

THE GOOD HAND OF GOD RESTORING AND PRESERVING HIS PEOPLE (A Study of Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther)

INTRODUCTION: Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther are the last three of the seventeen Old Testament historical books. The three books should be studied together because they highlight God's mercy and faithfulness in fulfilling His promise to restore Israel after He judged the nation for persistent unbelief and sin. God's judgment resulted in the fall of the nation to the Babylonian empire, the destruction of Jerusalem including Solomon's Temple, and the people being led away into seventy years of captivity and servitude in Babylon. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah focus on three Jewish remnants which returned to Jerusalem following their seventy year captivity in Babylon, while the book of Esther has to do with the much larger number of Jews who remained in the land of their captivity.

The three Jewish groups who returned to Jerusalem span over nine decades. The first two returns are the subject of the book of Ezra while the third return is the subject of the book of Nehemiah. The first return was in 538BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a civil servant and descendant of David, and deals with restoring God's people to their homeland in Israel, and rebuilding the temple to establish the priority of worshiping God. The second return came eighty years after the first in 458BC under the leadership of Ezra, a priest and scribe, and deals with the reformation of the people through instruction in God's Law. The third return came thirteen years after the second in 445 BC under the leadership of Nehemiah, the cupbearer of the King of Persia, and deals with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and spiritually reviving its people.

The events in the book of Esther took place in the gap between the two Jewish returns recorded in Ezra and deal with God preserving His people from an evil plot to annihilate the Jewish people.

In studying Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther we will also tie in the last three of the seventeen prophetic books, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, since God raised up these three prophets to minister to His people during this historical period.

AUTHOR: Concerning Ezra & Nehemiah, the most widely held position and Jewish tradition is that Ezra is the author of both books, and that originally they were one book. Tradition also recognizes Ezra as the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles. The author of Esther is unknown, although Mordecai, Ezra, & Nehemiah have been suggested.

THEMES AND OUTLINES:

EZRA - RESTORATION

“Though He cause grief He will have compassion.”

FIRST RETURN UNDER ZERUBBABEL (chapters 1-6)

- 1-2** God's people return & are restored to the land promised them by God.
- 3** Altar is re-erected and foundation of new temple laid.
- 4** Adversaries obstruct rebuilding of temple & work is halted.
- 5** Prophets Haggai & Zechariah rebuke & exhort the people which results in the temple work being resumed.
- 6** Temple is rebuilt & dedicated with the people returning to worship.

SECOND RETURN UNDER EZRA (chapters 7-10)

- 7 Ezra prepares for the return.
- 8 Ezra leads the second return to Jerusalem.
- 9 Ezra confronts the people over their compromise & sin.
- 10 Ezra restores the people through confession & obedience to God's Word.

NEHEMIAH - RECONSTRUCTION

*"Be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work,
knowing your labor is not in vain."*

RECONSTRUCTING JERUSALEM'S WALL (chapters 1-6)

- 1 Nehemiah intercedes to God over the reproach of Jerusalem.
- 2 Nehemiah leads third return & challenges people to rebuild the wall.
- 3 Nehemiah begins the rebuilding project.
- 4-6 Nehemiah encounters and overcomes both external opposition & internal division to complete the wall.

REVIVING GOD'S PEOPLE (chapters 7-13)

- 7 God's people are organized into a unified community.
- 8 God's people are revived through the teaching of God's Word.
- 9-10 God's people repent and renew their commitment to obey God's Word.
- 11-12 God's people repopulate Jerusalem and dedicate the wall.
- 13 God's people ongoing need for correction and repentance.

ESTHER - PRESERVATION

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep.

(Even when God is strangely silent, He remains actively sovereign.)

CRISIS ANTICIPATED BY GOD

- 1 Queen Vashti deposed
- 2 Esther becomes queen
- 3 Haman plots genocide
- 4 Mordecai pleads help
- 5 Esther courageous action

CRISIS OVERRULED BY GOD

- 6 Mordecai is honored
- 7 Haman is executed
- 8 The Jews are delivered
- 9 Purim is instituted
- 10 Mordecai made premier

KEY LESSONS:

- God is sovereign and can overrule all authorities and adversaries to turn events around to favor His people and accomplish His plans.
- God is faithful to keep His promises.
- Although God disciplines His people He does not discard them. He ordains discipline for His people's restoration, not their ruin. The final word will never be the failure of God's people but the triumph of God's love.
- Opposition to God's Work will be innumerable and inescapable, but God is invincible.
- More important than the success of God's work is the character development of God's workers. Therefore, learning, loving, & living God's Word, & prayer must be priorities.
- All three books move God's plan of redemption forward by restoring and preserving the nation of Israel, who will usher in the Messiah, and all three books end with unmet expectations rooted in the reality they are still waiting on the Messiah's coming.

Ezra Part One: The Return Under Zerubbabel
The Steps to Spiritual Restoration
The Construction of the Temple

- 2. Return to the place of God's blessing by trusting in God's promises. Ezra 1-2**
 - 3. Reestablish the Altar of Sacrifice by renewing dedication to God. Ezra 3: 1-6**
 - 4. Rebuild the Temple by embracing the priority of worship & witness. Ezra 3:7-13**
 - 5. Resist opposition as a testing and refining of faith. Ezra 4**
- Respond to God's Word in completing God's work. Ezra 5 - 6: 15**
- 6. Haggai - Choosing God's priorities**
 - 7. Zachariah - Obedience over Observance**
- 8. Rejoice in God by celebrating the victory of faith in God**

ESTHER - The Drama of God's Providence
in the Preservation of God's People
The Restoration of God's People

- 9. The Crisis Anticipated**
- 10. The Crisis Overruled**

Ezra Part Two: The Return Under Ezra
The Steps of a Godly Person

- 11. Ezra Prepared His Heart through the study and practice of God's Word**
Ezra Poured Out His Heart through prayer in absolute dependence on God
- 12. Ezra's Confession of Sin**
Ezra's Restoration of the Sinner