

## The Message of History

by Ray C. Stedman

Our survey of the Bible brings us now to the historical books of the Old Testament. If you are not reading these books as we go along, you are missing tremendous truth which, if you grasp it, will deliver you from many weaknesses and failures that you may find present in your life right now. That is the purpose of truth – to set us free. In this survey so far, we have seen the great purpose of all revelation, of the book that God has given us, and of the Holy Spirit, in whose power we understand and enter into this truth. All of this has been given to us through the intermediacy of about forty authors, writing over a span of some sixteen hundred years, and preserved at the cost of blood, sweat and tears in order that we – you and I – might be brought to maturity in Jesus Christ. It took all of that to do it.

Maturity is the reflection, in my life and yours, of the image and character of Jesus Christ – that is, as Paul prayed in Ephesians, that we may be bodies filled and flooded with God himself, and therefore, as Paul put it in Philippians, shining as lights in the midst of a generation of crooks and perverts. This is the purpose of revelation – to mature us, to bring us to full-grown stature in Jesus Christ, so that we are no longer children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine that blows, and led into all kinds of false ideas; but instead, we walk straight and sure down the path of truth, with our heads held high as men, women, sons, and daughters of God who know where they are going, where they have come from, and why they are here.

We have seen that the particular part the Old Testament contributes to this is preparation, while the part the New Testament contributes is realization. You cannot realize what God has for you without the preparation of heart which the Old Testament provides. I am absolutely convinced of this. I am positive that those Christians who believe they can get all of their spiritual strength and

help out of the New Testament, at the price of neglecting the Old, will discover that, though they may assimilate the truth of the New Testament in the head, it will never reach the heart. The mind may be full of the doctrinal content of the New Testament, but the life remains utterly untransformed. This is because there has not been adequate preparation for it by the assimilation of Old Testament truth.

In our last study we began to see, in our survey, how each of the Old Testament's divisions contributes to this work of preparation. We looked at the first five books, the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses – which we saw were God's pattern of working in the human life. Over and over again, in the Scriptures and in life, you will find repeated the pattern which the Pentateuch sets forth. Do you remember what it is?

- Genesis is the book which constantly stresses the deep-seated need of human life – man in his helplessness, in his weakness, in his overwhelming need for God.
- Exodus follows as the book of redemption, where God lays hold of us. The key to this book is ownership. We become his – as Paul expresses it: “You are not your own; you were bought with a price,” {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}.
- Leviticus is the book of access to God, of instruction in how to worship. Worship is nothing more than laying hold of God. We don't worship when we simply bow our heads and let some kind of pious thoughts run vagrantly through our minds. We worship when we lay hold of what God is. Though it may seem dry reading, when we begin to analyze it, Leviticus opens up as a great book which gives us tremendous lessons in the life of worship.

- Numbers is the book of weakness and failure, of wandering in the wilderness. The wilderness is the experience of attempting to carry out the worship of Leviticus in the strength of the flesh, the effort of the natural heart. The result is wandering.
- Deuteronomy comes in as the second giving of the Law, which prepares us to recognize our helplessness and makes us ready for entering the Land of Promise, ready for victory.

This brings us to the historical books – Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. We will see now how these books contribute to the preparatory work of the Old Testament. If the Pentateuch is the section which gives us the pattern of God's working, then the historical books give us the perils which confront us when we try to walk in the life of faith. This is their purpose.

If you stop to think about it a minute, this is what history is for, isn't it? History is the story of man. I know there are those who say that history is "his story," meaning Christ's story; but that is true only in a secondary sense. Christ is in history; however, he is behind the scenes.

I love those words of James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold  
wrong forever on the throne,  
But God is standing in the shadows  
keeping watch above his own.

That is the relationship of God to history. He is behind the scenes. But history primarily is the story of man's cycle of failure, a continual sequence of the rise and fall of one empire after another – one civilization after another struggling through defeat or bondage to the place of victory and triumph and material blessing and prosperity, and to a wide extension of the empire. But then forces begin to eat away and cause the empire or nation to deteriorate and dissolve and crumble and at last collapse. If you read any great historian, such as Arnold Toynbee, you find he points out cycle after cycle of failure in history.

In these historical books of the Bible we find all of the lessons which we can read in secular history – condensed, as it were. These books trace the

history of one nation, a peculiar nation, a nation with a special ministry – a representative nation, if you like. Though it is good to read secular history – I enjoy reading it myself – nevertheless, if you want to know what history can teach you, you will find it all condensed in these historical books of the Old Testament. Here we have history visualized in one nation: Israel. What happens to them is a picture of all the perils which will ever oppress men anywhere. But more than that, the picture is a special illustration of the perils and pressures and problems which come upon the believer, the Christian, as he attempts to walk the life of faith. It is very important to know your enemies. Do you know who they are, and do you know in what form they come to you? It would simply be absurd to send a submarine against an army entrenched in the mountains, wouldn't it? Well, it is equally absurd for a Christian to try to employ any randomly chosen spiritual weapon against one of the powers of darkness for which that weapon is not designed. We must know our enemies. This is where these historical books become of great value to us. They present to us the perils which beset the life of faith, and the means of victory over them.

The first of the historical books is **Joshua**. It begins with a story of victory – the entrance of Israel into the Land of Promise, the place where God intended them to be all along when he brought them out of Egypt. Who of us has not yet discovered that the Christian life is not only a question of being brought out of, but of entering into, as well? The problem is that many of us are quite content to be brought out of Egypt – the world and all its ways – but we never quite get around to entering into the Land. We have faith enough to be brought out of Egypt, but somewhere we falter and fail to lay hold of that faith which takes us over the Jordan and into the Land of Promise. But, in the book of Joshua, Israel is now entering into the Land. This book is a story of great triumph and victory. It is a book which traces for us the experience of conquest.

What was the first enemy which faced Israel as they came across the Jordan River? It was the imposing city of Jericho, with its tremendous walls – about one hundred feet high and thirty feet thick – a super-fortress of a city, an impregnable barrier. It might have been the first city any of them had ever encountered. As they looked at it, they saw their

own feebleness and that of their weapons, and they said, "How can we ever take a walled city like this?"

Have you ever felt like that? Has there been anything in your life which has seemed to you to be an insuperable obstacle – something you have struggled with, and it has mocked you and baffled you and defeated you for years – something you have seen looming there in all its invincibility, and nothing you are able to do seems to have any effect upon it? Well, that is your Jericho.

What did God do? It is perhaps the most amazing story in all literature. I am not a military man, but I am sure that no military man in his right mind would ever devise a strategy like this: Set his troops to marching silently around a walled city once a day for six days; on the seventh day, have them go around seven times, with seven trumpets blowing; then, after the seventh time, have the people shout – and the wall will collapse! But many a Christian has discovered, where he begins to lay hold of the truth of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ – which is what entering into the land signifies – that many obstacles which once were a problem suddenly disappear. They simply aren't there. Their walls have totally collapsed. There is immediate victory. Jericho is a picture of the world in its assault upon the Christian, and of the victory over the world which is available in Jesus Christ.

The Jericho story is followed immediately by the story of Ai. Ai was an insignificant little town. Nobody thought anything of it. It just a little village, a little 'wide spot in the road.' Joshua reasoned, "Why waste an entire army on a little place like that?" So he dispatched only a few men. But they came back defeated. Joshua went before the Lord and found that there was sin in the camp. When that was taken care of, then there was victory over Ai. Ai is a picture of the flesh – its subtlety, its seeming insignificance. We think we can control our tempers and our lusts and our evil thoughts if we just set our minds to it. But we discover it isn't that easy.

Ai is followed by the battle of Gibeon, the story of deceit. Joshua and all the hosts of Israel were deceived by a handful of Gibeonites, who disguised themselves in old clothes and took moldy bread and pretended to have come from a long way off. They made a pact with Joshua that he would protect them. Then the Israelites discovered that the Gibeonites were from the city right over the next

hill! This represents the wiles and the deceitfulness of Satan.

So if you cannot find the perils of your life in the book of Joshua, there is something seriously wrong. They are all there. But the kernel of the book is set forth for us in Chapter 13, Verse 1. Each of these historical books has a peculiar peril all its own which it is designed to describe for us. But not only does it set forth the peril, but right along with it is the manifestation of at least one individual who is given victory over that peril. In the book of Joshua it is the man Joshua himself. Here is his peril:

**Now Joshua was old and advanced in years; and the Lord said to him, "You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to be possessed." {Josh 13:1 RSV}**

This was the problem with Joshua. This book is a picture of the believer who understands Christ's indwelling life. Once that concept is internalized, any believer can immediately experience victory over Satan. It is a glorious and marvelous experience. But somewhere along the line there is an incomplete victory. We decide to settle down. We are enjoying life. It is so much better than it ever was before. So we say, "Why go on any further? I know that there are areas of my life which I have not yet conquered in the name of Christ; but I have conquered so much, Lord. Let me just enjoy this awhile." The peril here is the temptation to premature contentment, to an incomplete conquest, to a readiness to settle down where we are and stop the pilgrim march.

Have you experienced this? It is always the first attack of the enemy in times of victory and conquest. But Jesus said,

**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." {Matt 5:6 RSV}**

This hunger and thirst must mark all our life. We are never to get over it. Then we are always on the march. At the close of the book you find Joshua saying to the people of Israel, "There is very much land yet to be possessed," and he urges them to do it. He warns them about some of the attitudes which were already beginning to possess

them. Then he says to them, in Chapter 24, Verse 15:

**“choose this day whom you will serve.” ...  
“but as for me and my house, we will serve  
the Lord.” {Josh 24:15 RSV}**

There was never a letdown in Joshua's life, never a willingness to stop the march. He was on the march until the day of his death. He never quit. This is the shining of grace, the breaking through of light into darkness, in the book of Joshua.

Now we come to the books of **Judges** and **Ruth**. We will take them together, because the events of Ruth are contemporary with the first half of Judges. The book of Joshua covers a period of about twenty-five years. Judges covers a period of about three hundred years. The book of Judges is the story of a continually repeated cycle of defeat – of decline, discipline, and then deliverance. Over and over again God sent judges to the people of Israel to deliver them from persecution and bondage into which they had fallen and under which they suffered for many weary, painful years.

The book begins with the story of Othniel, the first judge God sent, and ends with the familiar story of Samson, the last judge. There were seven judges altogether whom God used to deliver the people. But over and over again, no sooner had he set the people back on their feet than they began again to fail.

Now, why did they fail? What is the peril of Judges? You will find it stated in Chapter 2, Verses 11-13:

**And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were round about them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They forsook the Lord, and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. {Josh 2:11-13 RSV}**

Idolatry! Why? How did they ever get into this mess so quickly after the tremendous victories of Joshua? How do people suddenly fall from the height of a victorious experience into moral degra-

dation? You find the key to the book in the very last verse. It is the key to this kind of experience in your own life:

**In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. {Judg 21:25 RSV}**

The story of Judges is the peril of what we might call “consecrated blundering.” It wasn't that these people did not want to do right. It was that they simply were deluded. They did what was right – it doesn't say they did what was wrong – they did what was right in their own eyes. But they didn't know what was right. This is the terrible peril of dedicated ignorance.

I must honestly say that I know of no peril from which God's people suffer more today than this. I find many Christians weak and stumbling, ineffective and defeated, because they are suffering from dedicated ignorance. There is nothing wrong with their dedication. They mean well. Time after time I have sat with young people and older people alike as they have told me terrible stories of agony and anguish and despair, and they have said: “I don't know what happened. I started out intending to do right. I thought I was; but something went wrong. I always ended up wrong.” They did not expose themselves to truth.

And, for this same reason, throughout the period of the judges there was a repeated cycle of failure and defeat and, finally, deliverance for awhile by God's grace; but then the cycle began all over again.

In the midst of this story of failure and defeat – and the last chapters of Judges are probably the darkest, most terrible picture of sexual depravity in all the history of Israel, arrived at by a repeated cycle of moral failure – right in the midst of this, there shines the wonderful little story of Ruth. In the book of Ruth you have a picture of faithfulness in the midst of defeat, you have the story of this heathen woman who heard the voice of God – heard the story of grace in a far country – and left all her friends and home and family, cleaved to Naomi, her mother in law, and returned with her to Israel. And there, in a beautiful story of romance – one of the most delightful stories in all the Bible – this young, lovely widow met a rich young bachelor, and they were married. It is a story that tears at your heartstrings as you read it:

When Ruth left her home and all her friends, she manifested a willingness to walk with God despite all the defeat and failure in the land around her. These words of Ruth to Naomi are perhaps the most beautiful ever uttered by any woman anywhere (Chapter 1, Verses 16-17):

**“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.” {Ruth 1:16-17 RSV}**

I always have the bride say those words to the groom when I conduct wedding services. It is such a marvelous expression of faithfulness.

Then we come to the book of **1 Samuel**. This is largely the story of two men – Samuel and Saul. In the latter part of the book, the early history of David is interwoven into the story of King Saul. Samuel was the greatest judge Israel ever had. His ministry lasted some forty years. During this time the people were still hungering after something other than God. The great peril of faith which is set forth in this book is given to us in Chapter 8, Verse 5. One day the people of Israel came to Samuel and said,

**“Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” {1 Sam 8:5 RSV}**

Now, the trouble with this is that God had called this nation to be unlike all other nations. Here they were hungering to be like them, and particularly to have some kind of authority other than God.

Do you recognize this peril? It is what we can call ‘the peril of legalistic conformity,’ the desire for outward rule over life – one of the most devastating perils of all in the spiritual life. We soon find that the freedom and liberty we have in Christ means that we must continually be exercising judgments, making decisions, evaluating circumstances.

You know, I find lots of people who don't want to do that! They don't like the freedom God gives

us in Christ. They come to me and say, “Don't tell me all these principles by which to determine what I should do. Just give me a rule. That is what I want. If I just had a rule, then I'd do that, and that ought to satisfy God.” But a life lived under rules is always a life lived in bondage.

This is the story of the life of the nation during Samuel's time. As a result, God allowed the people to choose a king. They chose Saul.

The story of Saul is one of the great tragedies of the Bible. He was a man of great promise, a handsome man with great abilities. But the story of this man's life is the peril of seeking the favor of man. The defeat of Saul came about as a result of his expedition against the Amalekites. He was told by God to kill all the Amalekites. But he refused and saved King Agag. Why did he do it? Because he felt this would find him favor in the eyes of the people. So the awful tragedy of Saul's life was the peril of a divided allegiance. He was quite content to serve God so long as it pleased those around him. The secret failure in this man's life was his continual hungering after the affection and honor and favor of other people.

Have you ever discovered this in your life? It is a peril which will defeat you ultimately and bring the same tragic end which Saul finally came to – his kingdom was taken from him, his crown taken from his head. He lost everything but his own personal relationship to God.

In the midst of this somberness, the light breaks through in the story of David and Jonathan – that marvelous story of the greatest friendship in all of history.

Next comes **2 Samuel**, and with it we will link **1 Chronicles**, because these two books cover the same chronological era. 1 Chronicles, though it covers the same events, by and large, as 2 Samuel, nevertheless gives us a slightly different viewpoint of them. It is well worth reading it right along with 2 Samuel because it gives you a closer insight into the inner story, the story of David in his kingship over Judah and Israel.

There is no more wonderful story in all of the Old Testament than the story of David. What a mighty man of God he was, a man after God's own heart! What unflinching faith is continually evident in this man growing up as a boy, the battle with Goliath, living in the court of King Saul at the risk of his life, involved in all kinds of intrigues and

fascinating episodes, the beautiful story of his friendship with Jonathan, and finally being made king, first over Judah for seven years and then over Israel and Judah together for thirty-three more years, a reign of forty years altogether – for the most part, a mighty reign.

However, there is an ugly side to the story of David. There came into his life a weakness which resulted, as we know, in the terrible moral fall of this man. He became guilty of the sins of adultery and murder. It is almost incomprehensible to think of David, God's own man, as guilty of these terrible things. Well, how did it start? That is what we always want to seek to understand if we want insight into the nature of sin. Where does it begin? You will find the clue in 2 Samuel, Chapter 11, Verse 1:

**In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; ... But David remained at Jerusalem. {2 Sam 11:1 RSV}**

In this verse we have hinted strongly for us the peril of a forgotten calling. The result was indulging in the lusts of the flesh. David was the king of Israel and Judah. It was his business to be at the head of the army. That is where he belonged. But he forgot his calling. He was resting when he had no need for rest. He was staying home and enjoying himself while the others went into battle. That was the beginning of the end; for, while he was home enjoying himself, he went up upon the housetop and, looking over into his neighbor's yard, saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. It did to him what such a sight does to any normal male – he was filled with lust. But he indulged his passion and took her. In order to cover up that sin, he had to murder her husband. So the terrible fall of David occurred. And it all began by the subtle pressure of the peril of a forgotten calling and the indulgence of the flesh.

The gleam of grace in this story is David's repentance. And that is why it can still be said of David, despite his double fall, that he was a man after God's own heart, because the minute he was faced with his sin he admitted it and repented, and he accepted the grace of God. There is no more wonderful picture of a contrite heart than that of David, down on his face before God, crying out his

sorrow and repentance over his sin as he realized what had happened. Out of that experience came the 52nd Psalm, which is such a marvelous expression of a heart which is truly repentant.

Then we come to **1 Kings** and the first part of **2 Chronicles**, which again we can link together because they cover the same general period. This is the story of two men, by and large, Solomon and Jeroboam, the rival to Solomon's son Rehoboam. Jeroboam became king of the northern kingdom, Israel. This is the account of the division of the kingdom between Judah and Israel.

The story of Solomon is fascinating. What a wonderful inheritance this man stepped into as he was crowned king even before his father David's death! He came into the kingdom at the height of its glory, and God gave him riches and power. At the beginning of his reign, as a young man, Solomon chose wisdom rather than anything for himself. God gave him wisdom. He was the author of the sublimely wise book of Proverbs, as well as the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

Along with his wisdom, God gave him power, magnificence, riches in abundance. But his misappropriation of these was the seed of Solomon's downfall. In the third chapter of 1 Kings find the beginning of the story of the peril which brought him failure and defeat (Verses 1-3):

**Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places [pagan religious sites], however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.**

**Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only, he sacrificed and burned incense at the high places. {1 Ki 3:1-3 RSV}**

And as we trace the account through, we find in Chapter 6, Verse 38, that Solomon was seven years in building the Temple. But then the first verse of Chapter 7 says that he “was building his own house thirteen years,” {1 Ki 7:1b RSV}. Doesn't that strike you as strange? Seven years building the Temple, but thirteen years lavishing magnificence upon his own house! You can see the

beginning of the self-centered life and the peril of a love of things. The downfall of Solomon was the peril of material magnificence. The end of the story comes in Chapter 11, Verses 1-3:

**Now King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods"; Solomon clung these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. {1 Ki 11:1-3 RSV}**

And that is the story of the downfall of the wisest man who ever lived – the peril of material magnificence; a heart wooed away from the Lord by a love of things; spiritual strength shorn by giving himself to possessions.

The rest of the book is the story of Jeroboam, the rebellion he fomented, and the beginning of the kingdom of Israel. The peril set forth in Jeroboam's life is that of a substitute faith: Chapter 12, Verses 26-28:

**And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David; if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah. So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought up out of the land of Egypt." {1 Ki 12:26-28 RSV}**

What is the peril of a substitute faith? Religious deceit.

Not long ago at a women's meeting I spoke on the incarnation, the virgin birth, and the glory of the babe in Bethlehem who was God himself, manifest in the flesh. At the close of the meeting a woman bustled right up to me. She was one of those ladies whom Harry Ironside used to call 'a female dreadnought.' She came running up under

full power, and said to me, "Did I understand you to say that the baby of Bethlehem was God?" I said, "Yes, exactly so." "Oh," she said, "I can't believe anything like that! God is everywhere. God is vast and infinite. He fills the universe. How could he be a baby in Bethlehem?" I said, "That is the glory of the mystery – the mystery of godliness – that God was manifest in the flesh." "Oh," she said, "I don't understand! I can't accept anything like that." I said, "You know, there was a time when one of his own disciples took the Lord Jesus by the feet, and said to him, 'My Lord and my God.' Now, do you know more about him than his disciples did?" She said, "I was raised a Christian Scientist, and I was taught that God is in all universe, and I can't accept this idea." I said, "My dear lady, then you have been taught what the Bible does not teach. You have been taught a false faith." She turned on her heels and walked away.

This the peril which is deluding and destroying the faith of thousands and millions today. All over this country I run into stories of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and members of many other such delusive cults following right along in Jeroboam's sin, succumbing to the pressure of a substitute faith of false gods with Christian names. How many have been destroyed by that? But right in the midst of all of this here comes shining out, by the grace of God, the story of a man who lived and walked untainted by these pressures – Elijah the prophet.

Now we come to **2 Kings** and the latter part of **2 Chronicles**. These portions of Scripture also link together chronologically. Here we have the rapid-fire story, over and over again, of the downfall of one king after another, usually murdered by someone who has a hungering for the throne, government by assassination, with which we have become somewhat familiar in recent days in our own country. The story of the nation of Israel, the ten tribes which constituted the northern kingdom, is that of moral abandonment, the peril of a nation which gives itself up to what it supposes is liberty.

Do you know anyone suffering from that? Have you ever said to yourself, "Oh, I am tired of these afflictions of the Christian life! If I could just do what I want and I go where I please and say what I like and abandon myself to the pursuit of pleasure, then I would be happy." Well, read the result in 2 Kings, Chapter 17, Verses 16-17:

**And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah [an idol], and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination, and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. {2 Ki 17:16-17 RSV}**

This is the same condition which Paul characterizes in Romans 1: Men who knew God refused to acknowledge him or give thanks; so God gave them up, gave them up, gave them up – three times over – to the most dissolute depraved moral practices. This is the story of moral abandonment – of flinging aside all the bonds, kicking over the traces, living life as you please. And the result is the removal of every restraint of godliness and goodness in the life. It is moral disaster. It happened here in Israel, and the rest of 2 Kings is the story of Israel, followed by the captivity of Judah, the southern kingdom, the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The downfall of Judah is the story of the peril of the hardened heart – of a nation which was warned by the downfall of the northern kingdom, but refused to heed that warning and became indifferent to the warnings of God; so they failed. Chapter 21 gives us the story in Verses 10-14:

**And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations, and has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab [i.e. Israel, the northern kingdom. God says he will do to Judah as he did to Israel.] and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they would become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies," {2 Ki 21:10-14 RSV}**

Why? Because they succumbed to the terrible pressure of a hardened heart, of indifference to the warnings of God. But in the midst of the book is the beautiful story of Hezekiah and Josiah kings of Judah – one who cleansed the Temple and one who found again the book of the Law.

This brings us to the last books of history – **Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther** – which we will take as a unit. They are the story of the nation in captivity – deteriorated, fallen apart at the seams morally, carried away at last into bondage. But, while they are in bondage, God begins to work. And, at last, after the seventy years' captivity, Ezra is raised up to lead a group back into the desolate land of Palestine to begin rebuilding the Temple.

The book of Ezra is the story of a discouraged people, along with a reluctance to leave captivity. Imagine that! A reluctance to leave Babylon. Only a handful could be persuaded to go. The rest were so blinded that they decided to stay in captivity, and they drifted off and lost themselves among the nations of the world. We call them "the ten lost tribes of Israel." No one knows where they are, or who they are. They are completely lost. But those who were willing to go back found all the promises of God waiting for them when they returned to the land.

The peril of these three books together is that of a discouraged heart. Sometimes we get into this frame of mind, don't we? We say, "What's the use? I might just as well quit. I might as well throw it all in and just stay where I am. I know I am not victorious. I know I am not walking with God. I know I am getting nowhere. I might just as well quit and stay this way." Well, this is the awful pressure which comes upon us in that state. But the story of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther is the story of the triumph of faith in the midst of that circumstance. A remnant finally returned and began to build the second Temple.

Then Nehemiah comes along, and his book is the story of the determined opposition and harassment of everybody else trying to keep these people from coming back into the grace and glory of God. When we are in defeat, we discover that every obstacle will be put in our path to keep us from coming back to God. But the book of Esther is the story of the victory of God in the midst of even impossible circumstances. God watches over his own and delivers them. And the shining of the grace in

these three books is seen in the personal lives of these three people – Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. All three manifested the triumph of faith in the midst of defeated circumstances.

Now, in your own life do you recognize any of the perils narrated in these twelve historical books? Are you struggling against any of these forces? Then I suggest that you mark the peril you are particularly up against, take the pertinent book, read it on your knees, and pray it through, asking God to speak to you and show you the way of deliverance in the midst of that kind of defeat.

That is the purpose of all these historical books – that we might know the pressures which are upon us and the way by which God can take us through. May these twelve books be a blessing to you.

### Prayer

We thank you, our Heavenly Father, for the magnificent book you have given us, a book carefully prepared and revealed to men in a magnificent way, so that we might know the truth and be able to walk in the glory and power of a life of triumph and victory in the midst of defeat and despair and failure. Lord, save us from these perils. Grant that we may walk in such a way as to be continually pleasing in your sight, as was the Lord Jesus himself; for we pray in his name, Amen.

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