

Israel: The Potter's Vessel Remade

Lesson 1

A Remnant Returns by God's Grace

Introduction

Outline:

- I. The Chronology of the Post-Exilic Books
- II. The Contents of the Post-Exilic Books
- III. The Theological Revelation of the Post-Exilic Books

Introduction: The Scottish Presbyterian, Arthur John Gossip, preached one of the notable sermons in the history of sermonic literature in 1927. Rev. Gossip preached this message a week after his wife had gone into the hospital for seemingly minor tests. She died unexpectedly while there. Gossip's sermon a week after her death was entitled, "But When Life Tumbles In, What Then?"

All of us typically are interested in the aftermath of a tragedy or crisis. Human-interest stories relating health difficulties, great tragedy, the shattering of lives, or severe blows dealt to whole families intrigue us. We are especially fascinated with the "What then?"

A most moving "what then" is recorded in three books of our Old Testament: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These books record the history of God's people after they had experienced severe judgment by fire and sword (cf. 2 Kings 24-25; 2 Chronicles 36:2-21). We can only imagine the terror that gripped the hearts of the Jews early in the summer of 586 B.C. Jerusalem had been under constant siege for nearly 2 ½ years. Food and material provision had long since been exhausted.

People walked the streets like gaunt skeletons with hardly enough strength to lift their heads. Depletion and despair permeated the atmosphere. The city had so little, while the Babylonian army reposed leisurely on the hills surrounding the city. The enemy soldiers must have appeared as ravening wolves relishing the thought of a tasty meal. When finally the Babylonians breeched the city walls and began their plunder, the atmosphere would have been filled with fear, remorse, and screams. The Babylonians easily captured Zedekiah, the Jewish king, forcibly fettered him, and then made him watch as his children were bludgeoned to death before his eyes (2 Kings 25:7). Then, to cauterize that sight in his seared brain, his eyes were gouged out so that the last thing that he ever saw was the merciless execution of his family. The soldiers plundered the people, too. The young women, the young men, the old and infirmed—no one was spared. Houses were toppled, public buildings destroyed, and the splendidly-arrayed temple of Solomon succumbed to the marauding Gentiles. Sacred objects were rudely carried out and roughly carted off. The temple was burnt and then the walls were razed. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar turned loose his soldiers on the city walls themselves. Painstakingly, they tore down the walls and left the rubble to mingle with the brown Judean dust. Certainly national Israel's life had tumbled over. But then what happened?

In Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, God records for us the answer to the “what then?” Seventy years later God would begin to restore Israel to her homeland—not with the glory of earlier years, but with enough stability to create a womb in which the circumstances could be born where the Messiah would be laid. Of these three post-exilic books, we will begin a systematic study of Ezra.

Ezra records the initial stages of Israel's restoration to the Promised Land when God as Potter began to remake His people Israel:

¹The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD saying, ²"Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you." ³Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. ⁴But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁶"Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel (Jeremiah 18:1-6).

Before launching into a systematic study, a helpful survey of the book's chronology, contents, and themes will be helpful.

I. The Chronology of the Post-Exilic Books

It may seem odd to be talking about the conclusion to the Old Testament when we are studying the 15th of 39 books. An acquaintance with Old Testament chronology will help sort out the possible confusion.

If we were to place Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther in their proper chronological sequence, they would cover the final 100 years of Old Testament history. The message of the final three prophetic books of the Old Testament also fall into this time period (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). The dating of these books actually comes from time references within the books.

Ezra 1:1 records the first time reference:

*Now in the **first year of Cyrus king of Persia**, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing.*

The *first year Cyrus, king of Persia* was 538 B.C. Cyrus (580-529 B.C.) had actually been a king previous to 538, but this reference dates him with reference to the first year of his reign over Babylon. Babylon had overtaken Judah (from 606/05 B.C - 586 B.C.), and the Persians then conquered the Babylonians (this is recorded in the book of Daniel following the incident of the handwriting on the wall).

The last certain time reference in these books occurs in Nehemiah 13:6. Nehemiah is speaking in the first person, saying,

*But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in **the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon** I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king.*

For a portion of the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah had been present in Jerusalem. He had first come in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. However, after a time, he had returned to Babylon. After mentioning his absence from Jerusalem, he begins to unfold how he approached the king to return to Jerusalem a second time (this time in the 32nd year). This second return of Nehemiah is in the year 433 B.C.

Our first date was 538 B.C. Our last date is 433 B.C.—a span of 105 years.

The book of Esther, though it falls in sequence after Nehemiah, actually occurs during the period of the book of Ezra. Ezra 6 ends with the story of the completion of the rebuilding of the temple. They commemorated the completion by observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

²²And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Invisibly in the book of Ezra, sixty years pass between Ezra 6:22 and 7:1. The book of Esther fits right into those years. Ezra has been recording what God has been working to bring stability to His people in Jerusalem. Esther shifts the scene back to the capital of Persia, and reveals what God does to give His people security even in a foreign land.

II. The Contents of the Post-Exilic Books

What is the focus of these historical books? What events are they recording? These three books constitute the conclusion to a larger section of 12 books of our Old Testament called the historical books. One whole section of the Old Testament is given to recounting the history of the people of God.

Notice on the chart below, where the historical books fit into the overall scheme of the Old Testament. Four major sections comprise the Old Testament.

Pentateuch (5 books) Genesis—Deuteronomy
Historical (12 books) Joshua—Esther
Poetry (5 books) Job—Song of Solomon
Prophets (17 books) Isaiah—Malachi

When studying an Old Testament book, it helps to identify the specific section into which it falls. Each section has an overriding emphasis that is necessary to remember. Why do we call the books from Joshua—Esther the historical books? Do we mean by that the Pentateuch records no historical details? No, the Pentateuch clearly records history. The historical books give special attention to a specific aspect of the history of Israel. These books record the history of God's people in relationship to their land. In the Pentateuch the people are not yet in their land *nationally*. Beginning in Joshua, however, they are in their land. The theme of Joshua is “conquest” of the land. The twelve historical books systematically recount how Israel first acquired the land, how they lost it, and how they got it back.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah need to be taken as a unit in their contribution to that overall history of Israel and her land; these are the only two books that record how Israel got her land back, so their teaching can be summarized under the word “return.” The last 100 years of Israel's Old Testament history are preoccupied with events related to her return to the land.

How do Ezra and Nehemiah capture this “return” theme?

*²“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him **go up** to Jerusalem which is in Judah and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴Every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem' (Ezra 1:2-4).*

Which words best capture the idea of return? The two English words “go up.” These words translate one Hebrew word that means simply to ascend or climb. These are the books of Israel's going up, of their returning to their land.

Though Ezra and Nehemiah are a unit in their theme, they give diverse expressions to it. These books systematically record the recovery of three important institutions in the national life of Israel once they returned to their land:

- The rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1-6). The house of the Lord is referred to over 40 times in those six chapters. This work began after the first wave of captives returned under Zerubbabel and lasted 20 years. Zerubbabel was a descendant of David and a legitimate heir to David's throne.

- The recovery of the Law (Ezra 7-10). This is where the man Ezra enters the scene 80 years after Zerubbabel first arrived. Ezra came as a ready scribe in the law of the Lord to instruct the people (Ezra 7:6). Do you know that the heathen king actually told him to go back and to teach the law of God to those people? Imagine such a secular mandate to do sacred service! The Law was not “lost” as in extinct, but it was being neglected, and it was recovered when God supplied a man to teach it.
- The rebuilding of the wall (Nehemiah 1-6). A third man, Nehemiah, leads the people in this task.

Though these activities are central to the theme of the books, there is a deeper and greater purpose behind each of them. Why was the temple rebuilt? The rebuilding represented the reinstatement of the worship of the one true God. For all those years (since 586 B.C.), the only true God of heaven had no temple in all the earth that stood as an external testimony to His existence. Not one! The fanged and winged gods of Persia had their temples, and those gods carved out in statuarian Greece looked down with a calm repose on their worshipers. But not one edifice gave external testimony to the God of heaven! In Babylon, the Jews met in houses or in synagogues that likely sprang up during that period, but not one major central gathering place that bore testimony to the true God of heaven. When they rebuilt the temple, it was a reinstatement of true worship.

Why was the Law recovered? The deeper purpose was to renew the covenant that they had broken with God. The covenant was an agreement between God and His people. The people's responsibility to the covenant recorded in the Law had not been kept. The Law had to be recovered and preached in order for those people to be true to their covenant.

Why was the wall rebuilt? It was necessary to restore the Jews to a national, separate identity that had gradually been broken down. The city wall was both a testimony and an opportunity. It distinguished the people of God from those who were without. It gave the Jews a fresh opportunity to live out the purpose for which God had originally brought them to the new land—the ability to keep His Laws freely. Nehemiah used the wall to shut out the Sabbath desecraters who wanted to come in and make merchandise of the Sabbath during his time of governorship. God was not merely interested in buildings and walls; God was interested in remaking His people and renewing His unique covenant relationship with them.

For every great project God had His leader in whose heart He planted the seeds of that vision. God gives that man the courage and the faith to persevere in that project in spite of persecution. Throughout their record, Ezra and Nehemiah continually acknowledge that the *good hand of God* (Ezra 7:28; 8:31; Nehemiah 2:8, 18) was on them.

III. The Theological Revelation of the Post Exilic Books

The theological message of the Ezra/Nehemiah unit is probably best captured in Ezra's own testimony in Ezra 9. At the time of his writing, Ezra has a good grasp of the overall picture of what God is doing in restoring His people. Ezra was a historian as well as a Bible teacher. Not only did he write the book that bears his name, but he may have compiled some of Nehemiah, and he may have authored 1 and 2 Chronicles. When these books are studied together, it is apparent that Ezra has a good grasp of God's viewpoint. Ezra 9:7-8 condenses everything recorded in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Fittingly, he attributes it to one great aspect of God's character. In the course of a great prayer of confession, Ezra acknowledges that he and his people have been in great trespass against God—and then everything “tumbled in.”

⁷“Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.

But is there a “what then”? Ah, yes!

⁸But now for a brief moment [approximately 100 years] grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. ⁹“For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the

kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

Observe the list of God's gracious provisions to them:

1. God left them a remnant to escape, 9:8.
2. God ensured them a hold in His holy place—they would return to their land, 9:8.
3. God enlightened their eyes—their darkness was enlightened, 9:8.
4. God revived them in their bondage, 9:8.
5. God did not forsake them, 9:9.
6. God extended mercy to them through the king of Persia, 9:9.
7. God revived them to set up the house of our God, 9:9; Ezra 1-6.
8. God revived them to repair the ruins and to build a wall in Judah and Jerusalem, 9:9; Nehemiah 1-6.

The Potter is graciously remaking His vessel. An additional passage that reiterates the theological theme of the book is 2 Chronicles 36, the final chapter in a Hebrew Bible. Though God is graciously restoring His people, sometimes we cannot comprehend the magnitude of God's grace until we see it against the backdrop of human depravity.

First Chronicles begins with Adam, and 2 Chronicles ends with Israel losing her land. This final chapter recounts the last 30 years that Israel was in her land before losing it. Ezra surveys each of the three invasions and deportations by Nebuchadnezzar.

First Deportation, 36:5-8; 605 B.C.

(i.e., Daniel)

Second Deportation, 36:9-10; 597 B.C.

(i.e., Ezekiel)

Third Deportation, 36:11-21; 586 B.C.

More detail is given about the third deportation, and right in the middle of those details is a short sermon summarizing Israel's sins for which they were being judged. This is the sordid backdrop against which the grace of God will appear.

¹⁴Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. ¹⁵The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; ¹⁶but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy [healing] (2 Chronicles 36:14-16).

- All categories of Jews imitated the heathen (36:14). They acted like people who have no right to have their own city, temple, or relationship to the God of heaven.
- They polluted the house of the Lord (36:14).
- They mocked the messengers of God, despised His Word, and misused His prophets (36:15).

Consider how much of God's Word they despised. Some sources calculate that more than 600 verses out of the 17 prophetic books predict the destruction of Jerusalem. The message was attention-getting, and the dose of it was massive, yet they still despised it.

Then the wrath of the Lord arose against His people until there was no remedy [lit., healing]. Do we understand that God indicates that there comes a time when the spiritual condition is terminal? It is as if God is acknowledging within a particular generation that those pieces of clay will never quite be molded, and so he allows them to be cast aside, in fact, He casts them aside Himself.

But notice how 2 Chronicles ends. The three deportations are not the whole story. The final words of a Hebrew Bible appear in 36:22,

²²Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—In order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah—the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ²³Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given

me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!"

The closing refrain of the Old Testament pages is an appeal to the true people of God: *Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!"* Through the 400 intertestamental years, every time a Jew took out his Bible, the last instruction to him was to remember that his God was with him and to *go up*. Why should he obey? Why should he return? Because God still had a plan for those people and that land. In four centuries, the Messiah was to be born, and God wanted His people to be on hand for that event.

Conclusion: The Jews could only return by the grace of God. It had repeatedly manifested itself to them, and it continued to be offered to them even in the blight of their captivity. God's grace is His favor on undeserving people. As we study the book of Ezra, the theme of God's restoring grace will surface again and again. Though the people are undeserving, God can remold them and make them useful in His purposes again.

Though we may have imitated the heathen, polluted our bodies (God's sanctuary), despised His Word, and experienced His chastening hand, God's message is one of repentance and renewal. Though we have failed Him, we too can return! On one Sunday morning, Alexander Whyte, an old Scottish preacher, sat in his study grieving over news he had heard only the day before. An upstanding member in his church had been taken away to

jail. Whyte, with his head buried in his hands pondered the case. As he did, the morning church bells began to toll. Whyte remarked, "He hears the bells in his cell this morning, and except for the grace of God, I'd be there, too."

A New Testament summary statement for the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is found at the conclusion of Romans 5:20: *where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*

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