

PREACHING THROUGH EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

These three books, containing a total of 33 chapters, close the Old Testament historical record. They tell of the Jews' return from captivity in Babylon, the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple within it, and the reorganization of their national life in their own land. The three last of the Prophets—Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi—minister during the period.

Ezra was a priest, who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem with a large company of people in 457 B.C. He records also the story of a group who returned eighty years before that. Ezra's work was designed to keep the national and religious life of his people free from the heathen influences about them.

- Chapters 1,2 The return of the first refugees permitted by Cyrus.
3-6 The building again of the temple.
7,8 Ezra's return to Jerusalem.
9,10 His action to avoid intermarriages with the heathen.

Nehemiah was a trusted servant of the Persian king. He requested, and received, permission to take a company to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He remained as governor of Judea.

- Chapters 1,2 Nehemiah journeys to Jerusalem.
3-6 The walls are rebuilt in spite of many difficulties.
7 Records of a former company returning to Jerusalem.
8-10 Reading of the Law and renewing of the covenant.
11,12 Dedication of the wall.
13 Correction of abuses.

Esther, a Jewess, became queen of Persia in 478 B.C., at a time when her influence was providentially used to avoid the complete destruction of the Jewish people by their enemies. She was probably still living when her stepson, Artaxerxes, sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem.

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- Chapters 1,2 Esther becomes queen of Persia.
3-7 She is able to defeat Haman's attempt to secure the death of all the Jews.
8-10 The Jews celebrate a great triumph and Mordecai is exalted.

Importance For The Christian: In addition to their plain moral and religious teachings and examples, these books tell how God acted through the history of His people to preserve a nation through whom he could send His Son. Ezra tells of their religious preservation; Nehemiah of their political establishment; and Esther of their preservation from physical destruction.

Sermon Outlines Provided:

- "The King's Decree" (Ezra 5)
- "Rise Up and Build" (Neh. 2:17-20)
- "Enemies of the Builder" (Neh. 4)
- "How to Get a Raise" (Esther 6:1-13)

Other Suggested Sermon Topics:

- "Assistant Builders" (Ezra 1:1-6)
- "A Statesman Prays" (Neh. 1:4-11)
- "The Family's Business" (Neh. 5:1-13)
- "The Old Word for a New Day" (Neh. 8:1-8)
- "For Such a Time as This" (Esther 4:13-17)
- "Pride's Suicide" (Esther 7)

QUESTIONS OVER EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

1. Who was the prince of Judah in Ezra's day? (Ezra 1:8)
2. How many Jews returned to Jerusalem with Ezra after the Babylonian captivity? (2:64-65)
3. What motivated the people to build the wall? (Neh. 4:6)
4. What did the people ask Ezra to do? (8:1)
5. When did Nehemiah return to Babylon? (13:6)
6. What did Nehemiah do when he discovered that the Jews had married foreigners? (13:23-27)
7. What did the sleepless king remember? (Esther 6:1-3)
8. What position was Mordecai elevated to? (10:3)

THE KING'S DECREE

(Ezra 5)

INTRODUCTION —

The story of the rebuilding as parallel to the Restoration Movement.

- A. Cyrus gives the command and provisions for building (Commission).
 - B. Samaritans and others send letters to Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, condemning Jerusalem for insubordination (Paganism vs. the church).
 - C. Artaxerxes commands the building to stop (Paganism takes over).
 - D. Haggai and Zechariah urge and secure rebuilding (Reformers and restorers).
 - E. Tatnai, the governor, challenges authority (human attempts to regulate the church in present time).
 - F. Reply of the builders—old foundation and former authority. (We build where the apostles and prophets built.)
 - G. Inquiry to Darius and his reply. (“I found the former writing.”)
- I. WE BUILD ON THE PATTERN GIVEN BY THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST.
- A. We know what it is to restore according to a former plan—story of Ft. Niagara, N.Y., and the well that had been forgotten.
 - B. The plan of the New Testament church (as though a set of by-laws).
 - 1. Its name. The church, “The churches of Christ.”
 - 2. Its make-up. Bridegroom’s bride. Building on foundation. Body with head.
 - 3. Its members. Saints, disciples, brethren, Christians.
 - 4. Its officers. Elders, bishops. Deacons, servants, ministers.
 - 5. Its creed. “Thou art the Christ.”

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6. Its ordinances. Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

7. Its activities. Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers.

(There is no provision for amendment to these by-laws.)

II. THE AUTHORITY MUST BE UNCHALLENGED (Matt. 28:18-20).

A. Josephus says that: "King Darius to Sisinnus the governor, and to Sathrabuzanes, sendeth greeting. Having found a copy of this epistle among the records of Cyrus, I have sent it to you; and I will that all things be done as therein written. Farewell."

B. Having found these things written in the New Testament by the hand of the inspired apostles, we deliver them to all men; and we will that all things be done as written therein.

III. WHAT DO YE MORE THAN OTHERS?

A. Elijah Goodwin: "Brethren, this reformation in which we are engaged has not done its work until the people of God who occupy Bible ground in theory have become so upright, so pious, so devout, so heavenly minded, that all who revere the Bible will be constrained to say, "These people are not only Christians in name, but they are Christians in deed and in truth."

B. We have not done it—shall we then abandon the plea? "These things ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone." It is easy to pare the program down to fit the man, but we must build the man up to fit the pattern.

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RISE UP AND BUILD

(Nehemiah 2:17-20)

INTRODUCTION — The story

Nehemiah's tour of the walls at night—a description of their condition. His meeting with the people, making clear to him the aim. The allotment of portions of the building—guilds, cities, families. Difficulties and success. Double application—to the personal Christian life, and to the church.

I. GIVING A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT IS EXPECTED
—A BLUE-PRINT FOR THE BUILDING.

A. For the Christian life.

1. Must get away from vague idea of "join the church and be good."
2. The pattern is given in the person of Christ. Illustrated by the lives of many heroes. Described in the epistles.
3. "Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5:22, 23).
4. "Faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, love" (II Pet. 1:5-7).
5. Who is a Christian?

B. For the Church—what is the purpose of its existence?

1. Have we a pattern for the Church? Government, polity, life, etc.
2. One says, "Anything good is the church's business." That is wrong!
3. Briefly, the Commission.

II. THE AUTHORITY BEHIND THE BUILDER—
NEHEMIAH'S LETTER FROM THE KING.

A. We have a letter from the King.

B. "All authority hath been given unto me" (Matt. 28:18).

C. Promises of success.

1. "The gates of hell shall not prevail" (Matt. 16:18).
2. "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

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3. "With every temptation there will be provided a way of escape" (I Cor. 10:13).
4. "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give unto thee the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

III. THE ASSIGNMENT OF WORK TO INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS—APPLY ESPECIALLY TO CHURCH.

- A. The assignment is that nearest home.
- B. "Their nobles put not their necks to the work."—some object to obscure place.
- C. Discouragement in the carrying out of the work.
- D. Assignments in the church—
 1. Special—teaching, calling, ushering, office work.
 2. General—presence, welcome, enthusiasm made known, calling in case of need, finance, invitation.

IV. ACCOMPLISHMENT—THE PEOPLE HAD A MIND TO WORK.

- A. Lack of dependability is partner to the lack of willingness, in discouraging Christian leaders and paralyzing the church.
- B. In the personal life—"To him that knoweth to do good . . ." (James 4:17).

V. THE VICTORY IN THE COMPLETION OF THE TASK.

- A. —"That the man of God may be complete, throughly furnished" (II Tim. 3:17).
- B. "Till we all come to the stature of a full grown man in Christ" (Eph. 4:13).
- C. "That He might present it to himself a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27).
- D. This is a task that is completed only when the builder is called home.

ENEMIES OF THE BUILDER

(Nehemiah 4)

INTRODUCTION —

Consider the need of Christians in building faith, character, and service, according to Galatians 5:22.

- A. For new Christians it is construction of something new, requiring work.
- B. For most of us, it is a matter of repair and addition.
- C. We learn from Nehemiah, who returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls.

I. THE ENEMIES.

A. To Nehemiah.

1. Himself—but by prayer and energetic discipline he conquered himself.
2. Tobiah—a slave who became ruler of Ammon, eastward across the Jordan. He kept up correspondence with spies in Jerusalem.
3. Gashma the Arabian, from the land south of Judea.
4. The enemies were persons, and they were in and around Jerusalem.

B. To yourself as a Christian. No enemy can destroy you as long as you stay faithful.

1. Yourself must be conquered as the first accomplishment (I Cor. 9:24-27).
2. Folk who stand to make gain by your moral failure, persuading you to smoke, drink, use other drugs, gamble, etc.
3. Folk who are uncomfortable in the presence of a life better than theirs and so try to pull you down.
4. Folk who see no purpose in standards higher than those of general decency, and so decry "Puritanism" and "religious fanaticism."
5. Careless folk who mislead by weak example, e.g. parents who "want their children to go to Sunday School."

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6. Folk who undermine the faith by "religious teaching" whose ultimate authority is "scientific scholarship."

II. METHODS OF THE ENEMY. (Here we note the example of Nehemiah's enemies.)

- A. Ridicule—"Will they build in a day?" "Will the rubble rise into a wall?" "A fox running over it will knock it down!"

1. Aim to discourage and cause one to quit trying.
2. Result in defeated one's saying, "That is what everyone expected, so I'd hate to disappoint them."

- B. Serious attacks, when ridicule failed.

1. Nehemiah's enemies made a league with Samaritans, Arabs, Ammonites, and Philistines to discredit and destroy his work.
2. Enemies of Christ sometimes resort to persecution and pressure.
3. Enemies of Christ use "intellectual" attack, denying the Gospel.

- C. Conference and compromise.

1. Nehemiah invited to conference on plains of Ono, thirty miles northwest in the maritime plain. He saw invitation as disruptive of his purpose.
2. Nehemiah was threatened by pretended friendship of those who would "put to rest the evil reports against Nehemiah."
3. So the church is robbed of its evangelistic vigor at home and abroad by time spent in conferring rather than in doing its own work.

CONCLUSION —

Victory came to Nehemiah, and is available to us, through constant watchfulness and the help of God.

HOW TO GET A RAISE

(Esther 6:1-13)

INTRODUCTION —

The story of Mordecai, uncle and protector of Esther, who came to palace at Shushan with her.

- A. Heard of plot versus life of king and let it be known.
- B. Refused obeisance to Haman, and was cause of his wrath versus Jews.
- C. Heard of Haman's decree for the destruction of Jews; fasted; directed Esther's plea to Ahasuerus.
- D. Was belatedly honored, as here described, for discovery of plot. (Josephus fills in details of the night and day.)
- E. Placed over the house of Haman after his death; later made "next to king."

His example speaks to point of how to gain advancement.

I. DO THE THING YOU LOVE TO DO, OR LOVE THE THING YOU HAVE TO DO.

- A. Mordecai cares for his niece and his people.
- B. Farmer says, "How did I happen to be a farmer? Just lucky, I guess." — Edison has prospective employes go over the whole plant and make remarks and suggestions.
- C. "Greatest field for success is probably right where you are."
- D. See the story of Jesus, the shepherd and the hireling (John 10:11-14).

II. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF, AS MORDECAI'S REFUSAL TO BOW TO HAMAN.

- A. Complete honesty and faithfulness are not for sale. Henry Ford II, says "All of us will be better off when we can pay a man \$5 an hour because he produces \$5 worth of effort than when we try to pay him \$1.50 as hour for 75¢ worth of effort."

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- B. Advantage gained by violation of one's conscience isn't worth it. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world . . .?" (Matt. 16:26).

III. CONSIDER THE INTERESTS OF YOUR EMPLOYER.

- A. "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt. 7:2). "Give, and it shall be given unto you" (Luke 6:38).
- B. Consider value to him, not demands for yourself. (Employer kept goldfish on the desk: "something that can open its mouth without asking for more money.")

IV. TAKE RESPONSIBILITIES.

- A. Quelling the plot was the work of the palace guard, but Mordecai took it.
- B. (If the giraffe did not stick out his neck, he wouldn't eat.)

V. EXERCISE INITIATIVE. MORDECAI THINKS, PLANS, PERSISTS IN HIS WORK.

- A. Perhaps his was a stroke of good fortune, but he was ready to take advantage of it.
- B. A secretary wins a trip to Bermuda by a suggestion to steamship line.

CONCLUSION —

The rewards—

- A. First, the hollow display desired by Haman.
- B. Then the advancement which measured to his own abilities. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful in a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things" (Matt. 25:21).