

Getting Into The Promised Land Without Falling Asleep In Leviticus

**15. The Post-Exile
Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah,
Malachi**

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**A Teaching Commentary
of the Old Testament**

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1 Introduction

In our study of the Bible thus far, we have considered Genesis, The Wilderness Books, The Conquest and Early Life of the Nation (Joshua, Judges, and Ruth), The Establishment of the Monarchy, The Divided Kingdoms, and The Period of Exile for Judah. The next section of books that we will consider narrates the time of the post-exile – the period in which the people of Judah returned to their homeland and began the process of rebuilding. The books in this section include the historical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Ezra and Nehemiah were most likely a single book in their original form. In some earlier versions of the Bible (e.g., the Septuagint) they appeared as a single book. Whether or not they were written as a single book, they do appear to have been written by the same author, who was probably the same person that wrote Chronicles. Chronicles is a history of the united and the divided kingdoms, focusing on the time when Saul became king through the fall of the Southern Kingdom. It ends with the decree of Cyrus (which paved the way for the exiles to return), which is exactly how Ezra opens (with almost the identical words as Chronicles). Ezra/Nehemiah tells the history of the post-exilic period, when the people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. It carries the history of the nation through the time of Malachi, which begins the 400 years of silence before the coming of Jesus.

The story of Esther takes place during the post-exilic period, but it tells the story of a Jewess who was still living in exile. She lived under the Persian/Mede rule. God used her to spare disaster to her people.

Haggai was a prophet of this period, who ministered during a time that coincides with the events in Ezra Chapter 5. Zechariah began to prophesy the same year as Haggai, although his time of ministry lasted a bit longer. Malachi prophesied during the events described in the book of Nehemiah.

The events of the post-exilic period all took place against a background of Persian/Mede rule. The following kings ruled during this time:

King	Significant Events in His Reign
Cyrus	Issued the edict allowing the Jews to return. Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles (around 50,000 people) back to Judah to begin rebuilding the temple.
Cambyses	
Smerdis	
Darius I	Both Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during the rule of Darius I. The temple was completed during his reign.
Xerxes, also known as Ahasuerus	This was the king who made Esther queen.
Artaxerxes I, also known as Artashasta	A second return of exiles under Ezra occurred to beautify the temple and to institute religious reform. A third return occurred under Nehemiah. They went back to build the walls and to begin rebuilding the city. Malachi prophesied during the time of Artaxerxes I.

2 Ezra

2.1 *The Cyrus Decree*

Ezra 1-2

The return from exile began with the Cyrus Decree. In Ezra 1:1-4 we read:

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 throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone 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 the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

The Cyrus decree allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. He also decreed that people would give them provisions for the task. He returned to them the things that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the temple when Jerusalem was destroyed.

Verse 5 says that "everyone whose heart God had moved" prepared for the journey. This is just as it should be. Nobody was compelled to leave and many people did not want to leave. They had a comfortable life in Babylon. The people who returned were those compelled by God to do so.

Chapter 1 gives a list of the articles returned by Cyrus for the temple. It is interesting that the Ark of the Covenant is not in the list. As we have stated before, nobody is really sure when it was lost or where it is. The fact that it was not returned is an indication that it was probably lost (or hidden) prior to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon.

Chapter 2 gives a list of the people who returned in the first group of returning exiles. It is interesting to note that these people, most of whom had spent their entire lives in exile, knew that they were gatekeepers of the temple or singers or temple servants or whatever. These people had maintained their identities and their heritage, even though they had been living in exile. The first two names listed are Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Zerubbabel is the civil head of this returning nation. He is the governor of the civic affairs of the people. Jeshua is the spiritual head. He is the chief priest among those returning. (Note that in Haggai and Zechariah, he is called "Joshua," which is a variant spelling of "Jeshua.") Together Zerubbabel and Jeshua provide national leadership for these people. The temple that will be constructed under their leadership is generally referred to as Zerubbabel's temple. It is later expanded and remodeled by Herod and became Herod's temple.

Note that the man "Nehemiah" mentioned in verse 2 is not the same one in the book of Nehemiah.

One might wonder what motivated Cyrus, a Persian, non-believing king, to issue this famous decree. The answer may be found in the prophecies of Isaiah, written around 180 years earlier. Isaiah 44:28 says

who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,'
and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'"

Cyrus' decree was in direct fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. Through Isaiah, God told what would be done and gave the name of the person that would do it. Was this prophecy the motivation for Cyrus' decree? Probably not. But whatever motivated him brought about the fulfillment of God's decree.

The fulfillment of this prophecy teaches us two things about the nature of God. First of all, his word is true. What he promises he will deliver. The only mystery is the timing. Second, we are reminded that God cares about exiles. He longs to restore those whose relationship with him is broken. Even today the call is out to sinners to return home. God wants his people.

2.2 The Altar is Rebuilt and the Foundation Laid

Ezra 3

In Chapter 3 the people begin the building process. They first built the altar and resumed the offering of sacrifices. This is appropriate. Before the relationship with God could be restored and before he could live in their midst once again, the sin problem had to be addressed. The sacrificial system was the only method that the Jews had to atone for sin. They had to get that established before it made sense to do anything else. God is no different today. One does not enter his presence in a state of sin. Now, however, we come to him by claiming the sacrifice that he has already provided. There is no other way to restore relationship with him and to live in his presence.

The altar was built and the sacrifices resumed. They resumed observance of the feasts. Because it was the appropriate time of year, they observed the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 3 says that they do their work "despite their fear of the peoples around them". The church should not expect to receive the support and admiration of the world around it as it goes about following God's commands. That is no reason to stop.

The next step was to lay the foundation of the temple. The work on the foundation began in the second year of their return. This would have been laid on top of the foundation of Solomon's temple, which was on the top of Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, the same place where Abraham was tested with the sacrifice of Isaac. Today this is the location of the Dome of the Rock.¹

¹As best we know, Zerubbabel's temple was built on the same location as Solomon's temple. There is a great amount of interest in rebuilding the temple today, but the Dome of the Rock stands where the temple used to be. This is viewed as a major barrier to rebuilding. Interestingly enough, Scripture never records a mandate from God as to where the temple must be built. 1 Chronicles 22:1 indicates that David said it would be built at the threshing floor of Araunah. 2 Chronicles 3:1 indicates that Solomon did indeed build it there. Neither of these has a "Thus saith the Lord" tone to it, however. They did build the temple on this particular location, but there seems to be no Scriptural mandate that it had to be on that particular location. Note also that the description of the temple in Ezekiel 40-48 has no specific location associated with it.

After the foundation was laid, the people gathered for a praise and worship service. The people shouted their praise to the Lord. Among them were some who had known the glory of the old temple (this occurred in around 536 and Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586). The magnitude and splendor of Solomon's temple were much greater than that of Zerubbabel's temple and the people were grieved to see the house of the Lord reduced. In fact, once it was all said and done, Zerubbabel's temple became Herod's temple, exceeding Solomon's temple in majesty. The people present had no way of knowing that.

2.3 Opposition to the Rebuilding

Ezra 4-6

Chapter 4 describes opposition that the people received to their rebuilding. The chapter is a bit convoluted, jumping ahead in time and then jumping back. It is a bit hard to follow.

The enemies of the Judah and Benjamin came to them and asked them to let them help build the temple. They said to Zerubbabel "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon King of Assyria, who brought us here." These were people imported into northern Israel after Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom. They included the remnant of the northern tribes who had long since intermarried with the Assyrians and Philistines. These are the people who came to be known as the Samaritans. They had a knowledge of God, because some of their ancestors were descendants of Jacob and worshipped at the temple. To the Jews, however, they were unclean and apostate. They had a defiled religion. Their religious practices were not pure and the Jews did not want these people participating in the building of the temple.

The Jews were not just being unneighborly. If these people had participated in the building of the temple then they would have had ownership in it. They might have begun bringing their apostate religious practices into it. The Jews were right to avoid that, even at the expense of hurting someone's feelings. Doing God's will correctly is not always politically correct.

Anyway, these people felt rebuffed and began trying to cause grief for the Jews. This is where the chronology of the chapter gets to be a bit hard to follow. Understand it to say that they tried to oppose the people from the time of Cyrus through the time of Darius (verse 5), then again under Xerxes (verse 6), and then again under Artaxerxes (verses 7-23). Verse 24 jumps back to the time of Darius. It says that the work on the temple ceased until the second year of Darius because of the opposition that the people received.

Note: The prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah coincide roughly with Ezra chapter 3 and the first part of chapter 4. Verse 5:1 names them and says that they came to prophesy in Judah and Jerusalem. Because the rebuilding had stopped after the foundation had been laid (due to the opposition) they came to encourage the people to get on with the rebuilding.

If the events described in these chapters are sorted chronologically, the result is as follows:

- The Samaritans want to help with the rebuilding and are not allowed to do so. They begin organized opposition to the rebuilding. The work slows down considerably or stops altogether. (4:1-4)
- Haggai and Zechariah prophesy, encouraging the people to get on with the task of rebuilding. The work resumes. (5:1-2)
- A governor by the name of Tattenai, who is subject to Persian authority, challenges the rebuilding activity. He questions the people's authority to undertake this building project. He writes a letter to king Darius suggesting that the work be stopped. He also suggests that

- Darius search the royal archives to see whether or not the Jews had ever been given official permission to rebuild the temple. (5:3-17)
- Darius searched the archives and found a record that Cyrus had indeed commissioned this activity. So he sent a letter back to Tattenai telling him not only did they have permission to be building, but the activity should be paid for out of Tattenai's budget. God knows how to turn adversity into positive circumstances. (6:1-12)
 - The people finished work on the temple. There was a big celebration and a great offering of sacrifices. They were able to celebrate the next Passover the way it was intended to be celebrated. (6:13-22)
 - Even though they had built a functional temple, there was still ongoing work to be done. Building activity continued. So did opposition. An accusation was lodged against the people to king Xerxes, although there is no indication that he did anything about it. (4:6)
 - Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel, who seem to be Persian governors, wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. They suggested that the rebuilding going on in Judah was an act of treason. They said that this had always been a rebellious province. The rebuilding was in fact preparation for a revolt. Artaxerxes searched the royal archives and found historical evidence that Judah had once been a powerful nation. He tended to believe that they could indeed be troublesome if allowed to continue rebuilding. He issued an edict that their building activity should stop. Rehum and Shimshai, some of his officials, went to Judah and stopped the building activity. (4:7-23)

2.4 Ezra's Return

Ezra 7-8

In chapter 7, the character of Ezra actually appears. His genealogy is given, traced back to Aaron. This is significant, because the descendants of Aaron were the temple priests – the ones allowed by the law to minister in the holy place (Exodus 29, Leviticus 8). All the Levites were set apart as temple servants (Numbers 3) but the sons of Aaron were the priests and were in charge. Ezra is a man who "had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." (7:10). Ezra is evidence of the fact that the Jews had relative religious freedom during Babylonian captivity. He had spent his entire life in Babylon, but was well taught in the Scriptures. (Actually the first Jewish synagogues originated in Babylon. Since they had no temple, the synagogue became the center of their religious life.)

Chronologically, the events in this section seem to take place after those of Ezra 4:7-23. Artaxerxes had put a stop to the rebuilding in Jerusalem. He said, however, in 4:21, "Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order." Sometime after the issuing of that order and the beginning of chapter 7, the Jews seemed to have gained favor with Artaxerxes. Ezra in particular seemed to be favored by the king. Artaxerxes gave him permission to take a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem (the first group having gone under the Cyrus decree). This return took place around 458 BC, which was 80 years after the Cyrus decree.

Ezra brought with him a letter from King Artaxerxes, granting freedom for any Jew who so desired to return to Jerusalem. He sent instructions to the governors in the Trans-euphrates to provide Ezra with whatever he might need to carry out the functions of the temple and he reminded them that the priests, Levites, and other temple workers were not to be taxed. The king also made provisions to send gold, silver, money, and provisions for offerings to be used in the temple. The king wished that the sacrifices and offerings prescribed in Jewish law be carried out so that he might win the favor of the Jewish God. Obviously the Jews living in his land had made a favorable impression on him. Note that the temple was basically finished at this point. The contributions of Artaxerxes would have been used to beautify the temple.

Ezra assembled an entourage that included Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. Chapter 8 gives a list of people who returned to Jerusalem with Ezra. It also describes the journey. Verse 8:22 says that Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect him from enemies on the road. Travel in this time could be very unsafe and Ezra and his party were carrying many valuable articles. Ezra had described the power of the Lord to the king and he wanted to demonstrate faith in that power. Since God would protect him through the journey he did not need soldiers. Ezra was human. He knew intellectually that God could protect him but the rubber was about to meet the road. Those traveling with him fasted and asked for God's protection. God was faithful to respond to this act of faith. They had a safe journey. All the valuable articles arrived as well.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they offered sacrifices at the temple. Ezra delivered Artaxerxes' instructions to the governors in the Trans-euphrates.

2.5 The Problem of Intermarriage

Ezra 9-10

In chapter 9, it was brought to Ezra's attention that a number of the people in Jerusalem, including some of the priests and Levites, had intermarried with foreigners. Ezra was horrified. He lifts up a prayer for the people, confessing the corporate guilt. He is truly sorrowful.

Now, what is the big deal? Why was it wrong to marry a foreigner? The issue was not nationality; it was faith. When the children of Israel were originally being led into the Promised Land, they were given instructions by Moses. Deuteronomy 7:1-5 says:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations – the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you – and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.

God knew that if the people became intimate with their pagan neighbors they would begin to mix their pagan religious practices with their own. (This sentiment is echoed in 2 Corinthians 6:14, where we are told that believers should not marry unbelievers. It can only lead to strife.) Sure enough when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they did not totally drive out the foreign people. They began to intermarry and this is exactly what happened. One of the biggest intermarriers was Solomon, and his foreign wives brought with them their foreign religious practices.

Now the Jews were being given another chance to retake their land and reestablish a pure religious practice. And they were making the same mistakes as before.

Chapter 10 contains the sad conclusion to this episode. The decision is made that those who had taken foreign wives must separate from them and that the foreign wives and children must be driven away. This seems harsh, breaking up families and driving children from their parents. We know that the family unit is important to God, that marriage was ordained by him and that it is an institution that he values. This tells us, however, that obedience to his word supersedes

everything. Even the bonds of family are superseded by the relationship with God. It also tells us that disobedience leads to pain and strife. The wages of sin have always been death.

How much better off we would be if we simply learned to obey.

3 Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah picks up right where Ezra left off. More than likely they were originally a single book and were probably written by the same author that wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles. Because Ezra was present during the events of both books, some have speculated that he was the author. However, since Ezra is written in the third person and Nehemiah in first person, Nehemiah may have authored all four books. This is speculation at best.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries. The focus of the book of Ezra is on the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the observances of the offerings, sacrifices, and festivals of Judaism. The focus of Nehemiah is on the rebuilding of the walls of the city.

3.1 *News from Jerusalem*

Nehemiah 1

When the book of Nehemiah opens, he is still in exile, in the service of king Artaxerxes. He received word from his brother and some other men that the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem were in distress. The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates burned.

Most cities in those days had walls around them. They were there primarily for protection against hostile forces. They had gates, which allowed the residents of the city to regulate who came into the city. A city without walls and functioning gates was a sitting duck for invaders.

Nehemiah was seriously grieved when he heard this and took his concern to God. He prayed for the Jews. He confessed their corporate sins. He reminded God that he had promised to scatter the people if they were unfaithful but to gather them back if they would return to him. Nehemiah's prayer indicated that he was going to bring a request before the king and he asked for success in that request. The narrative then indicates that Nehemiah was a cupbearer for the king.

A cupbearer was an extremely trusted servant to the king. He was responsible for bringing the king his drink and for tasting it before the king did. The tasting was not to make sure that the flavor was good. It was to ensure that it had not been poisoned. The king thus trusted the cupbearer with his life on a daily basis. The fact that Nehemiah was the cupbearer indicates that the Jews were not considered to be a hostile people who must be controlled. They were a trusted part of the community. We know from the events of Ezra and Nehemiah that they as a people had favor with the king.

3.2 *Return to Jerusalem and The Rebuilding Begins*

Nehemiah 2-4

Soon after Nehemiah heard the news about Jerusalem, he approached the king in the normal course of carrying out his responsibilities. The king noticed that Nehemiah looked sad and wanted to know what was wrong (another indication that Nehemiah was not just a household servant – the king knew him well enough to recognize that something was depressing him and cared enough to want to know what it was).

Nehemiah expressed his sadness at the state of Jerusalem. The king asked what Nehemiah wanted to do. Nehemiah indicated that he would like to go to the city to rebuild it. He asked the king to write letters to the governors of the Trans-Euphrates area ensuring him safe passage and a letter to the keeper of the king's forest giving him timber for the rebuilding project. The king granted his request. He sent him forward along with soldiers to protect him (remember that Ezra went without protection). As we mentioned when we looked at Daniel 9, it was this decree of Artaxerxes that probably started the clock ticking on Daniel's "seventy sevens."

The chapter also says that some men, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official were not too happy that the king was taking a special interest in the welfare of the Israelites.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. Before doing any building he took a survey to see the status of the walls. He then told the people why he was there and of the provisions that the Lord had given to help him with his work. The people were with him and started rebuilding.

Sanballat and Tobiah and some of their friends saw the activity, and they tried to harass Nehemiah and his coworkers. Nehemiah told them, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Chapter 3 gives a detailed description of who was working on which specific pieces of the wall, who was repairing which gates, etc.

The opposition continued. Sanballat and Tobiah are angered that the rebuilding is actually taking place. They begin to harass the workers with words. Nehemiah prayed to God to turn back the insults on those delivering them. The people kept building. When the wall was to about half of its height, these men began plotting to attack the workers. The Jews found out. It had a major impact on the morale of these people, who were tired from the activity. Still they carried on. They prayed to God for protection and armed the workers and began posting armed guards around the wall at all hours. The people kept working but remained armed and ready to do warfare on a moment's notice if it became necessary.

3.3 Economic Strife

Nehemiah 5

The morale of the people was deteriorating badly. Because of the work on the wall, people could not work to provide for their families. They were mortgaging their fields to be able to buy grain. Besides this, there was famine in the land. There was a heavy burden of taxes that the people had to pay to the king. As a result of all of this, the rich among them were lending money at high interest rates to their fellow Jews. People had to go into slavery to their own countrymen as raise money.

They obviously had not learned the lessons of the past. The prophets had told them over and over again that there were two primary reasons that God drove them from their land and brought judgment upon them. One was unfaithfulness to God. The other grievous crime before God was the failure of man to take care of his fellow man. Now the rich were oppressing the poor all over again.

Nehemiah called together the people and admonished the rich to stop what they were doing. He made them promise to give back the fields they had taken and to start treating each other like brothers. He also led by example when it came to easing the burden on people. Even though he had been appointed by Artaxerxes to be governor of Judah and had the right to levy taxes to support himself, he did not do so because he sympathized with the needs of the people.

Nehemiah wanted to ensure that the new Judah was a land where those who had taken care of those who did not. It is a standard that is important to God. For that reason it should be important to his people as well.

3.4 *The Wall is Finished*

Nehemiah 6

The wall was completely rebuilt, except for the placing of the doors in the gates of the city. Sanballat and Tobiah tried causing trouble again. Multiple times they tried to summon Nehemiah out of the city for a "meeting," but in fact they intended to harm him. He was smart enough to realize it and did not go. Finally they sent a letter saying that they had heard rumors that the people in Jerusalem were planning to revolt, that they were building the wall in preparation for an offensive war. They wanted Nehemiah to come out of the city to address these rumors. Nehemiah simply sent back a note saying that it was not true. There were nobles within the city working with Sanballat and Tobiah to try to undermine Nehemiah and the work going on. Still, the wall was completed. Verses 15-16 say "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God."

3.5 *The Covenant is Renewed*

Nehemiah 7-10

Since the wall and the gates were complete, people were appointed to work the gates. Regulations were put forth about when they would be open.

Nehemiah then turns his attention to the condition of the city inside the wall. 7:4-5 says:

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return.

Then follows a list, basically the same as the one in Ezra chapter 2.

The people assembled in Jerusalem so that Ezra could read them the book of the law (possibly the entire Pentateuch, possibly some subset). The Levites were there to explain the law – to expound on it and make sure the people understood what was read. The people wept as they heard it. Nehemiah declared to them that they should not weep, but rejoice. He said that they should have a feast and should share with those who had little. This should be a time of great joy and not of sorrow. 8:10 says, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

This all occurred in the seventh month. They discovered in the Law that the Feast of Tabernacles was to be celebrated in the seventh month so they celebrated it with vigor. They used the days of the feast to continue the public reading and studying of the Law. 8:17 says, "From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like that. And their joy was very great."

Shortly after the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles concluded, the people began a time of fasting and of confession of corporate and individual sins. The chapter includes a long prayer, praising God for his faithfulness and his marvelous works from the time of creation unto that

current time. The prayer also confesses the corporate guilt of the people throughout the time of God's faithfulness. Verses 9:36-38 conclude with

But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.

Chapter 10 details the agreement referenced in verse 38 of chapter 9. The people do put together an agreement that includes such promises as:

- They will obey the commands, regulations, and decrees of the Lord.
- They will not give their sons and daughters in marriage to foreigners.
- They will contribute to the upkeep of the temple.
- They will be faithful in their tithes and offerings as set forth in the Law, including the firstfruit offerings.
- They will observe the Sabbath.
- They will let the land have the Sabbath year as prescribed in the Law.

Failure in every one of these areas contributed to the fall of Judah. When the people heard the law proclaimed, they realized their shortcomings and were moved to repent of these sins. The cycle through which they went is not uncommon. The proclamation of God's word should bring praise and worship mixed with mourning, confession, and repentance.

3.6 Jerusalem is Resettled and the Wall is Dedicated

Nehemiah 11-12

Chapter 11 gives some demographics about the settling of the land. It tells who settled in Jerusalem and lists cities where the other people settled. The opening of the chapter gives us an indication of the state of Jerusalem at this time. Verses 1-2 say:

Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

Apparently everyone felt that it was important that Jerusalem be inhabited, but nobody really wanted to live there. They had to draft one tenth of the population to move into the city. This is a sign that the city was in a great state of disrepair and an undesirable place to live. It still suffered from the destruction caused by Nebuchadnezzar's army. Until the walls were finished, the rebuilding inside the city would not really take place.

Chapter 12 gives a list of the priests and Levites who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. It then describes the ceremony that was held to dedicate the wall. It was a time of joy for the people. Masses of people came to participate. There was great singing and rejoicing. It was also a time of generous giving. Many offerings were brought to the temple. 12:47 says:

So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

3.7 How Soon We Forget

Nehemiah 13

In 13:1-3, the people read in the writings of Moses that no Ammonite or Moabite should be admitted into the assembly of God (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). Thus they banned all foreigners from Israel.

Nehemiah returned to king Artaxerxes. Recall that when Artaxerxes allowed him to come to Jerusalem, he wanted to know when he would return. After some period of time in Artaxerxes' court he returned to Judah. The first thing that he discovered is that the priest in charge of the storerooms in the temple had given a room to Tobiah. Tobiah was one of the people who had given them so much trouble during the building. Nehemiah threw him out and had the room purified and returned to its original purpose.

The Levites were out working their fields because the people had ceased to bring the prescribed offerings. Nehemiah convinced the people to resume giving as they were supposed to do.

People were violating the Sabbath, both working on the Sabbath and buying from foreigners in the city on the Sabbath. Nehemiah put an end to that and shut up the gates of the city on the Sabbath day.

He found that people were intermarrying with foreigners. Although he did not dissolve any existing marriages as Ezra had done, he forbade any future marriages of this nature.

We do not know exactly how long Nehemiah was gone, but it did not take long for the people of Jerusalem to forget the law and to resume doing whatever they pleased. People seem to need someone, probably a leader, holding them accountable. It seems amazing that they could have had such a spiritually high experience as was depicted in chapters 8-12, and then so quickly return to disobedience once life got back to normal. It is equally amazing how often we do the very same thing. How little we have changed. As God's people we need to spend our time in relationship with him rather than to simply impatiently wait for him to fulfill our expectations.

4 Esther

The book of Esther takes place during the time of Xerxes (also known as Ahasuerus), which is why it is placed in the post-exilic section. In fact, it describes an event in the life of Jews who were still living outside of the Promised Land.

When Cyrus issued his decree, anyone who so desired was allowed to return to Judah. Few people actually returned at that time (compared to the number of Jews who were living under Persian rule). More returned at later times, but communities of Jewish people were well established outside the confines of the borders of Israel by this time. Esther was a member of such a community.

The book is a piece of history. It shows how the faithful and brave act of one woman was able to spare a whole race of people from pain and destruction. God was able to work through the life of Esther to bring about deliverance to his people.

As a side note and a bit of Bible trivia, Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not directly reference God anywhere in the book. Another insignificant fact is that Esther contains more names of the months of the Hebrew calendar than any other book in the Bible. Esther names four (Nisan, Sivan, Tebeth, and Adar), Nehemiah three (Nisan, Elul, and Kislev), 1 Kings three (Ziv, Ethanim, and Bul), Ezekiel two (Abib and Tammuz), Zechariah two (Kislev and Shebat), Exodus one (Abib), Deuteronomy one (Abib), and Ezra one (Adar).

On with the story.

4.1 *It's a "Guy Thing"*

Esther 1

King Xerxes was impressed with himself. Verse 1:4 says that he put on a display of his own wealth and majesty for 180 days. At the end of this, he threw a huge banquet in the city of Susa. The banquet lasted seven days. The banquet would have been attended by men (only) from his kingdom; it is unlikely that it was a mixed affair. It was a lavish event with wine freely flowing.

During this same period, Xerxes' queen, Vashti, gave a banquet for the women in the palace.

By the seventh day, Xerxes was thoroughly lubricated from the wine. He decided to spice up the party by bringing in Vashti so that everyone could look at her. He commanded his eunuchs to go get her and to make sure she was dressed up in her fancy clothes. They were to bring her in for display to his guests. Vashti was busy having her own party. She did not feel like being pulled out of it and degraded by being put on display in Xerxes' party. She refused to come. This was not a welcome response to the inebriated emperor.

Xerxes was furious. The men at his party were angry, too. If Vashti could get away with treating the king in this way, what sort of authority would they have over their own wives? This insubordination had to be stopped or else chaos would reign. Thus all of the men decided that Xerxes would issue a decree that prohibited Vashti from coming into his presence ever again. Her position as queen would be taken away from her and given to another. They all figured that this would put fear in the hearts of the women of the kingdom and that they could continue being lords of their own homes.

Xerxes issued the decree and it was proclaimed throughout the kingdom.

This was before the days of support groups or marital counseling.

4.2 *Esther Becomes the New Queen*

Esther 2:1-20

Xerxes began a process of looking for a new queen. Beautiful virgins from all over the empire were brought together into a harem so that they might be "considered" by the king. Among those was a Jewess named Esther.

Esther's parents were deceased. She had been raised by an older cousin named Mordecai. The text says that they were taken exile along with Jehoiachin. This probably means that their ancestors had been taken exile along with Jehoiachin, because if they themselves had been taken at that time they would be over 100 years old.

Being a candidate for queen was a rather degrading process. A woman would be brought into the harem and given beauty treatments for a year. When her time came, she would be brought to the king. He would sleep with her that night. The next morning, more than likely she would be escorted to a "concubine retirement home" and would live there the rest of her life, probably never seeing the king again. Because the woman had been sexually intimate with the king, she was not free to have other men and thus could not marry or have a family. This process would go on with woman after woman until the king found one he liked. She would become the new queen.

In this manner, Esther entered the harem and began her year of beauty treatments. She found favor with her keepers there and was given special treatment during her year. Mordecai had instructed her to keep her nationality a secret and she followed his instructions. During her time in the harem, he kept a watch on her and communicated with her regularly.

The time came for Esther to be taken to the king. He was attracted to her above other women and chose her to become the new queen. She was given a crown. A banquet was held to honor her. She was treated like royalty, which she now was.

4.3 *The Assassination Plot*

Esther 2:21-23

Once Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the palace. He overheard two men, Bigthana and Teresh, plotting to assassinate Xerxes. He reported it to Esther, who reported it to the king. An investigation was held. The men were hanged. The events were recorded in the king's journals and Mordecai was given credit for uncovering the plot.

4.4 *The Plot Against the Jews*

Esther 3-4

A man by the name of Haman became prominent in the court of Xerxes. He was an honored noble. The king's officials would bow when Haman went by. Mordecai would not bow to him. Haman was incensed by Mordecai's insubordination and wanted to punish him (he was unaware of Mordecai's relationship to the queen). He discovered that Mordecai was a Jew. He plotted in

his heart to destroy the Jews. He cast lots to decide when it should happen. The lots pointed to the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

Haman went to Xerxes and told him that there was a group of people living in the kingdom who followed different customs and laws than the rest of the kingdom. They were disruptive and should not be tolerated. Haman offered the king a great deal of silver for the royal treasury if the king would issue a decree to destroy these people. Xerxes did not even bother to ask who the people were or what they had done. He told Haman to keep his money and to do with the people as he pleased. He gave Haman his signet ring.

The signet ring was the symbol of authority. A law sealed with the signet ring could not be altered.

Haman wrote a law that said on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, all the Jews in the kingdom should be destroyed. The people of the kingdom should rise up on that day and kill all Jewish men, women, and children in the kingdom. The edict was sealed with Xerxes' signet ring and copies of the edict were circulated all over the kingdom.

Mordecai and all of the other Jews went into mourning over this edict. Esther seemed to be unaware of what had happened. She learned that Mordecai was in mourning and sent a messenger to find out what was wrong. Mordecai told her everything that had happened and urged her to go talk to the king. Esther told Mordecai that nobody could approach the king unless he sent for him or her. If someone approached the king without being summoned, one of two things would happen. If he extended his scepter to allow the person to speak, then the person would be allowed into the king's presence. If he did not, the person would be killed for approaching the king. Esther also informed Mordecai that it had been thirty days since the king had summoned her into his presence.

Mordecai told Esther that she had no choice. She would not escape death from the massacre just because she was in the palace. The edict was irrevocable. Furthermore, he suggested that God had put her in this place specifically to deal with this event.

Esther asked Mordecai to have the Jews proclaim a three-day fast. At the end, she would do as he asked. Mordecai did as Esther wished.

4.5 Esther's First Banquet and Haman's Ego

Esther 5

At the end of the three-day fast, Esther entered the king's throne room, knowing that she could be executed for doing so. Fortunately he extended his scepter and invited her into his presence. He asked her what she wanted. She said that she only wanted for the king and for Haman to come to a banquet that she was preparing. Xerxes was pleased to do so. He summoned Haman and they went to the place where Esther had prepared the banquet.

During the meal, the king again asked Esther what he could do for her. She said that her only request was that he come again to a banquet that she would prepare the next day and that again he would bring Haman. The king agreed.

Haman came out of this with a very inflated ego. He felt extremely important that the queen would invite him to two banquets. Unfortunately as he was going home, he ran into Mordecai, this insolent Jew who would not bow to him. His feelings of elevation turned to feelings of rage.

When he got home, he expressed to his friends and wife how good he had felt when he left the banquet but how angry he was at Mordecai. His companions told him that he should have a super-high gallows built and that he should ask the king to hang Mordecai. Then he could get on with being happy.

4.6 *Mordecai is Honored*

Esther 6

That very night the king was having trouble sleeping. He summoned some servants and asked them to read to him. They read to him out of the king's journal. They came across the story mentioned at the end of chapter 2, where Mordecai had uncovered the plot to assassinate Xerxes. Xerxes asked what had been done to reward Mordecai for this act. They discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for his act of service.

About this time, Haman appeared to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged. Before he could speak, Xerxes asked Haman what should be done for a man that the king wishes to honor. Haman could only imagine that the king was referring to Haman. He suggested that such a man should have royal robes put on him and should be placed on a royal horse. A royal crown should be placed on his head. Then one of the noble princes should lead him through the streets proclaiming "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" (verse 6:9).

Xerxes thought this sounded like a good idea. He told Haman to go find Mordecai and to put the robes and crown on him and to place him on one of the king's horses. Haman himself should then lead him through the streets shouting "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"

After fulfilling the king's instructions, Haman went home humiliated. His wife and advisers began to realize that Haman was dealing with a power that was higher than Mordecai. They warned him that he might not want to take on the Jews. While they were talking to him, the king's servants arrived to take Haman to Esther's second banquet.

4.7 *Esther's Second Banquet*

Esther 7

Xerxes and Haman came to Esther's feast. As they were drinking, Xerxes asked Esther what she wanted and promised to give her anything up to half of his kingdom. She told him that she and her people had been sold into destruction. Her request was that she and her people would be spared from annihilation. Xerxes asked who would have done such a thing to her and she replied that it was Haman.

Haman was terrified. Xerxes was infuriated. Xerxes left the room because he was so mad. Haman began to plead with Esther that his life might be spared. He fell on the couch where she was reclining just as Xerxes reentered the room. In 7:8, Xerxes said "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?"

Haman was taken prisoner. Someone informed the king that a new super-high gallows had been erected but that Haman intended to use it on Mordecai, the very one who has defended the king's life. Xerxes told him to hang Haman on the very gallows that he had built.

4.8 The Jews are Spared

Esther 8-10

Only then did Esther reveal her relationship to Mordecai. Xerxes took the signet ring back from Haman and gave it to Mordecai, giving him a great position of authority in the kingdom. Esther informed Xerxes that the trouble was not over for her people because the decree issued by Haman still stood. She pleaded with the king to help.

The first order could not be rescinded because it had been sealed with the signet ring. The king had Mordecai issue a subsequent decree, however. A second order was written authorizing the Jews to defend themselves from anyone who sought to do them harm. When the thirteenth day of the twelfth month came, the Jews could take up arms and could kill anyone who tried to kill them. This second order was quickly distributed throughout the kingdom.

This order had two effects. First of all, not many people would attempt to do the Jews harm on that day. Second, the ones that did try to attack them were killed. On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, many enemies of the Jews were put to death. Esther asked the king to let the edict go on a second day. She also asked that the sons of Haman be hanged. Xerxes granted both requests. The status of the Jews was greatly elevated on these two days.

For this reason, the thirteenth and fourteenth days of the twelfth month became a day of annual celebration, known as Purim. ("Purim" is Hebrew for "lots." Haman had cast lots to choose the day when the destruction would take place.) The Jews still celebrate Purim. It occurs around the March time frame.

When the dust settled, the Jews were left in a favored position in the kingdom. Mordecai was second to Xerxes in authority. What would have been a disaster was turned to favor because of Esther's courage and faithfulness.

Esther's story is not laden with theological insight. It is not a source of prophecy. It teaches us nothing about the coming Messiah or the end of the age. It is simply a history. It describes an event that was significant in the life of God's people. It was also given to us that we might be reminded that common people might be used in significant ways. Esther was not chosen as queen because of her significant accomplishments. Mordecai was an insignificant figure when he reported the assassination plot. Still, because of their willingness to be righteous people of God in their every-day affairs, they rose to positions of power and favor and were able to spare God's people from great disaster.

We need to be about the business of being righteous in our every-day affairs.

5 Haggai

Haggai is a minor prophet who prophesied during the post-exilic period, particularly coincident with Ezra Chapter 5. His recorded prophetic activity only covered several months – from "the second year of King Darius on the first day of the sixth month" (Haggai 1:1) through "the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of the second year of Darius" (Haggai 2:10). Still he made a big impact on the people and God used him to spur the people on to get the temple rebuilt.

5.1 *First Message – Neglect of the House of the Lord*

Haggai 1

Chapter 1 of Haggai contains a message that he received on the first day of the sixth month of the second year of King Darius. Darius' reign began in 521 BC, which places the prophecy around 520 BC. The Cyrus decree was in 538 BC. Thus the people had been back in Israel for around eighteen years when this prophecy was delivered. The people had returned for the purpose of rebuilding the temple and reestablishing the nation (in that order). Eighteen years later, they were busy trying to reestablish the nation – carry on business, harvest crops, etc. – but the temple had not yet been rebuilt. Remember from Ezra that they started the effort but received harassment from their neighbors, so they stopped.

The gist of chapter 1 is simple. The people are busy trying to carry on with their lives but not having much success. 1:6 says:

You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.

Haggai tells the people that the reason things are not working for them is that they have not put the rebuilding of the temple as a first priority. Because they neglect the task of rebuilding the temple, God is withholding rain, causing crop failures, etc. Until they get their priorities straight, they are going to experience failure in their secular lives. Jesus stated the same theme in Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you."

The people took Haggai at his word and they got on with the task of rebuilding the temple.

5.2 *Second Message – The Glory of the Temple*

Haggai 2:1-9

The second message came to Haggai about seven weeks later, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month of the same year. We saw in Ezra, chapter 3 that some of the people had been grieved when they saw the foundation of the new temple because they remembered the glory of the old. God used Haggai reassure the people that glory of the new temple would exceed that of the old. 2:6-9 says:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord Almighty. "The silver is mine and

the gold is mine," declares the Lord Almighty. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty.

We know historically that when the temple was originally rebuilt, it was small and modest in comparison to Solomon's temple. Years later, however, King Herod undertook a remodeling project and reshaped this same edifice into what was perhaps the most magnificent complex ever built. The words of the prophecy came true in a very literal way. Even more importantly, it was this remodeled temple to which the Messiah himself would come, filling it with the ultimate glory.

5.3 Third Message – Restoration of Success

Haggai 2:10-19

Haggai received his third message on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, around eight weeks after the previous message. The section begins with a discussion of offerings that are either consecrated or defiled. The section is a bit cryptic. It says that if a garment is used to carry a piece of consecrated meat and then that same garment touches an object such as bread, it does not cause the bread to become consecrated. If, however, someone who is unclean from contact with a dead body should touch that same bread, it would cause the bread to become unclean. Then verse 2:14 says:

"So it is with this people and this nation in my sight," declares the Lord. "Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled."

Things that are unclean render as useless things that are clean. It is a simple principle. If you have a muddy shoe and a clean white rag and you rub the shoe with the rag, you will end up with two muddy objects rather than two clean objects. Uncleanliness is contagious and it defiles the clean things that it touches.

Thus it is with Israel's disobedience concerning the rebuilding of the temple. Their past unwillingness to rebuild was an unclean act. It defiled everything else that they did. Any sacrifices that they may have made in the past years have been defiled by the disobedience of the people. It is for this reason that they have experienced drought, crop failures, etc. Haggai brings good news, however. Now that they have taken to heart the task of rebuilding, their uncleanliness is removed. God tells them to pay close attention. Up to that day, they have experienced economic troubles. From this day forward, God will bless their other ventures in life because they now have their priorities straight. By their faithfulness in rebuilding they are giving God his proper place in their lives. They have sought first the Kingdom of God. Now all the other things will be added to them.

5.4 Fourth Message – Affirmation of Zerubbabel

Haggai 2:20-23

The fourth message came to Haggai the same day as the third one. In the last part of the chapter, God lets the people know of his favor on Zerubbabel and lets them know that he is God's chosen leader.

6 Zechariah

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. The opening verse of the book dates his first prophecy as "In the eighth month of the second year of Darius", which was the same year as all of Haggai's prophecy. Zechariah's role of prophet lasted longer than that of Haggai and his body of prophecy is bigger, containing a great deal of messianic prophecy.

6.1 *Restoration of Judah and Punishment of Enemies*

Zechariah 1-2

The book opens by reminding the Jews how they ended up in exile with their homeland destroyed. Over and over again the people had been warned about the cost of unfaithfulness. Their forefathers had been unfaithful and had basically gotten what they deserved. The people are admonished to return to the Lord.

Attention then turns to those who had scattered God's people. Even though the Lord was able to use Babylon to accomplish his purpose in refining his people, he is angry at Babylon for they way they treated the people of Judah. God intends that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and his glory will return to that place but his wrath will be poured out on those who conquered and enslaved the chosen people.

God promises that Jerusalem will again be a thriving city and that God will again make it his residence. He will dwell with his people there. Those still remaining in Babylon are encouraged to flee and to return to Judah. An angel tells Zechariah the chilling fate of Babylon. Verses 2:8-9 say:

For this is what the Lord Almighty says: "After he has honored me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you – for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye – I will surely raise my hand against them so that their slaves will plunder them. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me.

There is a lesson here for any nation that would consider taking on Israel militarily. It is a bad idea.

6.2 *The Sin is Removed From the Land in a Single Day*

Zechariah 3

Zechariah sees a vision of the high priest, whose name is Joshua. Satan is accusing him. This is Satan's job – to accuse and discourage. Those whom God sees as holy he seeks to make feel unclean. The Lord rebukes Satan. The high priest's dirty clothes are replaced with clean garments, symbolic of removing the stain cast upon him by Satan – removing his sin and making him spotless before the Lord. The high priest is told that if he will remain faithful that God will give him a place of authority in his house.

Verses 8-9 contain messianic prophecy:

Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. See, the stone I have set in

front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it, says the Lord Almighty, and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

"The Branch" is a messianic term, as we see in Isaiah 11:1-2:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord

The Branch is the coming Davidic king, the Messiah. The stone with the seven eyes in Zechariah 3:9 could be symbolic of the omniscience or the omnipresence of God, ever watchful over those whom he loves. The sin of the land was removed on a single day – Good Friday.

6.3 The Day of Small Beginnings

Zechariah 4

Zechariah sees a vision with a golden lamp stand with seven lights and an olive tree on either side. In verse 4 Zechariah asks the meaning of the lamp. He is answered in verse 10. The lamp stand represents the omniscience and omnipresence of God.

Zerubbabel is given some information about the rebuilding of the temple. First of all, verse 6 says that the temple will be built "not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty." Remember that the people were rebuilding the temple under adversarial circumstances; the people around them did not want them doing it. God reassured Zerubbabel that this was God's battle and Zerubbabel did not need to worry about that. Zerubbabel was reassured that he would be the one to complete the building (verse 9). Also, remember that some of the people had wept when they saw the foundation of the new temple because they compared it to the glory of the old. They are told in verse 10 not to despise the day of small beginnings. The implication is that God would bring majesty to the temple in his own time. We should rejoice in having things in God's time and not grieve at what we do not have now.

In verse 14, the two olive trees are identified as two yet unnamed servants who will minister in the temple. This is probably a reference to Zerubbabel and Joshua, to whom many of these prophecies are directed. Together they represent king and prophet, the roles that would be fulfilled in the Messiah. Their significance extends beyond the time of Zerubbabel and Joshua, however. In Revelation Chapter 11, the two witnesses are identified with these characters. We read in Revelation 11:1-6,

I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

Joshua and Zerubbabel seem to be forerunners or types of the two witnesses in Revelation (indeed, Moses and Elijah are also identified as types of these two witnesses in Revelation 11:6 – withholding rain, turning water to blood, striking the land with plagues, etc.) The identity of the witnesses in Revelation is a mystery. The identity of the servants in Zechariah 4 is uncertain as well.

6.4 *The Flying Scroll and the Basket of Wickedness*

Zechariah 5

In chapter 5, there are two visions. The first is of a giant scroll, flying over the land, bringing judgment on thieves and liars. The implication is that this sort of behavior will no longer be tolerated. God will purge the land of thieves and liars.

The second is of a woman in a basket. She represents the iniquity of the land. She is being carried off to be settled in Babylon. When the people returned from Babylon, they should have left their iniquity behind. It has no place in the restored Israel. God will collect the unrighteousness and wickedness from the land and carry it off to a place of judgment.

God demands purity from those among whom he will dwell. Think about it.

6.5 *Four Chariots*

Zechariah 6:1-8

Zechariah now sees a vision of four chariots ready to be unleashed to the four corners of the earth. This is a continuation of the theme of judgment found at the end of chapter 5. The purging of Judah may be a rather immediate thing, but the day will come when God will pour out his judgment upon all of the earth. The imagery here is very similar to that found in Revelation 6, where four horsemen pour out destruction on the earth in preparation for the final judgment.

Verse 6:8 indicates that God's Spirit finds rest after the judgment is carried out on the land of the north. This probably has a tie-in to the image in chapter 5, where the iniquity from Israel is transplanted to Babylon. After God's wrath is poured out on Babylon, his Spirit finds rest.

In the first chapter of Zechariah, we learn that God is angry at the nations that have come against his chosen people. In chapter 6, they receive judgment for their acts.

6.6 *The Man Whose Name is the Branch*

Zechariah 6:9-15

God now tells Zechariah to take silver and gold and to fashion it into a crown. Verses 6:11-13 say:

Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. Tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two."

This section has definite messianic overtones to it. First of all, recall that the name "Branch" is a reference to the coming Davidic king – the Messiah. The man named Joshua in this section is the high priest. The passage speaks of crowning him king. This was another definite messianic concept. Kings came from the tribe of Judah. Priests came from the tribe of Levi. Under normal circumstances, the same man could not be priest and king. Yet in this passage, there is identified a man who will be priest and king. There will be harmony between the two. This will be one who is not a priest. This is the man that David identified in Psalm 110:4:

The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."

Melchizedek was the man in Genesis who was both priest and king. David knew that another one would come in this same order – the one that David called "My Lord" in Psalm 110:1. This is the Messiah.

Interestingly enough, Zechariah 6:12 says of Joshua, "This is the man whose name is the Branch." "Joshua," when translated into Greek comes out "Iesous." "Iesous" translated into English is "Jesus." Jesus' name in Hebrew was Joshua. Was Zechariah saying that the Branch – the Messiah – would have the same name as Joshua – Jesus? That may be retrofitting historical reality onto what was said, but it sure works out nicely.

At a minimum, Zechariah was looking ahead to a time when God's universal judgment would be poured out on the earth. Following that would be an age where a priestly king would reign on the earth. This seems to coincide with the judgment of Revelation followed by the millennial kingdom.

Zechariah will have more visions concerning this time before it is all over.

6.7 A Question of Fasting

Zechariah 7-8

The Jews had adopted the habit of fasting in the fifth and seventh months to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple. Since these were being rebuilt, the people wanted to know whether they needed to continue this fasting ritual.

They get a rather blunt reply. God tells them that he never imposed this fast on them in the first place; it had been their idea. Furthermore, what he wanted from them was not fasting, but justice and mercy, care for the widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor, etc. God is not moved by ritualistic religious activities, especially from people whose hearts are not right. Their ancestors had refused to keep God's commands. They had ignored the prophets. They had not responded to God when he had sought them. For this reason, he did not respond when they sought him and allowed them to be scattered and exiled.

That was in the past, however. God promised to bless Jerusalem again. He said that he was jealous for Zion. He would return and dwell again in Jerusalem. Peace would return to the city. People would be brought out of exile and would live in the land once more. The people would experience prosperity. The land would be fertile. The nation would no longer be an object of cursing by its neighbors. People from nations from all over the earth would come to Jerusalem seeking God.

Verse 8:19 answers the question raised in the beginning of chapter 7. It says that the fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months will turn to times of feasting and joy. The fast of the

fourth month commemorated the breaching of the walls of the city by Nebuchadnezzar. The fast of the fifth month was in remembrance of the burning of the temple. The fast of the seventh month was in memory of the assassination of Gedaliah. The fast of the tenth month was in memory of the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem.

6.8 The King Riding a Donkey

Zechariah 9:1-11:3

Chapter 9 opens with a word of judgment against the enemies of Judah. God will take vengeance on them for their evil towards his chosen people. These nations will be brought low. In contrast, a righteous king will be elevated in Judah. Zechariah 9:9-10 says:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

This image was brought to life on Palm Sunday, when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. He was the righteous king bringing salvation. His reign extends to the ends of the earth.

God promises to restore the nation and the people to the nation. He will protect the people and provide for them. 9:16-17 says:

They will sparkle in his land
like jewels in a crown.

How attractive and beautiful they will be!
Grain will make the young men thrive,
and new wine the young women.

It is the Lord who provides good things to the people – abundance and rain. The idols speak deceit and lead the people into deception. 10:2-3 says:

Therefore the people wander like sheep
oppressed for lack of a shepherd.

My anger burns against the shepherds,
and I will punish the leaders;
for the Lord Almighty will care
for his flock, the house of Judah,
and make them like a proud horse in battle.

This is a charge that Jesus leveled against the Jewish leadership around 400 years later. God has already stated that he will deal harshly with the enemies of Judah. He is now addressing issues internal to Judah. His people have not only been mistreated by their neighbors; they have been led into deceit by evil leaders in their own midst. God will deal with these evil leaders just as he will deal with external enemies. His goal is to clean up his people and to make them fit to be his people. The chapter goes on to say that God will care for the people (not the deceitful leaders). He will renew and restore them. The people will rejoice to see it.

This section concludes by returning to the message of judgment against the neighbors of Judah. This time it is addressed to Lebanon.

6.9 The Good and the Bad Shepherd

Zechariah 11:4-17

This section contains the story of the good and the bad shepherd. It is a continuation of the discussion above of the evil leadership. The people are under the "care" of a bad shepherd. He slaughters the flock and rejoices at the profit he receives from it. God removes that shepherd and begins to guide the flock himself, with two staffs called "Favor" and "Union." The people immediately begin to whine and rebel against this leadership. God removes the staff of Favor and says he will leave them to their own devices. He asks for payment of wages. This sets the stage for a prophecy fulfilled by Judas Iscariot. Verses 11:12-13 say:

I told them, "If you think it best give me my pay, but if not, keep it." So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.

And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter" – the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.

The value that the people placed on the good shepherd was thirty pieces of silver – the same price paid for Jesus to Judas Iscariot. Judas, riddled with guilt, threw the money back to those who gave it to him and it was used to buy the potter's field.

The story continues. The good shepherd now removes the staff called "Union," symbolic of the breaking apart of Judah and Israel. He says that a new shepherd will come who will not care for them but will eat of the choicest sheep. He says "Woe to the worthless shepherd." God allows the people to choose this sort of leadership and allows them to reap the consequences of their choices. Still he does not let the bad leaders go unpunished.

6.10 The Final Battle – The One They Have Pierced

Zechariah 12-14

In the book of Revelation, John has a vision of the final battle, where the ungodly are finally defeated, Satan is finally put away, and the righteous enter the final age of dwelling with God eternally. In Chapters 12-14 of Zechariah, the prophet Zechariah has a vision of this same event. John and Zechariah stand and watch the same event from two different perspectives and thus record differing sets of details. They both see war against God's chosen people and God coming to the rescue of his own in a mighty way. They both see massive and bloody judgment against the enemies of God.

Chapter 12 tells of a day when enemies will be gathered against Judah and Jerusalem. God will intervene and protect them, sending their enemies reeling. The enemies will be certain that it is God providing the protection. At that time, the Jews will visually see the return of their Messiah. This will be after the revival of the Jews that Paul foresees in Romans 11. The Jews will be believers and will anxiously await the return of their own. Zechariah 12:10 says:

I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

Wow.

Jesus returns to be the righteous king of the Jews. In John 1:11, we read:

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

The first time that he came, the Jews rejected him. This time they receive him as their leader.

God will purify the people from sin and iniquity. In that day, idols and false prophets will be purged from the land. The people will no longer tolerate them.

13:7 says "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." Taken in context, this means that once the false prophets are removed, their followers will scatter. They will no longer have anyone to lead them astray. If they choose to remain in error, it is of their own doing. This particular verse has a messianic bent to it, however. We saw in the Garden of Gethsemane that the shepherd was struck and the sheep scattered.

Continuing in the chapter, after the shepherd is struck, the Lord will scatter and refine the people. Two-thirds will be struck down and the rest will be refined and saved.

That is something that many people do not consider. Being saved is better than the alternative, but it is also a two-edged sword. Those whom God saves he refines. Being refined is not necessarily pleasant.

Chapter 14 contains a vivid picture of a final battle. The nations are gathered against Jerusalem and the people and the city will be under siege. 14:3-4 says:

Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.

Verses 12-15 pick up on the theme.

This is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On that day men will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. Each man will seize the hand of another, and they will attack each other. ... A similar plague will strike the horses and mules, the camels and donkeys, and all the animals in those camps.

It is not too hard to read this through a twenty-first century filter and assume that a nuclear war is described, which is consistent with the plagues described in Revelation. This is a valid point of

reference since these plagues have not yet been fulfilled. Man's own technology may well be used to bring about his destruction.

But in the midst of all of this, Zechariah 14:5-9 promises:

Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime – a day known to the Lord. When evening comes, there will be light.

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter.

The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.

God spares and protects Jerusalem through all of this. The Lord will dwell in their midst and will be their light. Note that verse 5 says the Lord comes with "all the holy ones." This is the term used in the New Testament that is normally translated "Saints," which refers to all those who have been saved by Christ. If this interpretation is accurate and you take it very literally, it implies that the church must have been taken out of the earth before this final battle. This is the view held by pretribulationists and one for which I personally hope very dearly.

Verses 14:16-21 indicate that after it is all over, the survivors from the other nations will begin making annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. If they do not, God will withhold the rain from them. This seems to describe activity that would take place during the millennial reign described in Revelation 20.

Zechariah came to a people who were struggling to get back on their feet. They had returned from a humiliating national defeat and seventy years of exile. Their homeland had been destroyed. Their temple had been ruined. They had struggled to build a moderate replacement for the temple, but it only reminded them of their defeat. The contrast between how it was and how it once had been was overwhelmingly depressing for the people. Zechariah's prophecies would have given them strength, comfort, and a reason to carry on. He assured them that God would rebuild them. God would exact vengeance on their enemies. God would purge and refine them and lead them into righteousness. God would indeed bring them the long-awaited son of David, their Messiah King. God gave them a glimpse into the future when the enemies of God would be defeated and Jerusalem would be the center of the world.

This indeed would have given them hope. Zechariah's words were a balm to a hurting people. They still give hope to hurting people, longing for the return of the Messiah King, longing to be led into righteousness.

7 Malachi

Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah. Between the time that Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes and the time he came back to Jerusalem, the people had deviated badly from being faithful to the requirements of the law. Malachi was present during this time and prophesied against their unfaithfulness. Why were the people so quick to fall into unfaithfulness? They impatiently waited for the glorious future promised by the prophets and for the time when God would come to his temple in power, exalting Israel before other nations. They got tired of waiting and began to doubt God's love and his willingness to fulfill his covenant. Malachi was a voice of rebuke in their midst, although we know that they did not really turn around until Nehemiah returned.

The style of Malachi is a series of statements followed by a question. The question is then followed by an answer, in which the nature of God is revealed. An example of this begins with the second verse of the book (Malachi 1:2):

"I have loved you," says the Lord.

But you ask, "How have you loved us?"

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?", the Lord says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated..."

7.1 *Jacob I Loved, Esau I Hated;*

Malachi 1:1-5

As chapter 1 begins, Malachi finds the people doubting God's love. God responds with the example of how he has honored them above the descendants of Esau. The phrase "but Esau I have hated" seems a bit harsh. Some commentaries have tried to make this sound softer or nicer than it does. Unfortunately, if one looks up the verb in the Hebrew text, he will find that it means hate, pure and simple. The fact is that Esau had a character that was repulsive to God. He rejected God's ways. Therefore God rejected him. It is God's sovereign right to do so. Jacob was not perfect, but Jacob was a man that would submit to God. Thus God honored him. God continued to honor his descendants.

7.2 *Detestable Sacrifices*

Malachi 1:6-2:10

The second part of chapter 1 addresses the fact that the people are offering blemished sacrifices to God. God demanded the firstfruits and the choice sacrifices. The people were instead sacrificing blemished, diseased, and crippled animals. God takes offense at this. The words concerning this are very blunt. 1:8 says:

"When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty.

1:14 says:

“Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the Lord Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.

In chapter 2, Malachi comes down first on the priests and Levites who have gone astray and taken the people with them through their false teaching. He says that they will be despised by the people for their actions.

7.3 Defiled Marriages

Malachi 2:11-17

Ezra and Nehemiah both had to deal with the issue of Jews marrying foreign women, contrary to the requirements of the law. Malachi addresses this same issue. God is very displeased with these marriages. Just as the sacrifices are defiled, so are the marriages. It should be no wonder to the people that God does not answer their prayers and petitions.

Malachi also addresses the issue of unfaithfulness in marriage. Faithfulness in marriage is something that the twentieth century reader may take granted as a standard, but it is a new concept in Scripture. Adultery has been prohibited from the beginning, but polygamy was not. It seems that monogamy was God's standard from the beginning. In Genesis 2 we read of Adam and Eve becoming one flesh, not Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice. Still, many of God's favored leaders, including Jacob, David, and Solomon had multiple wives. By the time that the New Testament takes place, polygamy seems to have disappeared among the Jews. We do not know for sure, but we assume that Solomon wrote Proverbs 5:18-19, which says:

May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer –
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

Solomon was perhaps the worst example of someone in Scripture in regards to following this advice, but the fact remains that it is Scripture and it is God's standard. We are to rejoice with the spouse of our youth. Malachi 2:15 tells us why it is God's standard:

Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

A faithful marriage produces a solid home. A solid home produces children who are faithful to God. If parents cheat on one another, then cheating becomes an acceptable norm for the children. They are likely to cheat on God spiritually when they become adults. God wants monogamous and monotheistic homes.

At the end of chapter 2, Malachi also denounces those who are violent and those who look around at the evil and call it good.

7.4 The Messenger and the Lord

Malachi 3:1-5

Part of the reason that the people were going astray is that they felt the Lord was taking too long in coming to his temple and exalting their nation before other nations. Malachi addresses this in 3:1-5.

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty.

This side of the cross, we have seen the fulfillment of this. John the Baptist was the messenger who came to prepare the way. The Lord Jesus came to his temple. He came not to exalt the people but to purify them. The people were told exactly what kind of a Messiah they would have but still did not recognize him when he came.

7.5 Bring the Tithes Into the Storehouse

Malachi 3:6-17

After the walls were rebuilt, at some point Nehemiah returned to King Artaxerxes. Later he came again to Jerusalem. He found the people to be apostate in several areas, including giving to the temple. In chapter 3, Malachi addresses the issue of the people failing to bring their tithes to the temple. God says that the people have fallen away from him, but in observing the tithes and offerings they have the opportunity to return to him. 3:7-10 says:

"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you." says the Lord Almighty.

But you ask, "How are we to return?"

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

But you ask, "How do we rob you?"

In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

This is one of the few places in Scripture where God invites us to put him to the test. There is a clear message in Malachi that God unashamedly demands our firstfruits and that we will be blessed if we comply.

Next he addresses people who have come to the conclusion that serving God is futile. God says that they will see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. God will preserve those who are faithful to him. He has already pronounced destruction on the wicked.

7.6 The Great and Dreadful Day of the Lord

Malachi 4

Malachi now addresses that day of judgment. 4:1-3 says:

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the Lord Almighty.

The day of judgment will come. Before it comes, everybody gets to choose sides. Those who are on the Lord's side will come out safe. Those who are against the Lord will be destroyed. 4:5-6 says:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah. He called the people to repentance. He made straight the way for the King. John prepared the way for the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the line in the sand. You are either for him or you are against him. The test is true-false, not multiple choice. When the judgment is unleashed, those with him will be safe. Those against him will be destroyed. It is simple yet absolute.

When the prophecy of Malachi closed, the prophetic voice of God went silent for almost 400 years. Then the last prophet of the old covenant came – John the Baptist. Most of the prophets have pointed the people to that day unleashed by John's ministry. Zechariah and Malachi have had great focus on it.

God had said everything that he needed to say. The people knew all that they needed to do. In the fullness of time, the Davidic king would come. The line would be drawn in the sand. And in the time yet to come is the great and dreadful day when the rest of this prophecy will be unleashed.

Maranantha.

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