

An Aerial View of the Old Testament Part 5
Selected Scriptures
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Tonight is part 5 of a 6-part series surveying the Old Testament. My goal in this series was to help all of us sort of get our arms in a fresh way around the contents of the Old Testament. That has required us to take what I have called an aerial view. It's how the history and message of the Old Testament looks from about thirty thousand feet.

To help us in our journey, I've divided the Old Testament into nine major movements or scenes beginning with universal dealings in the first 11 chapters of Genesis; the patriarchal period for the rest of Genesis; slavery in Egypt, Exodus 1; the exodus under Moses from Exodus 2 through the end of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy; and then comes the conquest and division of the land in the time of Joshua. The period of the judges ensues after that with the books of Judges, Ruth and the first eight chapters of 1 Samuel; followed by the monarchy—that time when there was a king in Israel who ruled over the land: first, the united monarchy in 1 Samuel 9 through 1 Kings 11; and then the divided monarchy when there were two kingdoms—really with two different kings and dynasties that made up Israel. That's from 1 Kings 12 through the book of 2 Kings.

Tonight we come to the last two movements or scenes in Old Testament history: the Babylonian exile, which is described for us in not too much detail in Ezekiel, Daniel, and certain Psalms; and what's called the restoration period when some of the Israelites leave Babylon and return to the land of Canaan and resettle it. That is described in the books of Ezra, Esther and Nehemiah. We will go through each of those in its course tonight.

We need to begin however with the eighth great movement, and that is the exile of Israel. Remember that in 722 BC, the northern ten tribes, the north as we've called it, was destroyed by the Assyrians. Although the south, the southern part Judah, did not fall as soon as the north, it was destined to fall because of her ongoing sin of idolatry. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that

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Israel would spend seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah 25:11, “This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

And it happened; most of the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were carried off as captives to Babylon. But it happened in three stages or three distinct deportations that you need to understand because when you read the Old Testament, it’s hard to make sense of it if you don’t understand that there were three different times when the people of Judah were carried off captive. There was the first deportation that occurred in 606, 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, attacked Jerusalem and put the city under siege. Word reached him of his father’s death, so he had to return to Babylon and secure the throne, but he decided as he left to take with him a few of the best and the brightest Jewish young men to train them for leadership. Among those young men was a man named Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, as their Hebrew names are.

So God deports these young men including Daniel to Babylon. Why? This was God’s grace to His people. He was preparing the way for His people even though He must send them into captivity, He paves the way. Because of Daniel, their captivity would not be nearly so hard or so difficult. By 586, when most of the people were carried off to Babylon, Daniel was already the second most powerful man in the empire. And so, God, even in wrath, remembers mercy. Daniel became for Israel in Babylon what Joseph had been for Israel in Egypt. That’s the first deportation.

A few years later in 597, so 606, 605, first deportation. Second deportation, 597 BC, Judah refused to pay its annual tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. I don’t know what possessed exactly the leadership to come to that decision, but they did. So Nebuchadnezzar returned to punish the city. He took some ten thousand captives of the most skilled and powerful and influential, including a man named Ezekiel, a very influential man who would, while in Babylon, be called to be a prophet of God. And we of course have a book in our Scriptures written by this man. That was the second deportation; so the first, just a few young men, the second, ten thousand captives of the most skilled, the most powerful, the most influential.

The third deportation comes about ten years later, eleven years later in 586 BC. Once again, Judah refused to pay its annual tribute. And so Nebuchadnezzar's army returns, they destroyed the city entirely and they destroyed the temple, and Nebuchadnezzar carried off to Babylon the majority of the population. He left there only the poorest and the most infirmed so that the land wouldn't be entirely overrun. At this point, at 586, Israel's independence as a nation ended, and the time of the Gentiles began, a time that really continues to this day. Although Israel of course as of 1948 is in her land, she's still dominated in so many ways.

Now during this period of the deportations, between the second and third deportations, between 597 and 586, one of the most tragic events in Israel's history occurs. You remember back in Exodus chapter 40 that Moses completed the tabernacle and the glory cloud, that visible manifestation, that blazing cloud manifesting the glory of God took up residence in that tent. The Holy of Holies became the throne room as it were of Yahweh, Israel's King. And from that time forward, the glory cloud always resided in the tabernacle. And then later, when Solomon built his temple in 1 Kings 8, the glory cloud takes up residence there as well. But in 592, the glory cloud departed from the temple and even from the city of Jerusalem.

Turn with me to Ezekiel. Notice what Ezekiel sees and describes to the people. Ezekiel chapter 10. Remember now that glory cloud hovered over the Holy of Holies as a visible demonstration of the presence of God, Israel's King among her people, among His people. Notice verse 3, "Now the cherubim were standing on the right side," this is a vision that Ezekiel was allowed to see by God, "the cherubim were standing on the right side of the temple when the man entered, and the cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord." Look down in verse 18. "Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim. When the cherubim departed, they lifted their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight with the wheels beside them," that chariot image that Ezekiel sees in Ezekiel chapter 1, that sort of war chariot of God as it were, the war throne of God, he sees here. And verse 17 says "when they rose up, the

wheels would rise with them, for the spirit of the living beings was in them. Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim. When the cherubim departed, they rose up from the earth in my sight. They stood still,” middle of verse 19, “at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord’s house, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them.”

Then turn over to chapter 11, verse 22. So left that mercy seat there over the cherubim, went to the threshold of the temple, verse 22 of chapter 11, “Then the cherubim lifted up their wings with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered over them. The glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood over the Mount of Olives which is on the east side of the city.” And God in His visible manifestation as King of Israel departs. The glory really is gone, and it’s just a matter of time until God commands Babylon to come in under Nebuchadnezzar and raze it to the ground. Tragic demonstration of what God did with His people.

Why did God allow His people to be carried off into captivity? Really it’s because of His faithfulness, because of His loyalty because He made a covenant with them at Sinai, you remember what He told them? Deuteronomy 11, “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known.” And what was the worst, the greatest curse of all? It was captivity in a foreign land described in Deuteronomy 30. So the worst has come, God is merely keeping His word in the covenant that He and his people entered into at the foot of Sinai, seventy years of captivity.

Most of the details of these seventy years are unrecorded in the narrative of Old Testament history, but we get small glimpses from Daniel 1 to 6. We can kind of see a little bit of what happened with God’s people there in Babylon. We see a little more in Ezekiel as he lived there in Babylon and wrote his prophecy from there, and certain psalms including Psalm 137, where

they're asked to play but they can't play and sing the songs of Zion by the rivers of Babylon. Those are the glimpses we get.

During the period of the exile, those seventy years, there were two prophets who ministered to God's people in Babylon. I've already mentioned them both, Daniel and Ezekiel. Daniel's message and what we enjoy from his book is this—God is sovereign over all of human history, every king, every empire, and what a comfort that would have been to these people sitting under the thumb of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, you name it—there is no leader out from under God's control, that's what God wanted His people to know. And the message of Ezekiel was one of condemnation for their sins, but consolation that God loved them and even a message of restoration, the hope of restoration. And God's people suffered in Babylon for seventy years.

But then came the great Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great. Cyrus' Medo-Persian Empire stretched all the way from the Aegean Sea to India. And on October 12th, 539 BC, an army under Cyrus conquered the great city of Babylon, and the Babylonian Empire fell. You can read about it from a Biblical perspective in Daniel 5, it's one of my favorite chapters in all the Bible. Xenophon, the historian, describes how the Persians penetrated Babylon's defenses. Babylon was an unconquerable city, that's why they were having a party that night. It was an annual festival there, Belshazzar's feast, it was an annual festival that they held. But he decided to hold it in spite of the fact the city was under siege, in a sense to thumb his nose at the armies outside, to say you can't touch us, we are in Babylon the great.

So how did the Medo-Persians do it? Xenophon tells us that they deliberately chose the night of the annual feast, knowing that the people would all be drunk and distracted. Then upstream sometime before the feast, they had dug a canal and at the proper time, they diverted the Euphrates River, that part of which flowed under the walls of the city to provide a perpetual water supply, they diverted that and immediately the water level dropped, and the Medes and the Persians waded in under the walls where the river normally ran. Amazingly, once they got inside the city, they found that the brass gates that led into the inner city were open. What I love about

this is one hundred and fifty years before the events of that fateful night, Isaiah the prophet had predicted it would happen. And he even addressed his explanation to Cyrus by name, even though Cyrus would not be born for one hundred years and would not accomplish this event for one hundred and fifty years.

Turn to Isaiah, I have to have you read this, Isaiah chapter 44. Now remember this is written 100 years before this man's birth and one hundred and fifty years before the events themselves occur. Isaiah 44, verse 28,

It is I, [God] says, who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd! He will perform all My desire." And he declares of Jerusalem, "She will be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid." Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I [will] go before you [God says] and make the rough places smooth; [He says to Cyrus] I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me. I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Do you know what I love about that? God demonstrates His power by crushing an empire with a man He calls by name one hundred and fifty years before, and He even describes how it will happen, severing the gates of bronze just as Xenophon tells us the Medes and Persians found the city. In God's providence, Cyrus and the Persians conquer Babylon, and here's the amazing thing. Cyrus and the Persians have an entirely different approach from the Babylonians. They believe not in keeping people captive away from their homeland, but in repatriating the peoples

who'd been conquered. So in 538, just a year after he conquered the city of Babylon, Cyrus issued a decree that allowed the Jews to return to their land. And the seventy years of Babylonian captivity came to an abrupt end just as God had said at the very year that He had said.

There's some disagreement about how to calculate the seventy years. There are two options, both of them work. Some say you should calculate from 606 BC, the first deportation, to 536 when the Second Temple foundation was laid, when they started building the temple again. Others say no, it should be calculated from 586, when the city was really demolished and destroyed, the final deportation, and it ends in 516 when the temple is completed, that's when the captivity ends. Regardless, the point is God did just as He said, seventy years and no more, and He did it through the crushing of an entire empire.

That brings us to the final movement of Old Testament history—the restoration of Israel, the restoration of Israel to her land. This final phase of Old Testament history is recorded in two books, Ezra and Nehemiah. We think of them as two books, but actually they were considered to be one book by Josephus, by the Talmud, by the Septuagint, by the Hebrew scribes. In fact, it was Origen in about AD 200 that was the first to separate Ezra-Nehemiah into two books. So really it's one book describing the restoration.

Ezra actually in chapters 1 through 6 of his book wrote history because it was before his lifetime, the events of chapters 1 through 6. Chapters 7 through 10 of his book he is an eyewitness to, and he writes basically from his memoirs. Nehemiah, the entire book, are the personal memoirs of Nehemiah. So it is contemporaneous history. Together they give us a narrative of the restoration of God's people from the 70 years of Babylonian captivity to their own land.

The restoration, like the exile, also occurred in three phases or three distinct returns. Now if you read this from the left column to the right, you get the idea. You have the first stage, the first deportation on the left. Then there's an interval of some fifty-eight years during which time the events of Esther occur. Then you have the second deportation, I'm sorry, the second return is what I meant to say, I got my words mixed up. Let me go back and say that again. In the first column, you have the first return to the land. In the second under Zerubbabel, in the second

column, you have the interval between the first return and the second return. And you see that there's fifty-eight years, and that's when the events of Esther occur. Under the second return, you have Ezra bringing people back and the worship is restored, about two thousand people come back with Ezra. Fifty thousand came back under Zerubbabel in the first return.

Then you have an interval of about thirteen years between the second and the third returns. And the third return is under Nehemiah and of course, Jerusalem is fortified. Into the first return, the temple is rebuilt. Under the second return, worship is restored to the people of God. And the third return, Jerusalem, the city itself, is fortified. You'll notice also the books of the Bible that tie into these returns. Notice that Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets, write connected to the first return, and we'll talk about them in a moment. You have Esther between the first and second returns, and then the third return under Nehemiah, Malachi's ministry ties in with that and relates to that return. So that just gives you a little idea.

Here's another way to look at it—same concept, different idea. Start at the top and read down, you'll notice in the middle column there are years, and you so you kind of get an idea of the relationship of everything to each other. You see Zerubbabel returns with fifty thousand people and rebuilds the temple in the first six chapters of Ezra. Then there's a gap, you'll notice down here a gap of 58 years, and I've reproduced that on this next chart just so you can see where we are. There's that same gap during which the events of Esther occur of 58 years. Then you have Ezra's return, another gap, and then Nehemiah's return to rebuild the wall. So that gives you a little idea of how that flows. I don't expect you to get all of this from the charts, but I put them here so that when we print the overheads, you'll have them in print form for you to look at.

Now when you come to the book of Ezra, the writings of Ezra the scribe, and you begin to look at his book, he looks rather like a historian of sorts. He has a number of official lists: he has seven official letters actually transcribed and written out; and you have what amounts to his own official memoirs in chapters 7 through 10. So it could feel a bit like a history, but it's not. Ezra is not solely a historian. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah—remember we think of them as one—the book of Ezra-Nehemiah spans one hundred and eight years. It only touches on twenty-eight of

those years and ignores eighty of those years. Why? Because Ezra and Nehemiah both selected specific things to communicate a central purpose.

There are in these two books, or in this one book if you think of it that way, two very real recurring concepts or supporting themes. One of them has to do with the hand of God in providence; the other has to do with the Word of God. You see this in a number of ways when you look at how you have this recurring concept of the hand of God. Just look at some of the references I've put up here. First of all, from Ezra, in Ezra 1:1, God stirred up Cyrus; in verse 5, whose spirit God stirred up; Chapter 6, verse 22, God turned the heart of the king; chapter 7, verse 6, the hand of God; 7:9, the good hand of God; chapter 7, verse 27, put such a thing in the king's heart; chapter 8, verse 18, the good hand of God. You see that recurring theme: God is working behind the scenes in providence to accomplish His purpose for His people.

Same thing occurs in Nehemiah, you see those same concepts in Nehemiah 2:8 and verse 12; Nehemiah 4:15; and then in 2:18. I put that one last because here's how Nehemiah describes what happened to him. He says the hand of God has been favorable to us. So you see this recurring theme of God's hand involved in pulling the strings and directing the circumstances of His people; keep that in mind, that's important.

The second recurring theme is this constant appeal to the Word of God, unlike before the captivity. Remember what was going on before the captivity? People were ignoring the Bible, they found a copy once buried in the wall and it was a shock to them all. But when you come to Ezra-Nehemiah, you see a different occurrence. In Ezra chapter 1:1, all these things happened to fulfill the word of the Lord to Jeremiah. It is written is a theme that occurs over and over again in Ezra's book. The people even order their praise in chapter 3, verse 11, after what Jeremiah had prophesied. And remarkably in Ezra chapter 7, verse 23, a Persian king demanded obedience to the law of God. And in verse 25, he authorized the teaching of the law in Israel.

Chapters 9 and 10 of Ezra are all about conforming to the law, even without the chastening of a prophet because the prophets would cease. They needed to live by the Bible, by the Word of God, and this period of time highlights that reality. Malachi would be the last prophet, and there

wouldn't be another until John the Baptist came four hundred years later. How would the people live? How would they know what to do? The Word of God. Nehemiah makes this same point. They discover they're violating the usury laws and they immediately repent, there's this immediate response to the Bible. That's what the law says, let's make a change. And in Nehemiah chapters 8 and 9, there's a theme focusing on the priority of God's law.

So when you look at these two things together, you have to understand Ezra-Nehemiah's purpose. They exist to show the people of God how God normally works. When you and I read the Old Testament, what do we tend to gravitate toward? The miraculous. Wow, what God did to bring His people out of Egypt, how wonderful is that! They were used to the miraculous, miraculous intervention, direct revelation; but in the returns, all three of them, this whole period of time after the captivity, God wasn't parting the Red Sea. There was no exodus, but divine providence and their response to God's Word were to be the way they were directed, and those are no less a work of God, you understand that? Miracles are a work of God without question, but God's providence, as we saw in those passages from Ezra-Nehemiah, and following His Word are every bit as compelling as the miraculous. God uses His providence and His Word to accomplish His will in the lives of His people. Ezra's name means "Yahweh helps." How does He help? He helps by His Word and by His providence.

When you look at an outline of Ezra-Nehemiah, you see rebuilding the worship of God in Ezra: the first 6 chapters the preparation of the temple for worship; and then 7 through 10, the preparation of the people for worship under the teaching of Ezra. And then you have the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah.

Now I want to go through briefly this part of Israel's history, and I'm going to put some things on the screen that I won't comment on, you'll have them for later. But I want to just lead you through this and draw us to a conclusion because there's some powerful lessons in this part of Israel's history for us.

First of all, in Ezra 1 through 6, you have the return of the people from Babylon under Zerubbabel and the preparation of the temple for worship. They go with the aim of rebuilding the

temple. I told you in 538, Cyrus issues a decree for the repatriation of the Jews. Here is the Cyrus Cylinder from secular history that's been discovered, here's what he wrote. "I return to these sacred cities, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned them to their habitations. May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me." So he says this is what I've done, and of course in this we read Israel's history as well because that's exactly what happened for Israel, but it wasn't Cyrus. It was God. God had promised restoration, remember Jeremiah 25 said it would only last seventy years and then it would be over. And Isaiah prophesied as we read just a few minutes ago that Cyrus would be the instrument to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

So God is now accomplishing exactly what He promised, and He's doing it through Cyrus. When the timing is right, Cyrus conquers Babylon by God's providence and in his first year, he does something unbelievable. He decides to repatriate the Jews and to rebuild Israel's temple at Persia's expense. That's providence, and that is miraculous, even though it doesn't on the face of it appear to be so.

So, in Ezra chapter 2, Zerubbabel returns with about fifty thousand Jews. This is probably not a majority of the people who were in Babylon. Their situation in Babylon was not like Egypt where they were enslaved and making bricks. In Babylon, they had their own houses. They also were able to work skills, many of them stayed in Babylon because of their lucrative businesses and their comfortable lives, so only about fifty thousand of the Jews returned. This is the route that they took, you can see over here is Babylon on the Fertile Crescent, the Euphrates and Tigris. They had to travel up and over the desert and come down into the area of Judah.

When you come to Ezra chapter 4, they run into opposition, a group of enemies who are the Samaritans. The Samaritans are from the north, remember Judah is in the south; in the north you had the ten tribes. When they were carried off captive in the north, there were a few Jews left there, and then the Assyrians brought in colonists. We see that happening on the West Bank and in other places in Gaza in Israel, that's exactly what was happening in the Old World as well.

And the result of intermarriage between the Jews that were left in the land after 722 and the colonists that were imported by Assyria, they married and the offspring was the Samaritans, and they become the enemies of Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple.

In chapter 4, there's a summary of the opposition that arose. It's not chronological, in fact in some cases, it's out of chronology. It's simply to give you an idea of what they faced as they tried to rebuild the temple. And I love the forms of opposition there because they are common to all times. These are the ways that Satan attacks the work of God: distraction, they were building their own houses instead of the temple, you remember Haggai gets onto them for that; compromise, let us build us with you. The enemies of God want to work together with the people of God; discouragement, sneers and mocking were part of what they had to face; intimidation and threats; the undermining of their reputation, there were hired counselors who talked about their integrity, who called into question why they were doing what they were doing; accusations, letters were actually written to Persia accusing them of what in fact was not true; and then even physical force. Those are the forms opposition takes to the work of God—always, always those forms.

And it's successful. By the way, notice that God had commanded His people to go back to rebuild the temple. They were doing what they had been commanded to do, and yet there was opposition. There is opposition that comes even when you are doing the will of God, so don't for a moment think that opposition means something is desperately wrong. No, in this case Israel's enemies are successful, and the building stops for some ten to sixteen years. They had completed little more than the foundation of the temple, but in chapter 5 the building resumes, and not by coincidence, because God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. And they light a fire under the people. In addition to that, verse 5 of Ezra 5 says that the eye of their God was part of what caused it to happen. So, the fact that they resumed the work is the gracious design of God for it to be accomplished.

And so eventually in chapter 6, the temple is completed in 516. So, they left, or I should say the decree was issued for them to return in 538; they left in 536, and some twenty years after they began the temple, it's completed in 516 BC.

You might hear something about the First Temple period and the Second Temple period and all of it. Don't let that confuse me. The First Temple period was Solomon's temple, built in 959 under Solomon and destroyed in 586 by the Babylonians. The Second Temple period was Zerubbabel's temple that we're studying about here that was later modified and vastly rebuilt by Herod. And he didn't complete it until just before AD 70 when it was destroyed by the Romans.

Now after you end Ezra 6, there is a gap, remember, a gap between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7 of about fifty-eight years. And in that gap, the events of Esther occur. Ezra and Nehemiah, those events occur primarily in the land of Canaan, but Esther's events occur back at the ranch, back in Persia as the Jews there face extermination. And under God's providence and the work of Esther, they are saved and delivered.

So that fifty-eight-year gap then takes us to Ezra 7 to 10 and Ezra's own memoirs. These things occur during his lifetime. The first six chapters were the preparation of the temple for worship. Under the ministry of Ezra is the preparation of the people for worship. There's an amazing document that occurs that when you have time, I would encourage you to read because it's really a shocking document. In Ezra chapter 7, verses 11 through 26, you have Artaxerxes' decree. It is a detailed official record of what the Persian king commanded. Look at what he commanded, I've summarized it here. For the people of Israel, he authorized them to return, he authorized the transport of Persian assets to the land of Israel. He established the proper use of those assets to accomplish the mission, and he authorized the use of government funds to make it happen. To the government treasurers, he established a government budget for the project, and he exempted the temple personnel, as the worship of God is established there at the temple in Israel, from paying taxes to Persia.

For Ezra, he gave him authority to setup a provincial government and to make political, judicial appointments, and he gave Ezra the authority to carry out the punishment of law breakers.

Incredible! Why? Well listen to Ezra, I love what Ezra says, in fact turn there. Ezra chapter 7. After he completes the document itself, in Ezra chapter 7, verse 27, he writes,

Blessed be Yahweh, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, and [He] has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Again, you see that hand of providence working behind the scene to accomplish His purpose. If you had been there, it wouldn't have looked like a miracle, but the results would have. And that's what Ezra and Nehemiah want us to see. God put it in the king's heart and the hand of God was upon me.

So in chapter 8, Ezra returns. In 458 BC, Ezra returned, the second return now after a gap of some fifty-eight years. And he returns not with fifty thousand people as the first return, but with two thousand people. When he gets there, he is absolutely devastated by what he discovers because when he arrives there, he discovers that the people of God that have returned under the first return have begun to intermarry with the nations around them. They had married with all the "-ites" of the land. You can read about it in chapter 9, verse 1.

Now don't misunderstand, the issue was not racial, it was religious. What was at stake was the continuation of the covenant nation and the worship of the true God. Remember God said, "When you go to the land, don't intermarry, don't let your sons and daughters intermarry because if they do, you'll end up worshipping idols." And Ezra sees that, verses 3 and 4 of Ezra 9, he's distraught and he tears his clothes and he pulls out his beard and hair and he sits down appalled.

And then he does what we should do, he prays, one of the most magnificent prayers in Scripture. Ezra chapter 9, in fact turn there, let me just read a portion of it to you. Chapter 9, verse 7,

Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day. But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us [I love this image] a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. Now our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments.

As a result of Ezra's intercession, in chapter 10 the people take an oath to deal with this problem. They even consent to return their pagan, unbelieving wives to their families. While God hates divorce and doesn't accept it among His people except for two notable exceptions detailed in the New Testament—the case of unfaithfulness, in sexual unfaithfulness and abandonment by an unbeliever. Here because of the possible destruction of the nation in a special case, they send their pagan, unbelieving wives away.

So, in the period of the restoration, you have these three returns: they return to rebuild their temple under Zerubbabel; they return to purify the worship of God under Ezra; and they return to rebuild and refortify the city of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. Old Testament history comes to a close with the career of Nehemiah—Nehemiah the builder.

Now in chapter 1 of Nehemiah, Nehemiah fasts and prays and weeps, and he has a specific request of God. If you look at verse 11 of Nehemiah 1, he says grant me success and compassion before this man, and then the last verse ends by telling us that he is the cupbearer to the king. How did a Jewish person get such an important role in Persia? Well don't forget that Esther was the king's stepmother, and God is at work behind the scenes providentially to preserve His people.

So about four months later, chapter 2, verse 1 tells us, four months after his prayer and his coming aware of the problem, Nehemiah lets his sadness show for the first time. After three months, he shows his sadness. The king notices and asks why. Frankly, that in and of itself is a miracle; most kings are very selfish, self-dominated persons who don't notice other people, but here he notices. And Nehemiah explains in chapter 2, verse 3. And folks, this doesn't happen, and look at verse 4 of chapter 2. The king says, "What do you want?" So in verse 5, Nehemiah says let me return and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. The walls aren't built; the temple's standing, the worship of God is going on, but there are no walls. If you'd never read this book before, what would be the odds of a yes? Not very great, but look at verse 6. "It pleased him to send me." But Nehemiah isn't done. Notice verse 7, he asks for letters to the governors and even a letter to Asaph to supply timber for the project. Verse 8 says the king granted it because of the good hand of God. So, in verse 9 of Nehemiah 2, Nehemiah arrives in Judah about August of 445 BC to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

Chapters 4 through 6 chronicles the tremendous opposition that he faced. There's the external opposition of powerful men, all of whom are mentioned in secular history. There's the internal opposition of sin and discouragement and fear, it's all documented in those chapters. Why would there be such a lengthy chronicle of opposition? It was to show that humanly speaking, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem was an impossibility. But Nehemiah's prayers show that what is impossible with man is possible with God. Chapter 4, verse 15 says, "God frustrated their plan." Verse 20, "our God will fight for us." That's the idea. The opposition is overcome by God.

And so, in chapter 6, verse 15, the wall was finished in fifty-two days. Chapter 6, verse 16 is the key to understanding Nehemiah. How did they do it? How did they complete the wall? Look at Nehemiah 6 and verse 16, "When all of our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God." They saw that it was humanly impossible. God intervened. Miraculously? No, providentially, behind the scenes doing what needed to be done.

The death angel didn't show up, there was no collapsing of the enemy's resources, there were none of those dramatic events that you read in the rest of the Old Testament. There was instead quiet, behind the scenes, God shaping hearts, directing kings and overcoming the opposition against the work He wanted done. It was accomplished with the help of our God. Here's what Nehemiah did. You can see in the pink area, the area of Jerusalem we think at that time where the wall was built. And then, just to give you some concept of how that compares to today, the green line represents the time of, or the city of Jerusalem I should say in the time of Christ. So that just gives you a little bit of a feel for how things occurred in the building.

So the wall's complete, but in chapters 7 through 10 of Nehemiah, you have the rebuilding or the reviving of the people. The theme here is God directs His people through His Word. Chapter 8, I wish we had time and we will at some point go to chapter 8, it is a powerful lesson on the importance of God's Word. In chapter 8, verse 1, on October 8 of 445 BC, all the people gather and in verse 7, Ezra reads from the law of God and explains it from daybreak until noon, and the people weep, but Ezra-Nehemiah call for a celebration. So, they gather the next day to study, and they discover the Festival of Booths, the Feast of Booths. And they immediately realize that they haven't done that, and they respond in obedience. As you read that account, you'll see phrases like this: "as it is written" and "according to the ordinance." You don't have to be a rocket scientist to get the point—the people of God responding to the Word of God, obeying the Bible as it's discovered.

So in chapter 9, you have the people's prayer of confession, and it is one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture. I encourage you to read it, we don't have time to do that, but in their confession, you see these two themes showing up again and again. They say to God, "You have constantly shown Your grace and power to us, and we in return have refused to keep Your law." That's what it comes down to. They got it! After seventy years of captivity, they understood. So after their prayer in chapter 10, the people covenant in writing to obedience, especially in the areas where their disloyalty to God has been most flagrant, and that's intermarriage with the people around, keeping the Sabbath which they had not done—in fact that was the reason you

remember, for the seventy years of captivity, one year for each of the Sabbath years that had not been kept—and providing for the temple service. So they promised to do those things.

In chapters 11 and 12 of Nehemiah, the city of Jerusalem itself is repopulated now that the walls had been rebuilt. The walls themselves are dedicated, and then there's a great celebration. Then there's another one of those gaps. Between chapters 12 and 13 of Nehemiah, there is a time gap of roughly fourteen years. And Nehemiah returned to Babylon for a short time as he had promised to do. When he returns in chapter 13 for his second term, he finds that the people have disobeyed in the very areas that just fourteen years before, they had signed a written covenant to keep. Well in the midst of that, God does raise up one more prophet, the writer of the last book of our Old Testament, Malachi. And Malachi calls the people to repent of these sins and to prepare for the coming of the Lord, which of course would occur some four hundred years later in the person of Jesus Christ.

Remarkable history of the Old Testament, let me draw it practically together for you, the message of Ezra-Nehemiah and of this period of Israel's history, I love this period of Israel's history. The reason is because it is more like our times than the rest of the Old Testament. God isn't doing miracles today, there are no plagues. Instead, our God is working by providence and obedience to His Word. He's working behind the scenes to accomplish His purpose just as He does in Ezra-Nehemiah. And He's commanding His people to live in obedience to the Book. God directs us, listen carefully, the message of Ezra-Nehemiah to them and to us is that God directs His people by His providence and simple obedience to His Word. You want to know what to do? God's providence will pave the way for you, and you obey the Scripture. That's all you need to know, you don't need a miracle in your life. You need to do what God has commanded. And that reality, the fact that God directs us like that, is supposed to provide help and comfort. Help is the meaning of Ezra's name, and comfort is the meaning of Nehemiah's name.

You ever get discouraged? Do you look at the miracles of Scripture and then look at your own life and wonder where is God? Why isn't He parting the Red Sea for me? Be comforted, God's

work in Ezra and Nehemiah and in our lives is no less amazing than the miracles, in fact I would say in some ways it's more astonishing. It takes far more for God to work behind the scenes accomplishing His purpose than for Him to intervene in a dramatic miracle; it's just harder to trace His hand. The God of Israel is at work in your life using His Word and His providence to accomplish His purpose. And what should your response be to that? Trust His providence, trust the good hand of God in your life and obey His Word. That's the concluding message of the other testament. Next week we'll look at the message as a whole of the Old Testament together, and that'll be our last week in this series. Let's pray together.

Father, we do thank you so much for these precious accounts from the pens of Ezra-Nehemiah that give to us a record of how you work dramatically in their lives behind the scenes in providence, directing, moving in ways that couldn't be seen, only the results, and commanding Your people not to look for signs in the sky, but simply to be people of the Book.

Father, I pray that you would make us individually and as a church people like that. Help us to live as those who know that You govern all things to accomplish Your purpose; that while we see no miracles, You are at work and the hand of God is accomplishing all of Your perfect will in our lives and in our world. And Father, help us as well to be people who are righteous people, may we walk in the way of the righteous, the Bible. May we be people of the Book. Father, we thank you for these powerful lessons to us. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.