and began the rebuilding effort which Cyrus the Persian had approved, but local opposition brought the Temple work to a halt. For some time, the people went about their lives, rebuilding their homes, flocks, and fields, but they neglected the Temple. Haggai told them to repent and return to the Temple project. God asked, “Is it appropriate for you to live in your paneled homes while My House remains incomplete?” (Hag 1:9). These words stirred the high priest, the governor, and the people in a nationwide revival. Some were discouraged because the rebuilt Temple would not be as glorious as the previous one. God assured them He would one day make it more glorious than ever (Hag 2:9). They simply needed to be obedient and do their part.

While God was speaking through Haggai, He was also using Zechariah. In the second year of King Darius’s reign, Zechariah spoke to the returnees. They had returned to their homeland, but they also needed to return to Yahweh (Zech 1:3). As Haggai urged them to rebuild the Temple, Zechariah shared visions encouraging them to rebuild their souls.

Praise God for restoring our souls and making us His new temple through the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Wednesday, October 3, 2018—Ezra 1-4

At some point, waiting finally ends. The nurse calls the patient to the exam room. Dad comes home after a long day of work. The calendar finally reads December 25. Anticipation becomes reality.

God told His people for generations they would face severe punishment, and the exile finally arrived under Nebuchadnezzar. God told them they would be removed from Israel for 70 years, and Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther all speak of those years—the discouragement, the longing, and the hope for restoration. Ezra 1 says the day for return finally came under King Cyrus the Persian.

Showing His magnificent power and ability to do far more than His people could ever ask or imagine, God moved Cyrus to finance the rebuilding of the Temple. Not only were God’s people going home, but they had the blessing and treasure of the king of the world to rebuild the home for the presence of Yahweh. Added to that, the Persian people gave freewill offerings to Israel for their journey home. This was grace!

The seemingly insignificant and tedious genealogies of many previous books of the Bible began to be much more important as they people prepared to go home. They needed to know their history to know their role and their physical location when they arrived home. Their first task together was to give freely (2:68) to rebuild the Temple. Having God present and at the center of the rebuilding was absolutely necessary.

When God moves, Satan stirs trouble (4:1-24). Pray for patience while waiting and joyful obedience as He makes a way.

Tuesday, October 2, 2018—Esther 8-10

Paul said in Ephesians 3:20 that God is able to do far more than we could ever dare to ask for or even imagine. He is before and after all things, and He holds everything together, so His abilities exceed description. When He works, therefore, we may be amazed or surprised because what happens may exceed expectation, but nothing He is able to do exceeds His character.

His work in the lives of Esther and Mordecai was truly stunning. From relative obscurity, Esther became queen. By way of family relation and divine guidance, Mordecai became a man of great power throughout the country. Mordecai took the ring and the position of the man who sought to exterminate him and his people, and Esther received his estate (8:1-2). Only a just, caring, and wise God could orchestrate such a story.

The Jews of Persia remained a target, however, because of the king's edict, so Esther and Mordecai wrote a new edict in his name which allowed the Jews to defend themselves throughout the 127 provinces. On the day the original edict said they could be attacked, the new edict allowed them to defend themselves. Esther asked for an extra day, and the king granted it. Those two days became an annual celebration of God's grace.

What God did in Persia was a foreshadowing of what He did through Christ. Like Haman, Satan plotted to destroy, but his evil plan returned on his own head (9:25; see Genesis 3:15). Give thanks to God for the grace, mercy, and treasure He brings through Jesus.

Monday, October 1, 2018—Esther 4-7

Jealousy is a consuming passion. Looking at others and wanting their possessions or status to become one's own eats away at satisfaction and stirs thoughts for gaining those precious things or finding some way for them no longer to belong to the other person. Jealousy is also blinding, preventing the jealous person from seeing they will never be satisfied.

Consumed with exterminating the Jews, Haman convinced the king to decree this. When he walked passed Mordecai, one of these hated Jews, Mordecai did not bow down to Haman. This infuriated Haman. He should have been satisfied with the plans that would see Mordecai dead, but he was consumed with blinding jealousy. He built gallows to kill Mordecai. He would bring about himself now what the edict would have done later.

Meanwhile, Mordecai was devastated by the edict, and he sent word to Esther to petition the king for relief. She had never revealed her Jewish heritage, but now was the time. Perhaps God had brought her to royal position for such a time as this (4:14). Mordecai did not want what others had. He simply wanted to keep what God had rightly given.

In a beautiful twist of fate, the king honored Mordecai for uncovering an assassination plot years earlier, and the parade was organized by Haman. Afterward, Mordecai returned to the king's gate. He was not seeking notoriety. He only wanted God's favor. Haman, however, went to Esther's banquet and, upon the revelation of his plot, lost his life.

Pray for your walk with Christ to bring daily satisfaction.