

Post-Exilic Era, Part I

The post-exilic period, from the time of Esther through Malachi, was a time of mixed experiences and emotions. It is a period that is often skipped in various seminary studies because there is so much Old Testament material that by the time the end of the course comes, they have not gotten through the exile. I have found that many students are not well acquainted with this last period of Old Testament biblical history and theology. It is for that reason that I will spend a little bit more time on the history of the period and the theological importance of it. I want to start by reading from Nehemiah 1:5-6, “O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ears be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.” “Remember,” verse 8, “the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them.’” Nehemiah was a man of prayer and a man who was very much aware of what the circumstances and difficulties were.

As I was reading this, I thought of Paul writing in II Corinthians 4:13, “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak.” Then in verse 16-17, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” The Bible records many difficult experiences and it is amazing how Ezra and Nehemiah in the midst of those difficult experiences were able to bring the greater glory to God, even though the people did not always respond to their leadership, nor respond to the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi as a covenant people should have. Let us pray:

*Lord, our God, as we look at this material before us, it is part of Your Word. You have given it to us and it is for our instruction, for our edification, for our encouragement, and for helping us to carry on with our work in times of trouble, times of stress, times of challenge, and in times of blessing. God, we know that You can do great things for us. With You, all things are possible. God, give us strength this day. You know what our needs are. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

We turn to Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah this morning. The time period, however, that we will cover in these two lectures is from about 520 to 420 B.C. There is about a 100-year period that is recorded in the Scriptures from Haggai through Malachi. One important event to note is that the Jewish community was divided into three parts. There were three Jewish communities. There was the remnant and the 50,000 that had come back to Jerusalem. There was the greater part of the Israelites’ community that was still under the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Median empires way out to the east. And then there was a group that had gone through Elephantine down in southern upper Egypt. We do not read much anymore of those people there, but archeological activities as well as post-biblical writings and Old Testament writings indicate that the community in Egypt remained quite active.

The second great event that we should notice is that the temple, Jerusalem, and the altar were being rebuilt. That took almost 100 years to get both of those rebuilt. Thus this was a time of rebuilding.

During this time, the literature that was produced are the eight biblical post-exilic writings: I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. It is thought that I and II Chronicles were written by Ezra. It seems logical; if you read II Chronicles and move right into Ezra it seems to follow right through. Their emphases are much the same and I and II Chronicles give a good background to the understanding of Ezra and Nehemiah particularly, as well as for Haggai, Zechariah

and Malachi. In I and II Chronicles there are tremendous emphases on the Davidic house; how it rose, how it functioned and how, in a way, it disappeared physically from the historical scene.

I and II Chronicles emphasize the Jewish community. In fact it starts with the genealogy all the way from Adam on through. They also lay a tremendous stress on the work of the priests and the Levites, and on the temple and the temple worship. These were some of the major factors of the community, the patriarchal and Mosaic community. Although I and II Chronicles mainly repeat what I and II Kings tell us, they tell it from the post-exilic perspective.

The actual historical accounts are found particularly in Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah. But the prophets also give us a few details. Haggai and the first eight chapters of Zechariah tell us of the temple building, which was slow because the people were doing only what they wanted to. Haggai starts by saying, "Consider your ways, consider your ways. You are working hard but you have pockets with holes in them." I know what that is like and I suppose most of you do too. You say, "Where did all those dollars go? How can this cost us so much?" Consider your ways, and when you do consider your ways, and you say, "I will go the Lord's way and I will let my own way go," it is amazing how the Lord can prosper you.

I have two brothers that are millionaire farmers. I could have been one of the three, but I decided to go to school. About five years before I retired, a fellow minister and fellow president of a college (when I was president of Trinity Christian College) asked me, "George, what are you doing to get ready for retirement?" That hit me like a club across the forehead. I had never thought of retirement, much less laying up a certain account for it. I had not made plans for retirement, which he thought was crazy because in our culture everyone lays aside money for retirement. Well, today he is still paying off his house and we have our house paid for, and where the Lord gave us the income from, I do not know. It is amazing how the Lord continues to bless us. I can remember in that in 1972 we could not afford the dentist for the kids, but the kids did not get many cavities that year either. It is amazing how the Lord provides. He really does. Our years as students were not easy either, but by God's grace I finished my years as a student, with four children.

The Lord takes care of His own. Consider your ways and then consider God's way. God will bless you. Do you know how Zechariah starts his prophecy? "Think on your fathers, where are they?" They that had gone their own way. They had gone into exile, if they had not been killed by the sword or struck down by pestilence.

Haggai and Zechariah give us a few insights into what the historical situation is, but we ought to look at Esther as well. Esther comes on the scene at about 450 BC, 45 or 50 years after the exile had taken place and about 22-25 years before Cyrus gives his edict that the children of Israel can go back. The Book of Esther is a very popular book among the Jews. There are about 350 bibliographical entries in libraries of works written by Jewish scholars on Esther. Esther centers around the great feast, the feast of Purim. Among evangelical, Catholic and liberal scholars, Esther does not receive much attention, but the Lord had a good reason to give us the book of Esther. Although the word "God" is not mentioned in Esther, He wanted us to realize that He was surely sovereign over the palace of the greatest nation on earth at that time. The Lord was not only in, but He was controlling the palace of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, the great emperors of the world at that time. Also, there was a tremendous attack by the parasite kingdom to destroy the community of God, the covenant community. This attack came through the edict that Haman tried to get the king to pass, and which he did promulgate as the law of the Medes and Persians, which could not be broken. The parasite kingdom was trying to give the final stroke. The prince of the parasite kingdom had been very effective in destroying the Jerusalem community by the unfaithfulness of the

kings, the unfaithfulness of the priests, and by all the false prophets of whom Ezekiel spoke in chapter 13. Yes, again and again the old devil had shown that he and his cohorts were very active and it looked like the parasite kingdom was going to take over the kingdom of our God. But in the midst of these satanic, parasitic efforts, God kept His community people alive. The Jews were not killed.

That is one reason why the Book of Esther has such tremendous appeal, even today, among the Jewish people – it showed that these people were kept. But we must give proper credit to the sovereign Lord for doing this and for his opposition to the parasite kingdom. One thing that is interesting in this book is that we have unexpected kingdom agents. Whether you want to admit it or not, it is a fact that Xerxes the emperor was a kingdom agent. Granted, his allegiance was to the parasite kingdom of the devil, which is evidenced by divorcing his wife, putting on that big party, and bringing in the beautiful girls. But then what does he do? He brings in Esther, because the Lord is in control. Thus there is a tension between Xerxes and Esther. In the end, Esther comes out as the heroine. She is the victor. She is God's servant. It was Xerxes who had to bring her in. It was Esther who had to come before him and plead for her people as she had to plead for her life. It is a dramatic story, and it is amazing how God works there in the palace with two agents. I call them kingdom agents. I am not calling them mediators, but they are two very important characters. The other two important people are Haman and Mordecai, and that is where you see more clearly the opposition between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. Haman is the devil personified. Haman is the agent by which the devil is going to wipe out the community completely. Mordecai sitting at the palace gate is used of God in the life of Esther, his niece, but also in the undoing of Haman.

And so you have these four kingdom agents. If you preach and teach from the book of Esther, do not be too moralistic, saying things like, "Now, dare to be an Esther, girls. Dare to be a Mordecai, boys. Do not be a Haman and do not be a big playboy like Xerxes." You could use these characters as examples and non-examples for your audience, but you need to emphasize how God in that unique situation is sovereignly in control (even when the devil is doing his utmost to destroy God's people), how God uses the king, how He uses a tyrant like Haman, because it was through Haman that Mordecai and Esther get the positions that they have. And through them, the covenant community is kept so that the Christ could come in the fullness of time through this community. Emphasize the sovereignty of God, the covenant faithfulness of God. Although the three central concepts that we have been speaking of—kingdom, covenant, and mediator—are not explicitly developed, they are implicitly the controlling concepts in the Book of Esther. The kingdom is alive and well. The covenant is being kept by a faithful God. The mediator will come who will give the fateful final stroke against the prince of the parasite kingdom, against Satan.

The book of Esther is important for Christians, in times of stress and trouble and seeming defeat. We see how God used those four people, each in their unique role and thus how God works out His kingdom, covenant, and mediatorial plan in a palace of the greatest empire of that day. It is amazing. It is wonderful. It is beautiful.

About 20-25 years after Esther, Ezra comes on the scene. I want to make a comment about the two languages in which the book of Ezra is written. A section of it is written in Aramaic. I believe that it is written in two languages because Ezra was trying to address two communities at the same time. Ezra was aware that when he wrote, he was writing for more than just the Hebrew-speaking people. There were some who could understand Aramaic better and so he wrote in that language.

I want you to note how Ezra, right from the very beginning, ties in with pre-exilic covenantal revelation. "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the

LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation.” Notice how Ezra immediately gives all honor to the sovereign Lord. It is Yahweh who moved the heart of Cyrus. He does this so that the word spoken by Jeremiah—“After 70 years the temple will be rebuilt”—might be fulfilled. But then further on in chapter one, we read, “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘...Any one of his people among you – may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.’” And then he makes it possible for these people to actually build by what he gives them. A heathen king knows what the situation is. I am not saying he received revelation, but undoubtedly when he took over the Babylonian empire he was very much aware of what was going on. So that is an introduction to the facts related.

The first fact that I wanted to draw your attention to is that Ezra emphasizes that upon Cyrus’ edict there is a return. About 50,000 people go back, Ezra 2:64. It had been a community of well over 2 million. He also lists in chapters 2 and 8 who it is that goes back. There is a whole group of singers that go back and the important thing is that they are singers. What is so important about singers? They are an integral part of the temple worship that has to be reinstated. They are going back, not just to build their own houses. They are going back there to build the temple. They are going back there to worship God. There is emphasis also upon all the sacrifices that are to be re-established.

This leads us to my second point, the rebuilding of the altar and the rebuilding of the temple. The first thing that they do is rebuild the altar. We read of that in chapter three. Take note, as we read here in chapter three:

...and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel and to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what was written in the law of Moses, the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

Then they celebrated the feast of tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings. The emphasis is that they were well aware of what the Sinaitic covenant called them to do. They were still within the old Sinaitic covenant framework. The altar had to be there because the altar was then what the cross is in the New Testament, a place of sacrifice. It was the place of fellowship. It was the place where the Lord would receive the homage of His people and where He would receive evidence of repentant hearts. It is at the altar that the sacrificial substitutionary blood of the animals had to be shed, and thus they would be assured of a way open to the Lord and fellowship with the Lord. So the altar was very important. Ezra 3:6 says, “On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD’s temple had not yet been laid.” The sacrifices were the most important part. The altar and the sacrifice in the Old Testament were more important than the building. I do not mean to minimize the importance of the building, the great symbol of the LORD, saying “I am with you.” But the worship climaxed in the sacrifices; that was most important.

Ezra stresses that the people understood this when they returned. All this was not under Ezra’s leadership because Ezra had not yet joined them. He is talking in 5:36-37 about what happened under the leadership of Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel, a descendant of the Davidic house. Under these two leaders they brought to a proper expression what was expected of them according to the Sinaitic covenant. So there is a direct tie with Moses, but it is not only with Moses that they are tying in. With the rebuilding of the temple they are tying in with David and Solomon also. Thus they are showing that they knew what David and Solomon had intended and what God intended, and so they begin work on the temple.

There seems to have been opposition when they built the altar, because it says, “Despite their fear of the people around them, they built an altar.” They were able to do that. But when they began building the temple the opposition of the parasite kingdom servants was great, and the building of the temple stopped for awhile. There is parasite kingdom opposition in chapter five. The great antithesis between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light really comes to expression here. Will God’s people prove to be faithful to the covenant as God had covenanted with Noah the patriarch, with Moses, and with David? Will they be faithful to that or not? They are tested and they are tried to the utmost. They are tried to the utmost in the days of Zerubbabel and Joshua and the rest, when the peoples around them requested to be allowed to be a part of the rebuilding of the temple. But the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in the building of the temple.” If these other people had come in there, that would surely have opened the door for all kinds of unwanted and unworthy elements in the worship of God. So there was tremendous opposition while the temple was being built. He says that this opposition lasted from 520 B.C. until the time of Ezra, 440. There was 80 years of active opposition.

The temple was finally finished in 516 under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua and the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. But the city was not completed until 100 years after the children of Israel returned, when Nehemiah came on the scene. It took them 100 years to get Jerusalem rebuilt. It took them about 20 years to get the temple rebuilt. It took them seven months to get the altar built. That is a long period of time, especially with all the opposition. I am putting emphasis on the opposition, the antithesis that came to expression in that community. The devil did his utmost to keep the community from being resurrected and restored because this set the stage for the fullness of time when Christ was to be born in that community.

There are some points I would like to make about Ezra’s role. He was a scribe. He was devoted to the Torah. He knew the Word of God and that proved to be a tremendous asset in the work there, but he was also under the commission of Artaxerxes. Again God uses the king, the great emperor to accomplish His will. In 7:13, Artaxerxes says, “Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisors to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God.” Evidently, Ezra was well known as a scribe and he is honored for that and then he is placed under the commission of Artaxerxes. God uses Artaxerxes to give him authority and ability and freedom to go out and be God’s servant in the work of the rebuilding and the finishing of the city and the purifying of that community. He is very active in temple worship, as we see in chapters seven and eight. He lists all those that come back and he sees to it that proper worship is conducted in the temple, although he himself does not take a priestly Levitical role. He knows the offices. In ethical matters, he is unyielding. One of the great problems had been intermarriage. By Solomon intermarrying with the neighboring kings’ daughters, Solomon’s heart had been turned away through intermarriage. Deuteronomy seven had made it so clear: “Your son should not take the daughters of the idolaters as wives and you shall not give your daughters to them.” Solomon had violated that command and many of those returning to the community were doing this.

Ezra knew the law of Moses. He knew the history of Israel. He knew the effects of a bad marriage and he said it was better to put the wives away. He did not say to divorce them; he said to put them away, to separate from them. There is a difference. He took on a real problem for the children of Israel, the problem of intermarriage. But what I want to emphasize is this that he led the people in a confession of sin. While Ezra was praying and confessing and weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites, men, women and children, gathered around him and they wept bitterly. “We have been unfaithful to our God.” He led them in confession. Repentance is what that

community needed. Confession of sin is what that community needed and Ezra proved to be a spiritual lay leader. He was not an ordained priest. He was not of the royal house. He was not a prophet. He was a scribe and a teacher. It is amazing what teachers can do. It is amazing what students of God's Word can do, who are not necessarily ordained. Look how God worked through Ezra, and Ezra accomplished great things. Ezra had a mediatorial position. There is no doubt about that. Though he was not a prophet, priest or king, he was a shepherd. I would have appreciated having elders like that in the churches that I served, men who study the Word, ladies who know what it is to be able to teach the Word of God in their community.

We will go on to Nehemiah. We will not go into the debate as to whether Ezra or Nehemiah was written first. We will leave that up to the people who deal with introduction and history. I believe that Nehemiah comes after Ezra. But Nehemiah even more than Ezra was an administrator. As Ezra was a student of the Word, Nehemiah also knew the Word, although he was not a scribe. He was an administrator, the man who poured out wine, tasted it to see if there was poison in it, and gave it to the king. It was a highly important position to be the king's cup bearer. It is interesting again how God has someone from the exilic communities, not a Persian, not a Mede, but a Jew, a Jew protecting the life of the king in his palace. God kept putting His people in these important roles. He had a Daniel in the palace. He had an Esther in the palace. And now he has a Nehemiah in the palace in a crucial role. And evidently a relationship developed between Nehemiah and the king so that when Nehemiah looked unhappy, the king asked him if something was bothering him. That shows that they had a unique relationship. And then Nehemiah is able to tell him what is wrong. He does so willingly in his dealing with King Artaxerxes, showing that he is a man that can stand on his own feet. He is not a lackey for the king. He is his cup bearer, but he is not a lackey. He proves that he is a capable administrator when it comes to leading the rebuilding of the walls and leading in the defense. Look how God uses a man in a crucial situation who is not a prophet, not a priest, not a king and not a scribe, but who is an administrator. He knows how to lead people. He knows how to organize people. He knows how to get things going. Nehemiah tells us that some people were working there with the trowel and others were the sword. Some had a trowel in the right hand and had a sword in their left in order to get that wall built. God used a very capable man, Nehemiah, in leading the people, in giving them courage and organizing them, organizing their work methods. This is the way God's purposes are accomplished.

It reminds me those of you that are struggling with deciding what to do in the future. God uses more than preachers. He uses people other than teachers. He uses an administrator here in a very critical and crucial role. One thing about Nehemiah was his awareness of people. He knew how to deal with builders. He knew how to deal with residents. He knew how to deal with the priests and he saw to it that each got their specific role and their position; he made it possible for the priests to function properly. He made it possible for builders to function. Such people God sovereignly uses in His covenant community. The community had to be restored and as a community had to become settled, and God used people from these different areas. I also want to emphasize that as a community organizer, he was a helper of the poor. You read about that in chapter five.

But I want to move on now to another thing that is said so often, and that is an important factor - the role of prayer. Nehemiah is known as a praying man, an administrator of the best quality, but a man who was intensely alive to his need of God and he continued to pray. While he was working, he would pray, "Oh God help me. God be gracious." God established the work of this man even while he is busy, while he is writing. He is working and he is in fellowship with his God. The role of prayer in the work of Nehemiah is very important. There have been tremendous prayers recorded. Think of the prayer of Daniel 9, "We have broken the covenant." Think of the prayer of Solomon and the dedication. Think of Hannah's song and prayer. Think of Moses' song and prayer in Exodus 15. Great prayers. And then when you look at

the Psalms, many of these Psalms are beautiful prayers. But none can compare with Nehemiah's, I believe.

Nehemiah prayed, and these are some of the passages where we read his prayers. In chapter 1, "Then I said: 'O LORD, God of Heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love.'" We read this at the beginning. He knew his covenant Lord. He knew what the situation was. "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'if you are unfaithful...'" Then he goes on in verse 10, "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O LORD, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." He prayed this before he went and talked to the king, and he went in with the assurance that the king of heaven and earth was upholding him, guiding him, sustaining him and directing him. Prayer gave him courage, strength, assurance, and power. He was in fellowship with his God.

Nehemiah 2:4 says, "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight...'" We do not know what he prayed there, but probably it was like what he had prayed before he went into the king's presence. In 4:4 he says, "Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders." How did he dare to pray for God to deal harshly with his enemies? The antithesis is being strongly expressed there. It was one or the other. It would be either the covenant community or the covenant enemies who would be defeated. "God, bring Your enemies into disrepute." Do you dare to pray that way? We better learn to pray that way. In 5:19, "Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people." That prayer is repeated a number of times. Does that almost sound selfish? "God, remember me for all that I have done." I do not think so. We have to pray for ourselves and we have to pray for the work that we do, and we have to pray that God will establish the work of our hands. Nehemiah did so fearlessly and pointedly.

I want to go on through all the prayers, but I think we have seen enough. I also want to emphasize that Nehemiah was aware of how he was in the whole line of God's covenantal activity, and that he had a crucial and important role. He was aware, as you read in chapter nine, of all that God had done from the time of Abraham to Moses through the prophets. He knew the instructions that God had given through Moses for priests and Levites. He knew about David's and Solomon's provisions for the temple. He knew the past and he knew his place. He was not a prophet, a priest, or a king, but he was an administrator. He prayed fervently, he worked diligently, and he accomplished great things because he was aware of God's covenantal faithfulness. You will notice if you read this book and read it carefully, that he acknowledges God as the great Creator of heaven and earth. He acknowledges God as the righteous one (9:6 and 8). God is the great provider (9:14). God is the great virtuous one. Nehemiah says in 9:17, "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." You read this first in Exodus 34:6. The psalmists repeated it, as did Joel and here Nehemiah repeats it. He knows his God and he also knew what the faithful promises were regarding the land, regarding God's covenantal faithfulness. He knew God, the faithful covenant keeper in regard to His creatorship, His righteous character, His provisions, His virtues and His promises. I will conclude now by reading from 9:32-35:

Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes – the hardship that has come upon us, upon

our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have been just [the exile was justice in action]; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in this spacious fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

Nehemiah knew the past. And Nehemiah knew the present. Nehemiah knew his duty. Nehemiah the administrator led in a great work of God. Was he in a mediatorial position as such? No, but he was a servant, an agent in the kingdom. Through that God reveals to us how He kept His covenant, how His kingdom is unfailing and how the mediator will surely come.