



Editor's Note

As the year continues to unfold, we see again the faithfulness of God in answered prayer. ESN had fallen several issues behind, especially in the Spanish version (APA), and we requested prayer. Suddenly there are willing workers, completed issues, and provision to cover costs, all coming at the same time. Once again the world says, "Coincidence," and once again we say, "Praise the Lord." If you have been praying, be encour-

aged that you have "helped us through prayer." The Lord continues to build His church just as He promised, and we all as workers together, can rejoice that He has counted us worthy to share a small part in that big work.

You'll enjoy the ongoing series from the Old Testament by Dr. Spender, and notice that the closing thought about how the Lord keeps His promises flows right over into the article by Maria in Wives' Corner!



Biblical Foundations

Introducing the Historical Books *by Robert Spender*

Just as we preserve an account of our family's history, so too, Joshua through Esther preserves an account of Israel's history in the Promised Land. To begin, an understanding of how to approach the Old Testament historical books will greatly enhance any study of this important section of the Bible. Primarily written in narrative form, these books chronicle the nation's beginnings until the threshold of the New Testament period and even though they tell one progressive story, each book is quite different from the others. All recorded history is selectively written with some events emphasized and others excluded so we should not expect every detail to be recorded. In addition, all history is written from an author's perspective and since the ultimate author is the Holy Spirit, biblical history is best viewed as inspired theological history.

The Bible tells the story from God's point of view. Events unfold primarily in chronological order and are superintended by the hand of God, sometimes quite visibly as with Joshua's victories, while sometimes invisibly as in Esther. Smaller events link together to form the greater account of Israel's history. Careful study of individual events leads to a greater appreciation and understanding of God's work with His people. Also, many helpful applications for today can be found at the point of the Lord's resolution of an event, even as it connects to the next event in the narrative.

Conquering with Joshua

Joshua narrates Israel's conquest of Canaan as a fast paced series of events that involved tribal unity and effective leadership. The Lord's commissioning of Joshua opens the book and effectively transitions away from the Mosaic era. After an encouraging report from the spies of Jericho, Israel moved into Ca-

naan under Joshua's leadership, following the priests and the Ark toward spiritual renewal.

Once in the Promised Land, circumcision and Passover unified the people, affirmed the Lord's presence and created momentum for great victories. Large sections of the land were taken in a series of three major campaigns, expanded by the recording of key moments that focus our attention on who the Lord is and how He works. So, for example, the amazing success at Jericho is contrasted by Achan's blatant disobedience, underscoring the Lord's requirement for obedience.

The southern campaign, initiated by the Gibeonite deception and Israel's failure to seek the Lord, was followed by great victories affirming the grace of the Lord while hinting at the wideness of His mercy. A covenant renewal at Shechem during the campaigns reminded Israel of the Lord's presence and prepared them for the successful northern campaign. Stopping amid the crazy pace of our culture to remember the Lord is extremely important. What a privilege to do so on a weekly basis! Much of the latter part of Joshua is then taken up with apportioning the land, punctuated by hints about tribal ineffectiveness to fully accomplish the task. As the book draws to a close, we see the faithful leader Joshua, along with his family, challenging the people to make a clear choice to follow the Lord and separate from idols. Joshua 24:15 provides believers with a relevant challenge and, while our choices are daily made, the "today" of this verse speaks of a life long commitment to make the right choices and grow in the momentum of God's grace.

Compromise during Judges

After reading the positive and quick paced Joshua, the traumatic events narrated in Judges

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Practical Application

Pray for your Elders! by Jack Spender

Everyone knows it's important to pray, and most Christians would agree with praying for those in leadership in the church, and some actually do pray! But have you ever wondered how the average person prays in private for elders? In fact have you ever thought about how you pray for them?

Of course there are the obvious things, both spiritual and temporal. Like everyone else, elders have families and homes, and jobs and health concerns. They also need to grow spiritually in wisdom, and love, and the security of being God's children. They need help in their spiritual work of preaching or teaching, of visiting the flock, and meeting together with their team to study the Word, and pray and plan.

Most elders upon reading the above list might exclaim, "If I knew the people in our fellowship were praying these things for me, I'd be more than pleased." And so they would. It's interesting, however, that in the list of things mentioned above, there is no mention of some very important things for which elders need — and deserve our prayers. Let's think about some of them.

A Few of the "Other Things"

Temptation

Many people have subconsciously decided that elders are too spiritual to be tempted, much less yield to temptation. Or, they may think of temptation only in terms of unbiblical, physical intimacy. But the adversary of our souls will use devious tactics to accomplish his purposes, such as the lure of a lucrative job that takes an elder away from the assembly, or the desire to use his authority to control others.

Does this mean we must try to think of every possible temptation that those who lead may face? Not at all. Only the Lord knows them all anyway. But when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we ought not to think too narrowly. The Scripture tells us to "Know those who labor among you . . ." I Thes. 5:12, so that as we come to know them better, and this comes in part by being good listeners, we might pick up on things that could become temptations in the life of an elder,

and we can ask the Lord to strengthen them and keep them close to Himself in that area.

Burnout

This is a modern word for a very old problem. Poor Elijah experienced it after an exhausting contest with the forces of evil in I Kings 18. Paul said that at times he was pressed so severely that he despaired even of life. (II Cor. 1:8). It is all very well to speak of time management and setting priorities, but the truth is, sometimes the demands of life and urgent problems in the family and the church all converge at once, so that even the godliest elder could not have foreseen it.

Usually, when such situations are short term, most elders will patiently endure, and then rise above them. But how about when troubles drag on for months and even years? Just the feeling of no end in sight can be depressing! How can we pray about this?

The Lord sent a good meal and some well deserved rest for Elijah, and Paul spoke of finding the grace of God sufficient for his trials. This suggests that as we pray for elders who are under heavy loads of stress, we might also be asking the Lord what we as individuals or the church fellowship as a whole might do to obey Gal. 6:2: "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Sometimes only prayer is fitting, but at other times we need practical faith. There is some truth to the old adage that in many groups [read "churches"], 10% of the people do 90% of the work. Good teaching on the priesthood of all believers and the importance of spiritual gifts can provide more co-laborers by allowing the Spirit of God to bring needed conviction.

Loss of Vision

One reason why plurality in leadership is so important is vision. This of course does not refer to mystical experiences but to foresight into the will and workings of the Lord. Joseph not only satisfied Pharaoh's desire to understand his dream (Gen. 41), he was ready with a vision or plan that would safeguard the country as it moved into the future. Elders need vision!

There are many causes for loss of

vision, such as sin in the life, neglecting time in the Scriptures, self dependence, etc. Sadly, one of the biggest causes for loss of vision among elders comes from the very work they do. Certainly leadership teams need to deal with problems in the work. But as problems multiply, they can demand (and that word is well chosen!) more and more time. What is sacrificed? Spending time with the Lord just to hear His still small voice giving the guidance needed to take important steps for provision and growth of the church. The Lord is the Great Provider, so He is the true source of "pro-vision."

Whenever you hear an elder dismiss something in the present that will bring problems down the road, with a weary, "Well, what can ya do?" it's a signal to pray for courage and wisdom. Courage to say "No" to some demands, and get other people involved, and wisdom to remember a very important principle: There are choices that will bring temporary blessing in the present, but sorrow in the future. Moses experienced this in the smiting of the rock a second time.

What would strengthen both courage and wisdom? The firm resolve to spend time hearing from the Lord in the Word, and speaking to Him in prayer before tackling church problems, so that vision for the work might be known. Acts 6 provides a good study in this.

Insensitivity

The trials of life can cause one to become calloused to sensitive things. Almost imperceptibly, elders can begin to think that they have all the answers. What do the sheep know? Are they not just sheep, always going astray? But Scripture is filled with examples of how the Lord exercised His sovereignty by working through little known folks. Who was Agabus anyway, and why alert the church to a famine through him (Acts 11:28) when there were apostles around? And who ever heard of Ananias, and why send him to pray over the newly converted Saul (Acts 9:10), when Philip the evangelist lived nearby?

Elders must guard a sensitive spirit in all their dealings, listening carefully to legitimate concerns from the flock,

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Introducing the Historical Books (continued from page 1)

describe Israel's slow but sure departure from the Lord over the next several hundred years. The author's introduction outlines impediments including Israel's failure to drive out all of the inhabitants, the apostasy of following generations, and the peoples' growing attraction to idols. These tensions blend together to form a repeated cycle of waywardness that climaxed at the Lord's deliverance through a judge. Israel's failure for true repentance, however, led each generation into greater corruption (2:19) causing a subtle spiral away from the Lord and His gracious provision of rest. But Judges reveals how God works. He provides ample evidence and gently knocks on the heart's door but does not force people to follow His way.

The study of each judge will provide many lessons especially if one notes contextual clues like repetitions, emphasis and key words. Deborah's song (5:1-31), for example, not only provides a poetic description of previously narrated events (4:1-24) it begins with a bracketed note of praise (vss. 2 & 9) where Deborah illustrates what it means to bless the Lord.

Important for understanding the events of this great book, is the contextual development of specific moments in the life of each judge. For example, the events leading up to Jephthah's rash vow help us to see ourselves when we try to push ahead of God's program in our own strength, while Gideon's constant dependence upon miraculous events affirms the Lord's desire for faith above signs, (1 Cor. 1:22-23). The well-known judgeship of Samson provides a conundrum for many readers. How could he be so dense and why did the Lord use such a man? Even his initial marriage, which grieved his parents, was used by

the Lord. But this tension is essential to the development of the book and Israel's history. Further, it affirms the message of the Lord who provides wonderful grace but grace that cannot be selfishly used, (Rom. 6:1).

Closing this book are two ugly narratives chosen to illustrate the corruption of the times, (17:1-21:25). Dan's migration from a central location to the north is a story of idolatry, theft and violence while the second account records a civil war that almost obliterated the tribe of Benjamin. Each event involved a wayward tribe revealing the depths of Israel's failure.

Ruth rejoices with the remnant


The Lord loves to work with a remnant and while there are some glimmers of hope during the Judges, none outshine the book of Ruth. The story of Ruth, which transpires during the Judges, provides us with a snapshot of faithful folks who were living during difficult times. This small book illustrates the reality of life's struggles and the testing of a believer's faith. Naomi, who lost everything, did not initially recognize the provision of the Lord in her Gentile, Moabite daughter-in-law. She eventually grasped the grace of the Lord when Ruth's faithfulness and Naomi's knowledge of Israel's customs combined to bring about the blessing of the Lord for them, for Israel, and for us.

The book of Ruth is full of the customs of ancient Israel. Amplification of agricultural events like the reaping and threshing of grain will greatly enhance the message of the book. Especially important are the customs of the kinsman redeemer and levirate, or brother-in-law marriage. Little did Naomi realize that her trip to Moab would be used by the

Lord to provide a king for Israel and a genealogical link to Israel's greater King, the Lord Jesus Christ. The genealogical closure of Ruth also sets the stage for Israel's monarchy by contrasting the faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi (David's ancestors) to the turmoil of the tribe of Benjamin ending Judges (Saul's ancestors).

Remembering God's Rest

The study of Israel's early history in the land can be quite profitable for believers today, both in the individual events that are recorded and the working of the Lord with His people. However, themes do surface that unite these great books and generate fruitful ground for study. One example is the theology of rest. Grounded in creation and Sabbath rest, the idea of promise and completion is evidenced by Joshua's success (11:23 & 21:44). Judges, however portrays the ease of missing God's rest by showing how Israel squandered each time of peace that the Lord provided. But the rest in Ruth was for restoration through marriage (1:9). Ruth (and Naomi) found restoration through an heir – marriage and redemption of their land – as provided by Boaz.

Today, our rest is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believers rest in a Person not on a day. The Sabbath was only a shadow of what was to come but Christ is the substance, (Col. 3:16-17). Now that we have Christ we no longer need the shadow as we look forward to the eternal provision of the Lord, (Heb. 4:9). Joshua, Judges and Ruth record the amazing story of Israel's beginnings in Canaan and how the Lord preserved His people to bring forth a Redeemer for all. With such a heritage we cannot help but bless the Lord who always keeps His promises. 


Pray for your Elders! (continued from page 2)

esteeming others in their team highly, always being teachable in things new to them, sensing when there might be danger to the work. David prayed, “Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should

walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee.” (Ps. 143:8). That's a good prayer to pray for ourselves, but also for those who lead in the church.

Conclusion

“Remember your leaders” is Darby's accurate rendering of Heb. 13:7. There

are many ways we can remember them, but none more important than in prayer. The enemy considers elders to be marked men, prime targets for attack. Pray for them daily, even for some less frequently mentioned items such as those just listed. The church will be better for it! 

Wives' Corner

God Is Faithful *by Maria Forcucci*

One of the greatest encouragements we can impart to one another is sharing that the Lord keeps His promises. Sometimes He blesses us in preparation for coming opposition to confirm us (Acts 2, the gifts of the Spirit), sometimes in the midst of trials to strengthen us (Acts 9, Ananias' visit to Saul), or after the storm passes to reward (and surprise) us (Genesis 41, Joseph's exaltation in Egypt). In any case, God will be faithful to His own. Romans 8:32 says, "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" I want to share a few of my experiences which often do not reflect my "feelings" but portray truth nonetheless.

Many years ago, I was a sentimental person, adoring my blood relatives almost to the point of idolatry. Very soon after receiving Christ, something really strange happened. The family of God started to become more of a priority for me. It was painful as one by one my family members shared how hurt (and angry) they were that I was not as available, not as fun, so they assumed I must be brainwashed. That was a painful time for me but *God was faithful*. Now I have a family of 120+ saints! Not to mention that a few family members, including my parents, became believers.


Moving forward about 10 years, a dear friend of mine, and daughter to my mentors was diagnosed with leukemia. I believed with all my heart that God was going to heal her. Well, He didn't and she went to be with Him at 26 years old. I felt so betrayed, not so much that God took her, but that He didn't give me a personal heads-up. That event shook my faith

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for 6 months. During a Gospel outreach with which I was reluctantly involved, I witnessed a young woman come to the Lord. Her sincerity melted my heart and I became her mentor. She was 26 and has

become a beautiful friend for me, and a surrogate daughter to my mentors and sister to their family. *God was faithful to me despite my bad attitude and lack of faith!*

More recently, two and half years ago, my daughter experienced an unwanted separation when her husband left. In that time, she prayed and fasted, entreating the church to join her, never losing hope or considering divorce. Strangely, neither did her husband. Last week, after a week of intensive counseling and true repentance, they both entered the Lord's Supper to the joy of the saints who labored on their knees. *God is faithful when it seems hopeless.*

Finally and most recently, the loss of my job (ministry) of over 20 years came abruptly with the discovered sin and consequences of a close friend and coworker. I can tell you through tears that I do not know how the Lord will redeem this. I do not foresee a great plan unfolding at the moment, but may I encourage myself as I encourage you, that *His track record proves He is faithful*. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly." (Ps 84:11) May we wait, even in our tears, with anticipation for His faithfulness. 

THE SMALL PRINT

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