



## Editor's Note

I hope you are following and enjoying the ongoing overview of the Old Testament by Robert Spender. What is the goal in offering this series? ESN is committed to being a resource for busy elders. It's surprising how many churches neglect the Old Testament, for various reasons.

One reason is that it takes time to understand the historical details and, from the lessons they teach, make valid applications for today. Certainly no articles can make Bible study unnecessary, but they can suggest applications that make the Scriptures come alive with special meaning. Consider the following quotes taken from the current article on the restoration books:

"It is important to teach our young people the foundational principles of Scripture but understand that their approach to honoring and worshiping the Lord may differ from our own cultural perspective."

"Meditation upon Ezra's desire to apply the Word of God to each situation in life is a worthy goal for believers."

"The solid faith of Mordecai and Esther should remind us of how important it is to ground our young people in the Word of God. A firm stance on the promises of the Lord enables correct choices during times of crisis."

Enjoy the series, and remember: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable..." (II Tim. 3:16). 

### **Biblical Foundations**

#### **The Return from Exile** by Robert Spender

The feeling of isolation can be devastating. I can still vividly remember being separated from my mom and dad at a local fair at a young age. Though hardly a dramatic event, it was for me! I can only imagine the feelings of abandonment and loss carried by the exiles of Judah as they were marched to Babylon after Jerusalem's destruction. What will become of us? Where are our children and our spouses? Where is the Lord and why did He allow this to happen? A few passages of Scripture, like Psalm 137, preserve the feelings of despair even as the Jews gradually settled into new routines over the next seventy years.

God's prophets had warned about pending judgment but they also spoke of a better day. Jeremiah's announcements about the coming 70 years fell on deaf ears, yet with the help of Ezekiel, who ministered among the captives, the people were able to keep their focus upon the God of Israel. Daniel provides insight into the difficulties some faced but he looked forward to a better day and kept track of the 70 years by serving the Lord faithfully while meditating upon His word (9:2). The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther reveal the forward movement of God's plan as we view the return from captivity and conditions under the Persian Empire.

#### **The First Return: Rebuilding the Temple**

Returning from captivity must have been an awesome event for the Jews who made the trek chronicled in Ezra 1-4. The first return was led by Sheshbazzar, an appointed official who led the Jews safely to Jerusalem and

then handed leadership over to their governor, Zerubbabel. Long before the exile, the Lord named Cyrus as His chosen shepherd to initiate the Jews' return and the rebuilding of the Temple (Isa. 44:28). Our God has an intimate knowledge of the future, so when the Lord Jesus said that He is preparing a place for believers (John 14:2) we can fully trust His plan. The book of Ezra lists the honor roll of those who returned as well as their exuberance for reestablishing the sacrificial system. Laying the foundations of the Temple evoked a mixed response. The younger folks shouted for joy at the idea of a new Temple while the older generation wept from the memories of past grandeur. We need to remember that different generations can have different perspectives on the work of the Lord. It is important to teach our young people the foundational principles of Scripture but understand that their approach to honoring and worshiping the Lord may differ from our own cultural perspective.

Unfortunately, opposition to the rebuilding efforts quickly surfaced. The surrounding neighbors appealed to Persia and the work ceased. For over sixteen years the foundations sat idle, evidencing the Jews' weakening faith. The enemy is strong in any age and seeks to hinder the work of the Lord but God's power, so evident during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, is still available to believers today. The Lord's grace interposed with the raising up of Haggai and Zechariah, who encouraged the people to finish the work (Ezra 5:1 & 6:14). By obeying God's prophets (a rare thing in

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**W**e have been considering some “tools” to help elders accomplish their work for the Lord in the elders’ meeting, and today we’ll add one more very mundane but important one: good record keeping. How can such a subject matter in spiritual work? Consider the following:

Many years ago, a missionary to jungle areas of South America who worked by river boat told me an interesting story. He said, “When I include a note in our newsletter about a proposed trip to the interior, and ask prayer for the Lord’s provision to buy Bibles, the funds pour in and we buy the Bibles. But when I write a note saying the boat is now loaded with Bibles, pray for the Lord’s provision to buy diesel fuel for the boat, very little comes in. People want to invest in ‘spiritual things’ like Bibles, but who wants to use the Lord’s money for diesel fuel? So the boat and the Bibles sit at the dock much longer than necessary.”

I never forgot that story, because it illustrates a common misconception that ‘spiritual work’ is above the menial things of ordinary life. Years ago, when a group of men were discussing a proposed plan to provide better fellowship and accountability for the local assembly, one elder sniffed, “Sounds like the business world to me.”

But there is a place for order in doing the Lord’s work. After all, the Lord Himself was designing a wise and beautiful order during the week of creation long before there was any business world. And, He preserved a careful record of His work for His creatures to enjoy and profit by. To tell the truth, the principle behind every point of order employed by successful businesses, such as being on time, quality control and careful record keeping, can be found already intact in the Scriptures! Wise elders will understand the need for order and accountability in their oversight stewardship.

#### Some Basics

The goal here is to make a tool serve us, and not allow it to enslave us. Thus the old adage: “Keep it simple”! A few decisions will make a start. Appoint one

brother to take some notes during meetings, and maintain a file of important documents and papers. The task is easier today with the computer, but even a pad and pencil can serve the purpose. Ideally, the brother chosen will have some administrative gift, and enjoy keeping things in order.

Notes can be simple and emphasize decisions made rather than all the discussions along the way. These notes, or meeting minutes, should be dated and include the names of those in attendance, as well as subjects both new and old. Besides being stored for safekeeping, they can be shared with others at the elders’ discretion. Some will fear a breach of confidence, others will want the benefits of prayer and input from informed saints.

Don’t underestimate the value of careful filing of meeting minutes! What good are records if they soon become lost in a pile of old notes? A simple index of major decision dates or problems addressed can make all the difference in usefulness.

#### Avoiding Pitfalls

There are a number of ways in which record keeping can become a burden, and these must be avoided.

Issues that cannot be immediately resolved tend to get “tabled” to future meetings. But this list can grow long for a number of reasons. Elders who agree to “homework” or work outside the meeting can procrastinate. Or a consensus about which way to go can be elusive, so no decision is made. Thus it can be helpful to agree that items cannot be continued on the minutes for more than a set number of meetings or months. After that, they drop and must be reintroduced as new items.

Another problem can be recording too much or not enough information in the notes. Too much material preserves unneeded details and can become cumbersome to read or sift through later. Too sparse records tell the reader that items were discussed but keep him in the dark about crucial information that is needed to make an accurate picture of the outcome. Study Acts 15 for a nice example of good balance in record keeping, and the involvement of the whole church.

Finally, the more objective the records are, (“just the facts”), the more weight they will carry should legal questions arise at a later time. More on that shortly. In general the recording secretary or scribe should refrain from “slanting” the record in favor of personal viewpoints.

#### The Benefits

Keeping good records pays dividends. Here are a few of them:

- Even elders can become forgetful. Records provide visual reminders that decisions are needed.
- Committing things to writing is a form of accountability. Time is precious, and it must be redeemed (Eph. 5:16). Records are proof that time was used profitably.
- The admonition, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40) should begin with the leadership. If workmanship is sloppy among the shepherds, it likely will be among the sheep.
- Just as in law courts, “precedent” can be a help in decision making. It’s a sad fact that often in the Lord’s work, we invest time and money to “reinvent the wheel,” as the saying goes. Lessons learned the hard way can save descendants or even new churches much time and trouble if documented faithfully, and preserved accessibly.
- We are living in perilous times, and legal issues can arise that involve religious institutions in civil matters in which they had no desire to be involved. At such times, careful, factual, dated records can be invaluable in maintaining a clear testimony before the world.

#### Conclusion

It is true that the church is an organism, a living thing at the universal level. But it also exists locally, and in order to accomplish its mission in the world must make use of temporal resources like buildings, money, insurance, etc. The view that the Lord’s work is above these things was not shared by the apostles. No

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## **Elders' Meetings** (continued from page 2)

doubt there were some in the early church who opposed the formation of a new subgroup within the church with authority to maintain order in an area formerly overseen by the apostles (Acts 6; the feeding of widows). But the growing work (vs. 1)

demanded a wise decision, and the Lord not only blessed it, (vs. 7), but saw fit to record it in His Word for the church of all time.

As stated at the beginning, good records must be our servants, not our

masters. But in a world increasingly filled with disorder, Christians ought to be outstanding in bringing order to their private lives, their homes, and their gatherings before the world. 

## **The Return from Exile** (continued from page 1)

Israel) the opposition was silenced and the Temple was completed, bringing joy to the community and their worship (6:16 & 22).

### **The Second Return: Reemphasizing the Word**

Ezra's return, recorded in the second part of the book (7–10) appears to have been motivated by his love for God's Word. His three main goals: to study it, do it and teach it (7:10) should be emulated today. Ezra undergirded his thinking with God's Word in each situation. He declined to seek Persian protection for the return trip as being inconsistent with His witness of God's sovereignty (8:22) and later challenged his own people about the inconsistency of their marriages with people of surrounding idolatrous nations.

While we might wrestle with their solution to the problem (10:3) it reminds us that unholy living leads to increasingly difficult circumstances. However, seeking to follow the example of Christ always leads to a better path (Rom. 8:28). Meditation upon Ezra's desire to apply the Word of God to each situation in life is a worthy goal for believers today.

### **The Third Return: Rebuilding the Walls**

Nehemiah's strong leadership stands out as we approach the end of the Old Testament period. Today's spiritual leaders would do well to study and teach the principles derived from this book. After seeking God's will for the occasion, Nehemiah prayerfully moved forward with his desire to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. His personal involvement in the project (chapter 2), even distribution of labor (chapter 3), stability during great opposition (chapter 4) and sensitivity to fairness and people's needs (chapter 5) are some of the marks of effective leadership. The outcome of Nehemiah's leadership encouraged unity among the people who

heard the Word of God and responded with confession and positive actions, all of which enabled the community to finish the work and offer praise and worship to the Lord. Consistent focus upon the task at hand and conviction of the Lord's support enabled Nehemiah to withstand the growing opposition that he faced. The enemies' initial anger grew from mockery and intimidations to threats of armed conflict. Nehemiah, however, met each new stage of opposition with prayer and planned action. With the failure of overt intimidation the opposition employed more subtle attempts including false prophets and internal disruption.

Nehemiah's steadfast grasp of the Lord's calling and presence kept him from the snares of the enemy. What a great lesson for godly leaders who face opposition from without and questions from within. A firm grasp of the Lord's calling, undergirded by prayer and meditation upon God's Word, can provide the spiritual momentum needed to face opposition and carry one through tough times.

### **Esther: God's Hidden Presence**

Located between the completion of the second Temple in Jerusalem (520 BC) and the return under Ezra (457 BC), the events of Esther recount the struggles of the exiled Jews who remained in Persia. While this book does not mention God's name, His providential hand can be seen at every twist of events. Esther provides a wonderful glimpse of God's providential hand for those who are struggling in a stressful environment.

For example, when older folks are relocated to a new setting because of health concerns, they often struggle to discern the presence of the Lord. Rightly presented, Esther illustrates how God's strong arm undergirds His people at all times and in every situation.

One clear application from this book is the importance of taking a stand for the Lord. Mordecai took a consistent stand before his adversary Haman while Esther's moment came when she was challenged to put her life on the line for her people (4:16). The irony of Haman being ordered by the King to honor Mordecai expands beyond the historical moment to image the contrast between works and grace. Mordecai held firm while his adversary pulled out all the stops to orchestrate an evil end for the Jews. Mordecai's faith enabled him to understand that God's plan will always be accomplished (4:14). In the same way, the Lord expects believers to accomplish His will, and when they do not, they lose the blessing.

The solid faith of Mordecai and Esther should remind us how important it is to ground our young people in the Word of God. A firm stance on the promises of the Lord enables correct choices during times of crisis. Christ's return, for example, is not only the solid hope of the believer (Titus 2:13), it enables the believer to view stressful situations in a completely different light than those without such hope (1 Thes. 4:13).

### **Conclusion: Citizens of Another Land**

Finding oneself in a strange and stressful environment can create challenging situations leading to anxiety and doubt. However, the realization that believers are living daily in a strange land helps us to keep our focus on Christ. Walking with Christ as we depend upon the Spirit to show us the way by His word enables us to live as examples in whatever environment the Lord chooses to place us. The messages of the post-exilic period challenge believers to keep their eyes fixed upon the Author and Finisher of faith (Heb. 12:2) as they strive to do His will in a land away from home. 

## Wives' Corner

### Rahab, the Harlot with Heart *by Maria Forcucci*

In the last issue of Wives' Corner, we looked at Tamar, who exhibited faith in the Lord God by pursuing her inheritance with the Levirate law to fulfill God's purpose. Today, we will examine what we know about Rahab, the harlot, and her faith that put her in the ancestry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that when Joshua sent out two spies to inspect the land God had promised them, Rahab sheltered and protected them. The passage in Joshua 2 does not try to hide the fact that Rahab was indeed a harlot. Why would men of God go to a harlot's house and not another venue? Well, there is the obvious conclusion, although we have no reason to assume the worst. One reason could be location, as her house rested on the outer wall of Jericho and was easy to get to. Another thought is that it would be safe, as Israelites with all their "rules" would not be suspected of entering a harlot's house. Thirdly, harlots know things. They overhear things. Perhaps the spies thought she could help them with information. Personally, I suspect that the Holy Spirit led them to someone in whom He was already at work,

quicken her with a healthy fear of the Lord.

If we glance at statements in Joshua 2, like Rahab's answer to the men of the city, "I do not know where they went...", it certainly looks like a bold faced lie since the spies were on her roof under the flax. Like Tamar, Rahab did use deception to accomplish her goal. However, (and this is not an endorsement of deception), if the Lord was looking at the heart motive of these women rather than their actions, can we not think of them in the same way?

Rahab also stated in Joshua 2, "When we heard it"—how the Lord dried up the Red Sea—"our hearts melted and we had no courage. He is God in Heaven above and on earth beneath." Then she proceeded to ask for protection since she knew God was giving the land to the Israelites. Isn't that what God takes joy in, a soul dependent on Him for safety? Then she has the boldness and compassion to ask for protection for her entire family. This is nothing less than intercessory prayer by a woman who lays it all down before the Lord. How much there is to enjoy about Rahab in

this passage! We have already discovered some of her character qualities. For one, she had faith just by hearing stories about the Israelite God. She also had boldness, kindness, courage, compassion and loyalty, but there is even more if we look closely. Did Rahab have flax on her roof in anticipation of hiding people up there? Perhaps she would hide husbands from angry wives or customers from authorities. No, because women had no right to question back then and prostitution was not illegal. Flax was grown, harvested, and dried to make linen. I believe Rahab was busy with many other things besides harlotry. It would appear that she also was a hard worker in making linen to sell. Reminds one of the Proverbs 31 woman. How about us? Will we be remembered for the mistakes we've made, the sins we committed, the regrets we have? Or can we overcome with the one weapon that gives victory over all of the above...saving faith. Having this in our arsenal will obliterate all we are ashamed of and give us power to do God's saving work. 

#### THE SMALL PRINT

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Specific Bible versions used are indicated at the first quotation in each article.

Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.