



Foundations

Study Booklet #4

I, II Kings, I, II Chronicles, Ezra / Nehemiah
And Esther

The Books of I and II Kings

Chapter 1

Kings and Prophets

As we leave the books of Samuel, we enter the books of 1 and 2 Kings. While we study these books, pay attention to two themes: (1) how God accommodated Israel in the midst of terrible apostasy and backsliding, and (2) God's patience in dealing with some of their corrupt kings. These themes will serve as sturdy grips as you ascend the heights and descend into the depths of these remarkable kingdom books of Hebrew history.

An Overview of the Kings and Kingdoms

The books of 1 and 2 Kings tell us about the kingdom of man that resulted from Israel not wanting God to be their king. In 1 Kings, we learn about the division of that human kingdom. In 2 Kings, we encounter the details of their sad captivities.

We will find many warnings in the books of Kings, because most of these kings were wicked. The consequences for the people were terrible, but remember, God was not responsible for all those consequences. The people were responsible because they wanted those kings - and the kings were responsible for their own wickedness.

The importance and significance of these two books is that they record the division, collapse, and captivity of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. We might call 1 and 2 Kings "The Rise and Fall of the Hebrew Nation." Second Kings 17 describes the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom, the ten tribes that made up Israel. They marched in chains to Assyria, and we hear no more about them in Scripture. They are often called "the lost tribes of Israel".

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In 2 Kings 25, we read about the awful captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The captives who were not massacred were carried off to Babylon when Jerusalem fell. Seventy years later Persia conquered Babylon. Cyrus the Great, the Persian emperor, was moved by Almighty God to decree that any of the Hebrew captives living in Persia were free to go back to Israel and rebuild their temple, their city, their country, and their broken lives.

Historically, next come the "post-captivity historical books." Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther will tell us about the return of some of the children of Israel from the Babylonian captivity. The book of Esther will describe some things that happened in Media-Persia among the children of Israel who chose not to return. When we finish surveying Esther, we will have concluded our study of the History Books of the Old Testament.

Meet the Prophets

All of the prophets who wrote the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament will fit somewhere into the historical context of the History Books. We will meet these prophets "up close and personal" after we have completed our survey of the Poetry Books of the Old Testament.

So, What is a Prophet?

Let us consider what a prophet was. The word prophet literally means "to speak for God." It is a compound word: pro, which means, "to stand before", and phano, which means "to make shine". That is what these prophets did. The prophets preached the written Word of God (the books of Moses). They also got new revelations from God. In addition, they "forth-told", told forth or proclaimed the Word of God. This means they were preachers. At other times, they foretold the future. This

foretelling usually fascinates us, but a prophet primarily preached God's Word. Prophets stood between God's Word and God's people and they made God's Word shine for God's people. Their ministry was often confrontational, because the people constantly strayed from the Lord and God needed to rebuke them through His faithful prophets.

In 1 Kings, the central prophet is Elijah, while in 2 Kings it is Elijah's successor, Elisha. Although we will emphasize these two prophets as we survey the books of Kings, I want to make sure you do not miss some of the lesser-known prophets. In I Kings 22 you will meet one of my favorites, Micaiah.

When the kingdom was divided, the kings still sometimes got together, although most of the time they were enemies. Remember, all the kings in the northern kingdom were wicked and apostate. The southern kingdom of Judah had a good king every now and then. None were as good as David, but some of those kings were godly kings, such as Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah.

In 1 Kings 22, the king of Israel, Ahab, and the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, came together for a summit meeting. Ahab was very wicked, while Jehoshaphat was a mixture of both good and bad. What were they doing together? They had the same grandchildren because their children had married. But the main reason they were together was that Ahab wanted Jehoshaphat's help in battle against Syria.

Jehoshaphat responded to Ahab's proposal by wanting to first check with the prophets. At this time in history, it was an established tradition to check every move they were about to make with the prophets. Ahab said, "You want prophets? I will give you prophets. I have 400 of them - prophets of Baal and every other prominent deity." All those false prophets

encouraged Ahab to fight and promised success. But Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from a true prophet of the one true God, Yahweh.

Reluctantly, Ahab said, "There is still one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the LORD; but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."

(8) Jehoshaphat said, "Go get him." So Ahab sent a messenger for Micaiah.

When the messenger was riding back to the palace with Micaiah, he told the prophet to be agreeable and match his prophecy to that of the other prophets. But Micaiah said, "I will say what God tells me to say!" (14)

When Micaiah was brought before the two kings in Ahab's palace with all their ceremony and splendor, Ahab said, "Well, Micaiah? Shall we go fight the Syrians?" And Micaiah said, "Absolutely! Go right ahead! You will have a great victory!" Ahab was shocked and asked, "Are you telling me the true Word of the Lord, Micaiah?" And Micaiah replied, "If you really want to know, I saw Israel scattered all over the hills like slaughtered sheep without a shepherd." Ahab said, "See, did I not tell you? He never says anything good! It is always bad!" (15-18)

Ahab and Jehoshaphat, however, decided to go into battle against the Syrians anyway. But Micaiah told them plainly that they were following lies: "I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth- Gilead?' ... Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The LORD said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And He said, 'You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.'" (19-22)

Ahab ordered Micaiah to be jailed and fed only bread and water until he came back. To which the prophet replied, "If you ever return in peace, the Lord has not spoken by me" (28). Ahab and Jehoshaphat led their armies against the Syrians. We can assume that Micaiah died eating bread and water in a dungeon, because Ahab did not come back.

In the middle of the battle, Micaiah's prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. The armies of Ahab and Jehoshaphat were scattered all over the hillside like slaughtered sheep. A Syrian soldier shot an arrow at random and hit the one place where Ahab's armor was vulnerable. He bled to death, and the armies returned home, defeated.

There are many unnamed, unknown prophets in the books of Kings. For example, in I Kings 13, an unnamed prophet confronted the wicked king Jeroboam. Jeroboam pointed his finger at this prophet and said, "Arrest him!" But his arm froze in that position! The king then begged the prophet, "Please talk to God about my arm!" So the prophet obliged Jeroboam, bringing God's presence into the life of this rebellious king through a supernatural healing.

As you read about these godly prophets, notice that they all had the supernatural power of God working for them. Without God's supernatural miracles, these prophets could not have confronted those wicked kings.

As I have already observed, Elijah is the great prophet we meet in 1 Kings. In I Kings 18, Elijah had his shining hour. The people of God in both kingdoms were almost wholly turned away from God to pagan idols. There were many false prophets who represented false Gods. Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Queen Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, to a contest. Each side would build an altar, place a sacrifice on it, and then pray that their God would send down fire and consume the sacrifice.

When God responded with fire and supernaturally consumed their sacrifice that would be their irrefutable credential as the true prophets of the true God.

With all the people gathered on Mount Carmel, the false prophets of Baal prayed fervently and even cut and whipped themselves to get Baal's attention. Around noon, Elijah began to ridicule them: "You'll have to shout louder than that to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!" (27) They prayed more and more frantically until evening. Finally, they gave up.

Then Elijah dug a ditch around his altar and soaked the sacrifice as well as the wood with water. Then he prayed a great prayer of faith: "Oh LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Oh LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, Oh LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." (I Kings 18:36-37)

Immediately, fire came down from heaven, cremating the sacrifice and evaporating all the water in the ditch. Then the people fell on their faces and cried, "The LORD - he is God! The LORD - he is God!" (39) What a mighty revival! Then the people of God slew all those 450 false prophets. That day on Mount Carmel was Elijah's shining hour.

You almost won't recognize Elijah in the next chapter. Ahab's wife Jezebel, who introduced Baal worship to Israel, was furious about Elijah's downfall of her prophets. So she threatened to kill him. (19:2) The formerly fearless Elijah fled to the wilderness, sat down exhausted under a juniper tree, and prayed to die. He was absolutely dejected and defeated.

One of Elijah's problems was physical exhaustion. In fact, a good title for I Kings 19 would be: "How to become physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted." "Gently and patiently, God gave His prophet very practical help. He told Elijah to sleep, and He sent an angel to give His prophet nourishment. Then God came to him and asked a beautiful question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (9, 13)

Has God ever asked you that question? I do not know where you are spiritually. It may be that God would like to ask you, through the story of Elijah, "What are you doing here? Are you really where God wants you to be?"

Let me remind you again that you should look for examples and warnings in the books of Kings. In these books, you will find awesome warnings especially in the lives of the wicked kings. And you will also find great examples in the lives of those godly prophets, especially prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah.

Chapter 2

The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom

As we read 1 and 2 Kings, we are learning about the rise and fall of the kingdom the children of Israel wanted. That Hebrew kingdom reached its zenith in terms of pomp and glory when Solomon reigned. But it did not last long, because it was a result of God's permissive, rather than His directive will.

In 1 Kings, we read a description of how the kingdom was divided. In 2 Kings, we read about how the northern and southern kingdoms collapsed. The northern kingdom, Israel, was

swept away by Assyria; and the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered by and exiled into Babylon.

When you carefully study the fall of the southern kingdom, you will see that the conquest and exile was not simple. Jerusalem actually fell three times over a period of twenty years. The first time, Jehoakim surrendered the city and served the king of Babylon there for three years. Later he rebelled against the occupation forces of the Babylonians, and they had to conquer the city a second time. The second fall of Jerusalem came when Jehoakim's son Jehoachin surrendered the city, and many of the children of Israel were massacred. Those who survived were taken in chains to Babylon. The Babylonians then appointed Zedekiah as a puppet king over Jerusalem. That arrangement lasted for ten years. But then Zedekiah also rebelled, so the city had to be conquered for a third time. That was Jerusalem's final fall - the entire city was destroyed and burned to the ground.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let us go back to the glory days, under the united kingdoms most splendid, wealthy king, Solomon. He will provide us with both an example to follow and a warning to avoid.

The Mixed Legacy of Solomon

Solomon was very much like Saul in the sense that he had a good beginning but did not end well. At first, when David charged Solomon with the responsibility of being the third king of Israel, it appeared that he would follow in his father's footsteps. Humbly, he asked the Lord for wisdom to lead His people. (1 Kings 3) God was deeply moved by his prayer and answered by giving him unparalleled wisdom, riches, and honor.

Solomon did become the richest and wisest man who ever lived. He is a great example when he asks God for wisdom and

when he put that request before God first rather than riches or personal gain. Yet, for all of that, he became perhaps the greatest failure who ever lived. Remember: the division, collapse, and captivity of the kingdom was not a result of David's sin. David confessed his sin, and God forgave him. All the calamity that fell upon this kingdom was because of Solomon's sin and was a consequence of Solomon's failure.

When the united kingdom of Israel reached its peak of glory, Solomon turned away from God. Solomon's seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines worshiped other gods, and tragically, he followed their lead.

I do believe that Solomon came back to the Lord, though. In Psalm 127, a psalm Solomon wrote, he said, "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain." (1) Solomon was a great builder, not only constructing the temple but also cities, parks, and ships. In his Psalm, however, I think he is giving us a lesson in priorities. The message of Solomon here is this: "It is possible to be very focused in vain; you can work very hard in vain, and it is possible to build in vain because it is possible to be focused, to work and build the wrong things. Experience is not the only teacher, but it is a very convincing teacher. Benefit from my experience. The most important thing you will ever build in your lifetime is the life of your child."

Solomon's children did not turn out well. The son who followed him to the throne was a fool. Solomon obviously regretted spending so much time building everything under the sun except the lives of his children. Psalm 127 shows us that Solomon's priorities were tragically out of focus throughout his active adult life.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes Solomon gives an expanded version of his message in the Psalm referenced above. Ecclesiastes was a sermon Solomon preached to the young men who

were his subjects in the kingdom he ruled as king. That sermon and his Psalm give us two reasons to believe that he experienced a spiritual comeback in his last years on earth.

A third reason why I believe Solomon came back to God is that when this period of history is repeated in 2 Chronicles, not only is David's sin omitted but so is Solomon's. That means Solomon, like his father, must have confessed and repented of his sin.

Solomon certainly stands on the pages of the Kingdom Literature History Books as one of the great warnings. As you read 1 Kings, Solomon is the primary king upon whom you want to focus for both examples and warnings.

Good, yet Flawed King Hezekiah

Hezekiah was one of Judah's greatest late kings (see 2 Kings 18-20). He rid his country of the idolatry that had taken root, and he trusted and obeyed God. In fact, none of the kings before or after Hezekiah were as close to God as he was. So he provides a good example for us, but he also provides us with another warning.

When Hezekiah was ill, God spoke to him through the prophet Isaiah, telling him to put his affairs in order because he was going to die. (20:1-11) Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, wept, and prayed that God might spare his life. Then we read this beautiful message God sent to Hezekiah through Isaiah: "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears." (5) God sees tears. I think that is very significant. And the Lord added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. That is a beautiful example for us. This man still appealed to God, even though he was told that he would die by the great prophet, Isaiah, who was speaking for the Lord.

However, Hezekiah became a warning in an incident that was related to that miracle. One day some Babylonians visited Hezekiah, and he showed them everything - the armor, the arsenal, and all the treasures. Afterward Isaiah asked him, "What did they see in your palace?" (15) "Everything", Hezekiah answered. Isaiah told him that that was a big mistake, because "the time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD." (17) Isaiah was prophesying the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. According to Isaiah's prophecy, Hezekiah's sons were to be made eunuchs and carried off into Babylon as captives. (18)

What was the king's response? He was content that Isaiah's prophecy meant all these terrible things were not going to happen to him. "Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime? He thought." (19) He casually accepted the Lord's Word because he did believe that his fifteen added years would be good. He didn't seem to care what would happen to his sons and grandsons. Hezekiah's obvious self-centeredness certainly did not make him a model father or a good character study for a sermon on how to be a good father. Because of this attitude, his life is a warning to us who are fathers.

The Excellent Example of Elisha

We have another good example in the life of the prophet Elisha. In 2 Kings 5, the general of the Syrian army came to the prophet for healing. At this time, Syria was getting ready to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel. There were already border skirmishes taking place. They had a mighty army, but their top general, Naaman, was afflicted with leprosy. A captive Hebrew girl, who served Naaman's wife, told the couple

about a prophet in Israel who had the power to heal leprosy. So Naaman went in his chariot with some of his soldiers to the little cottage of Elisha.

Now Naaman had preconceived ideas about how Elisha would perform his healing. The powerful general thought Elisha would be very dramatic. But Elisha did not even come out of his cottage to greet him. Instead, the prophet sent a servant out to Naaman, who told him, "Elisha says you should go to the Jordan River and dip in it seven times. Then you will be healed of your leprosy." (10) Naaman was furious! He turned his chariot around and left Elisha's cottage in a cloud of dust, telling his attendants, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy." (12). His own country had plenty of beautiful rivers, he thought, and he was not willing to go dip in that muddy little Jordan.

Naaman's servants, however, encouraged him to follow Elisha's directions, and he soon changed his mind and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times. When he came up for the seventh time, his leprosy was healed! It didn't happen as he expected, but the results were better than he had ever hoped.

By application, the story of Naaman's healing is a beautiful allegory of salvation. Many who hunger spiritually and come to Christ for salvation have preconceived ideas about how their salvation is going to happen. Some expect salvation to be a theological panacea. Others believe that if salvation is not complicated, it cannot be valid. This is often true of people in the academic community. When they hear the simplicity of the Gospel, they find that it is so uncomplicated they cannot believe it. But the Gospel is that simple, as simple as dipping in the Jordan seven times, and no one needs special intellectual qualifications to receive it. Elisha is an example for us in

that he did not accommodate the expectations of Naaman, even though it would have been very profitable for him to have done so. These are the primary applications of the story of Naaman the leper and Elisha the prophet.

Before we leave these history books that profile the kingdom of God, let us look at the prophets again and make one final observation about them. The prophets were not only men who spoke for God, and men through whom God spoke; they were not only men who stood before the Word of God and made it shine; they were men who were raised up by God when there was a problem. There is a sense in which we could say, "No problem, no prophet." But as soon as a problem surfaces, look for the prophet to appear.

For example, every time the work of God ran into an obstacle, God raised up a prophet. One of the roles of God's prophet was to center his preaching on that obstacle until it had been removed and the work of God could go on again. Removing problems and obstacles that blocked the work of God was the chief role or function of the prophets.

In summary, as you read 1 and 2 Kings, observe the rise and fall of the kingdom. As you learn about this kingdom, you will be able to discern what God wants to do today with His church. Then pay attention to the kings themselves. Most of their lives are warnings for us; a few are examples. Then follow the prophets carefully, because for the most part they will provide godly examples for us to follow.

The literature of 1 and 2 Kings involves a great deal of reading; in a study such as this, we can only make general observations, trying to set these books in perspective so that when you read them, you will get more out of them. So here are a few more observations about Kings.

Some Final Observations about 1 and 2 Kings

First, observe how God accommodated, to a point, the kings He never really wanted the Israelites to have. Observe His great patience with the wicked kings, especially in the Northern Kingdom. See how He patiently pleaded with these kings and warned them before the awful calamities of the captivities fell upon them. Finally, note that God also answered prayer for wicked kings, which raises some interesting theological questions. (2 Kings 13:4-5) Many people believe that God only answers the prayers of believers who are in fellowship with Him. I do not see that in Scripture. God heard the publican's prayer. (Luke 18:10-14) Jesus heard the prayer of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:42,43), and God heard the prayers of these wicked kings. Today if a wicked man's son has been injured in an accident, if that man asks God to spare his son's life, can God hear and answer that prayer? I believe God can hear anybody's prayer, anytime! That truth is illustrated for us in these books of Kings.

Chapter 3

The Chronicles "Things Omitted"

Overview of 1 and 2 Chronicles

The books of Samuel and Kings cover the same period of history as the books that follow them, 1 and 2 Chronicles - 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. The older groupings of the Old Testament books placed Chronicles with Ezra and Nehemiah; the Hebrew of Chronicles is so strikingly similar to these books that many scholars believe Ezra wrote all three books. Only later were

the books of Chronicles grouped with Samuel and Kings for their similar time frame.

Reasons for Repetition

Why does God cover this period of history twice? There are several answers. First, repetition is the essence of education. "If you don't repeat, you don't teach." So say the educators. Second, in Scripture, repetition is not only for teaching purposes but also for emphasis. Observe the things that are repeated in Scripture. The creation account is given twice in Genesis. The Law of Moses given in Exodus is repeated in Deuteronomy. The biography of Jesus Christ is repeated four times in the New Testament. And this period of Hebrew history in these kingdom literature history books is repeated in The Chronicles.

Precisely what is being emphasized in the Chronicles? Obviously, the answer to that question is: The Kingdom of God. Jesus said The Kingdom of God should be our top priority and prayer petition and it is the end to which the new birth is the means. (Matthew 6:33; John 3:3,5) So, our introduction to this Kingdom of God concept we read about in the kingdom literature is very important. God wants us to understand the concept that He is King, and He wants us to be subjects in His kingdom today. That is why God repeats this period of history.

A third reason for this repetition by design is that God wants us to understand that His people rejected Him as their king and that we are still living with the consequences of that rejection. God also wants us to understand this rejection because it pictures the hard reality that we can also reject God as our King today.

The Times and the Seasons

When the Southern Kingdom was carried off captive into Babylon, a new era was born called "the times of the Gentiles". God wanted to have a theocracy where He would be the King and the people would be His subjects. But when the children of Israel rejected that arrangement, God said, "All right then, you are going to be dispersed among Gentiles," meaning non-Jewish people, nonbelievers, "and you are going to be ruled by Gentiles." Starting with the Babylonian captivity, God did not work through kings like David, who would do all His will, but kings like Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus the Great, who were pagan kings. These kingdom history books tell us that God's plans are not impossible to implement because His people are ruled by pagan Kings. He continues to accomplish His plans through them. And God's plans are not impossible to implement when we reject Him as our King.

In "the times of the Gentiles", God's Kingdom is within individual believers who make God their King. They live among unbelieving people and, for the most part, under the rule of unbelievers. They are scattered like salt among unbelievers to flavor the earth. This does not mean that the nation in which these kingdom people live is Christian or godly. Ever since the Hebrew people rejected that arrangement God very much wanted (a theocracy), there has never been a nation on earth ruled by God. There is no such thing as a Christian nation. The Kingdom of God is experienced in individual hearts. (Luke 17:9,10)

The fourth reason for the repetition in Chronicles is that the whole story had not been told. Ezra believed that the authors of Samuel and Kings gave us a history of that period from the human perspective and that someone should give God's perspective. That is why he wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Things Omitted

Despite the repeated history, the books differ greatly. We can find a clue to the differences in the Septuagint's insightful name for Chronicles, which was: "Things Omitted." This title means that some things were omitted when this period of history was written in Samuel and Kings and that some things which filled many pages in Samuel and Kings, like the sins of David and Solomon, are omitted in the Chronicles.

The omission of David's sin is good news. By application, it means that our sins will be omitted when we come before God because we trusted Jesus Christ for our salvation. For the same reason, Solomon's sin is also one of the beautiful omissions in Ezra's Chronicles.

Today, when an event is televised, several cameras are used to provide several perspectives of that event. There is a sense in which the books of Samuel and Kings report this period of Hebrew history through the human camera and The Chronicles report this period of history through God's camera. As we might expect, some of the "Things Omitted" in The Chronicles are awesome. For instance, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was completely wicked, is never mentioned after the division of the kingdom. Why? Because, Chronicles emphasizes the lineage or house of David and his tribe of Judah. David's lineage is in focus so much in The Chronicles because the Messiah would come through his descendants.

Also, Chronicles spotlights the kings who were instrumental in bringing about revival, restoration, and reformation. Some kings in the southern kingdom of Judah, like Asaph, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah, were instrumental in bringing about good things. The wicked or do-nothing kings (all the kings of the northern kingdom) are not even mentioned.

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Josiah, for example, arranged for the temple to be repaired. During this process, Hilkiah the priest found some scrolls of Scripture. The people had become so decadent and apostate that they had completely forgotten about God's Law. The scrolls were then read to King Josiah, who realized immediately that God's commandments were not being obeyed, and he brought the nation back in agreement with God's Word (see 2 Chronicles 34).

The Chronicles, in a sense, provide an interpretation or commentary on the books of Kings. That is why in the Kings we are consistently told to "consult the Chronicles, consult the Chronicles", because the Author of Kings (the Holy Spirit) wants us to get the divine perspective on a particular king or event.

Consider David. The explanation Chronicles gives for David's political success is that he was blessed in order to give joy to God's people. Chronicles shows us the tremendous contribution David made to the worship of the nation. In 1 Chronicles 15 and 23, beautiful passages tell us how David organized the choirs and the musicians. He had a large orchestra and a choir of Levites, four thousand of them. David's contribution to worship is emphasized in Chronicles even though it is omitted in the books of Samuel because God is telling us what our worship means from His perspective.

Also in Chronicles, we are given an explanation as to why David was not permitted to build a house for God. It was because he was a warrior and had shed too much blood (1 Chronicles 22:8-9). It is The Chronicles that explains why a good king like Jehoshaphat allied himself with wicked King Ahab - they had the same grandchildren because their children had married. (2 Chronicles 18:1)

A Prayer for Revival

One of the most important verses in Chronicles is 2 Chronicles 7:14:

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Here we have a word from the temple to the palace, from the religious life to the political life of the nation, a covenant God offered His people. God is saying, "I am ready to forgive, I am ready to heal. But before I forgive and heal, there are some paths of righteousness in which I want My people to walk." I believe this is a verse all of us should take to heart - first, individually, and then we can apply it nationally.

The key to understanding and approaching the distinctions and repetition of this period of Hebrew history in the Chronicles is this: God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts. There is as much difference between the way God thinks and does things, and the way we think and do things, as the heavens are high above the earth (Isaiah 55:8-9). If you want to get the divine perspective, if you want to align the way you think and do things with the way God thinks and does things, read the Chronicles. You will discover a tremendous message in values and perspective.

"Things Omitted" is a very good title for the books of Chronicles. It is good news when we discover that our sins can be omitted by God, even as the sins of Solomon and David are omitted in Chronicles. It is also an awesome challenge when we realize that God omitted that northern kingdom. God never mentioned the northern kingdom because the citizens of that northern kingdom were not called according to God's purposes. It is a sobering thought to imagine that our entire existence is

being ignored by God today and will be ignored in eternity because we never aligned our thoughts, our ways and our lives with the will and the ways of God.

I pray that your comparison of the books of Chronicles with the books of Samuel and Kings will challenge you to compare God's perspective with human perspective, not only on this period of history, but also in the period of history in which we live today and your own personal social history.

Chapter 4

The Synoptic Gospels of the Old Testament

In this chapter, we will begin by briefly surveying the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which, along with Esther, are known as the post-captivity history books. The Babylonian captivity was a dividing line in Hebrew history. In fact, when we study the Prophets later on, we will discover that the prophets are classified as pre-captivity, in-captivity, or post-captivity prophets. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther record that period of history that took place after the captivity had ended in which the post-captivity prophets wrote, preached, lived and died.

The Return from the Babylonian Captivity

As you begin reading Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, you need to understand that the return from the Babylonian captivity came in at least three dimensions. The first return happened soon after Cyrus the Great made it possible. Governor Zerubbabel and high priest Jeshua led that return around 537 B.C. That first return was for the specific purpose of rebuilding the temple.

Soon after that work had begun, those who had returned were distracted by opposition and persecution, and they stopped building until the prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged them to finish what they had started. Largely due to the ministries of these two prophets, the work was resumed, and the temple restoration was completed in 516 B.C., twenty-one years after it was started.

In 458 B.C., Ezra led the second return. This extraordinary priest and scribe was a great teacher of Scripture. Ezra brought a dynamic ministry to the rebuilt temple. That happened seventy-nine years after the first return and fifty-eight years after the rebuilding of the temple had been completed.

Thirteen years after Ezra's return, Nehemiah led a third return. His purpose was to rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem. The prophet Malachi was involved with Nehemiah in the rebuilding of the wall.

The Synonymous Content of Ezra and Nehemiah

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah have been called "the Synoptic Gospels of the Old Testament" because so much of the content of the two books is synonymous. Let us look at some of their similarities:

- Because the Hebrew of both books is so similar they may have the same author, Ezra.
- The central theme of both books is the same event in Hebrew history: the return from the Babylonian Captivity. The central theme of both books is also the work of God when both men lived: the work of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

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- They both emphasize the patterns and principles that must be followed if a human work is to be a work of God.
- Both books give us great models for leadership. Though different in leadership styles and gifts, they were both great leaders. Ezra was a priest and scribe, teaching God's Word. Ezra's work was primarily pastoral. Nehemiah, a layman, was a pragmatic, practical builder.
- They both led anointed revivals that were obviously the work of God.
- Their books have similar outlines: the first chapters of each record the work to be done; and after it is done, the people fall away from the Lord. Also, Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 show both leaders grieving over the people's behavior with prayers of confession, sorrow, and repentance.
- Both books have a pagan emperor granting permission, showing sympathy, and offering assistance so that God's work might be accomplished through His people.
- Both books end on an encouraging spiritually optimistic note. .

Unique Lessons from Ezra

Though the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are similar, they do have their distinctive qualities. Let us get better acquainted with Ezra.

As I focus the book of Ezra, I would like to concentrate on the man. Ezra should be classified with the great men like Moses, Samuel, and David. His whole ministry was to bring about a revival of interest in the Word of God.

In Ezra 7:10, we read, "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." That verse outlines his life, dividing

it into three periods. The first third of Ezra's life was preparation for the other two thirds of his life. He gave his heart to learning and knowing God's Word, studying it diligently. In the second third, he devoted himself to living the Word of God, applying what it said. In the third period of his life, Ezra devoted himself completely to teaching the Word of God and mentoring others in God's ways.

That is a beautiful way to spend your life. I think one of the problems with teaching today is that we have people who prepare and teach, but they can only teach theory. They cannot draw from a reservoir of experience. The best teacher is the person who has spent the second third of his life practicing what he learned in the first third of his life. After experience, the final third of his life could be profitably spent teaching.

As you consider Ezra's contribution to God's work, you can see why he is in a class with David, Samuel, and Moses. As I already mentioned, Ezra is considered to be the author of the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and he also wrote the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, which has 176 verses. That one psalm is longer than many other books of the Bible. In those 176 verses, every verse but two mentions the Scriptures. That shows you something of how devoted this man Ezra was to the Lord's Word.

Traditionally, scholars believe that while Ezra was in captivity and could not function as a priest in the temple, he founded what is known today as the synagogue, which is the equivalent of our modern Sunday school. Scholars also believe that Ezra played a leading role in organizing the Old Testament in its present form. In addition to these contributions, he led the second return from the Babylonian captivity. It was Ezra who put a dynamic teaching ministry in the temple, which had

been rebuilt prior to the return he led. He brought quite a staff of priests and scribes who taught the Word of God with him after that return.

Principles and Patterns for a Work of God

Ezra's book also gives us lessons concerning the work of God - principles that are also patterns for God's work. The first principle is this: When there is a work of God to be done, God, Himself, will be the prime mover of that work (compare Romans 11:36). God is the Source of that work, the Power behind that work, and His glory is the purpose for that work. I believe that is the way Ezra prioritized his life's work, based on the first verses of his book.

The second principle we learn from Ezra is this: When God, the Prime Mover, wants to accomplish His work through people, He will give clear guidance to the human agents who will accomplish that work for Him.

Third: The God who is the Prime Mover and Who gives clear guidance will provide everything needed to see that His work is accomplished. This is a very important principle, which is stated many times in Scripture. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus told His disciples, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." When we know what God wants us to do, and when we do what is right in His eyes, He will provide everything we need to accomplish His work.

A fourth principle is this: When God wants to accomplish a work, He will not only barely provide but provide exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask, or even think to ask (see Ephesians 3:20). In Ezra's work or ministry, those who returned barely had enough to accomplish their work; they had more than they needed to rebuild that temple.

Fifth: When you are doing the work of God, expect Satan to oppose God's best with what seems good. Our Enemy will try to distract us from doing our best work for God by whispering, "Only accomplish something good, but do not try to accomplish God's best plan for your life."

We will consider this fifth principle in more detail, as well as some additional ones, in our next chapter.

Chapter 5

Forces Opposing God's Work

The fifth principle we considered in Ezra was this: When we set out to do God's work, a power of evil in this world will oppose us. We need to study the strategies of Satan in more depth in order to understand what Ezra and the returning Jews had to face.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us to understand Satan's strategies. (see 2 Corinthians 2:11; 10:3-5; 11:13-15) Satan is deceitful. He likes to imitate and deceive. He knows that the greatest enemy of the best is the good. When God is working through you, you will experience God's best. Satan does not want you to experience God's best. Since Satan is very clever, he knows that he cannot successfully distract you from doing God's best by tempting you to rob banks. What he will do is tempt you to do something else that is good. If you live in a wealthy, comfortable place and God's best is for you to be a medical missionary where there is no medical help for people, Satan will tempt you to be a good doctor in your nice, comfortable place. That would be a good goal for your life, but

it is less than best if God wants you to be a medical missionary to the needy in a difficult place.

A sixth principle Ezra profiles for us is closely related to the previous one: Always expect opposition when you attempt to do the work of God. Sometimes when people set out to do God's work, as soon as they run into opposition they doubt God's direction or their understanding of His will. They mistakenly believe that there will be no opposition if they are doing God's work. That is simply not true! God works through people, and so does Satan. Since Satan is opposed to everything Jesus Christ is doing, we should expect opposition when Christ is working through us. Sometimes people who oppose you do not realize they are the ambassadors of Satan (compare Mark 8:27-33).

The book of Ezra tells us that opposition will come from two directions. First, there will be the obvious opposition from without. There will always be people on earth who will not wish us well when we set out to do God's work. For example, when the exiles went back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, the local residents tried to discourage and frighten them. They sent messages to King Artaxerxes that were filled with lies. And God's people were forced to stop building. (Ezra 4) Also, the book of Nehemiah says that when they were building the wall, they had their trowels in one hand and their weapons in the other. (Nehemiah 4:17) In a sense, opposition from without is easier to manage because that opposition is obvious - it is out there where we can see it and fight it.

The second kind of opposition comes from within. When the exiles returned to rebuild the temple, the pagan peoples who were then living in Jerusalem and Judea approached Zerubbabel and Jeshua and said, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since

the days of king Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here." (Ezra 4:2) But Zerubbabel and Jeshua replied, "You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord." (3) Zerubbabel and Jeshua established a principle regarding God's work: it must be done by God's people. Here is another way of stating this:

***It is the plan of God
to use the power of God
in the people of God
to accomplish the purposes of God
according to the plan of God.***

An authentic work of God should be done by the people of God. Unbelievers have no part in it. I believe one of the weaknesses of the church today comes from the fact it is a mixed multitude of believers and nonbelievers. Many churches want to recruit community leaders, people with prestige, money, and name recognition, to lead in the church - whether they are believers or not. But the work of God must be done by God's people, not by just anybody who wants to be a part of it because it is good business or socially acceptable. Imagine a person in a profession where it is necessary to know a lot of people (a dentist, for example who does not believe in Christ but who needs to meet families with children). He might want to become a Sunday school superintendent in the big church in town because he wants to meet these families. That would be the easiest thing in the world to do because the average church on the corner would be delighted to have him. Yet that would also violate this principle we learn from Ezra regarding the work of God.

Principle seven is this: The God Who is the Prime Mover, Who gives clear guidance, and Who provides everything needed for His work, will overcome any opposition to His work. This

beautiful principle should encourage and bring hope to the Lord's servants all over the world who are faithfully battling opposition.

The same God of Ezra and Nehemiah is as capable of overcoming opposition to His work today as He was in their day. (Consider Ezra 6:6-8) A message had been sent to King Artaxerxes, saying that the Jews were a rebellious people who had a history of rebelling and that they should not be allowed to rebuild their temple (4:11-16). But when a later king, Darius, dug into the chronicles, he discovered that Cyrus had in fact issued a decree and supplied materials so the temple could be rebuilt. He then wrote:

"Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site.

Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God:

The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury." (6:7-8)

God overcame that opposition. His will and His work were done.

Principle number eight is this: As God does His work through His people, pagan onlookers will be saved as they watch God work. When people see God work through us, and they know we are only earthen vessels who could not possibly accomplish this work on our own, they begin to realize that it is a work of God. They begin to understand that God is the prime mover, source, and power behind all the things His people are doing.

This is how people are saved when they observe the work of God. In Ezra 6:21-22, we read that some of the heathen people who had been relocated in Judah turned from their immoral customs and joined in worshiping the Lord God when all the Jews

ate the Passover feast. This is different from unbelievers wanting to be involved in the work of God but not being born again. When pagan people are saved, they belong to the people of God and have become the people through whom God wants to do His work in this world.

We now come to principle nine: All who are involved in the leadership of God's work will find the work of God revealed in the Word of God. Here Ezra becomes our example. Ezra had determined in his heart to study the Word of God, to obey the Word of God, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments that are revealed in the Word of God. He knew what the work of God was because he knew the Word of God. And the work God had for Ezra was to put a dynamic teaching ministry in that rebuilt temple.

The tenth principle is a very realistic one: When God's work has been accomplished, God often permits His human agents to fail so that it might be obvious to all that the power was coming from God alone. In both Ezra and Nehemiah, after the great work of God was accomplished, the people fell away. The people of God got caught up in the horrible customs of the heathen people who lived in that land. This is a sad and solemn pattern in the lives of many great men and works of God. It may be that God wants to show us and the whole world that it was He Who was the source of our work and not the human vehicles of His work.

There is another reason why this often happens, and it has to do with Satan. Principle eleven: When God has worked through a person to accomplish His work, Satan likes to discredit the human vessel God used to do that work.

These are some principles about God's work that we learn from the Book of Ezra. In summary, and for emphasis I repeat that Ezra is telling us this: ***It is the plan of God to use the***

power of God in the people of God to accomplish the purposes of God according to the plan of God.

Are you one of God's people? Are you aware that you are a vehicle of God's power? Do you know that the purpose of God's power in you is that His work might be accomplished through you, according to His plan?

Chapter 6

The Profile of a Leader

Where the book of Ezra shows us principles for making sure our work for God will be the work of God, the Book of Nehemiah focuses on the kind of leader, the kind of human being, God must find if He is going to do His work through people. Nehemiah himself is the example of that leader.

When Nehemiah was the governor the people needed a revival. Many Jews had intermarried with the pagan people around them, which was in direct violation of God's Law. Listen to Nehemiah's rebuke: "About the same time I realized that some of the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab, and that many of their children spoke in the language of Ashdod and couldn't speak the language of Judah at all. So I argued with these parents and cursed them and punched a few of them and knocked them around and pulled out their hair; and they vowed before God that they would not let their children intermarry with non-Jews." (Nehemiah 13:23-25)

You can see that Nehemiah had a different style of leadership! Not many pastors lead that way, but Nehemiah did because that is what God's people needed then.

We could say that Ezra wrote or made the plans for God's work, while Nehemiah was the builder who actually did the work of God that was assigned to both of them. The word for Nehemiah is pragmatic. He believed in getting out there and seeing that the work of God got done. These men are both superb models of leadership, even though they are very different.

As we approach the book of Nehemiah, we should look for the principles of leadership, or the attributes God found in him to do His work. I call the book of Nehemiah "Profile of a Leader for the Work of God."

The first characteristic Nehemiah displayed was this: **a burden for the work God wants to do.** One of the first signs that God is about to do a work through you is that you feel a great burden for that work. If you feel that burden and are praying about it, God might want you to be part of the answer to your prayer.

A second character trait is this: the person to lead God's work must have had **a word from God concerning that work.** In Nehemiah 1:9, Nehemiah remembered God's Word to Moses: "If you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name." That place was Jerusalem. God wanted Nehemiah to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.

A third characteristic is **a commitment to the work God wants to accomplish.** The man or woman God finds to lead His work must not only have a burden and a word from the Lord but also a commitment to the Lord about completing God's work. Nehemiah's commitment to God's work shows in the risk he took as cupbearer to the king. It was a law in Media-Persia that if you were sad or negative in the presence of the king, you would be killed. Yet in the Nehemiah 2, we read that the king asked

Nehemiah, "Why does your face look so sad?" (2) Nehemiah tells us that he was frightened and prayed silently but told the king what was on his heart anyway: "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" (3). The Lord was with Nehemiah because the king asked, "What is it you want?" (4) Saying a quick prayer, Nehemiah told him that he would like to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild that wall (5). The king not only agreed to grant his request but gave him all the supplies he needed. God blessed Nehemiah for his commitment to God's work.

A fourth character trait is **a vision for the work of God**. "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18) The leader of God's work must have a vision and must share it. When Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem, he privately inspected the city's condition until he had all the information he needed. Then he met with the priests, nobles, and officials, telling them, "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem." (17) When he knew exactly what he wanted to do, he told others.

A fifth character trait is **involving others in the work**. When a leader who has a vision from God shares his vision, the people of God will follow his leadership. Sometimes, spiritual leaders despair that God's people will not follow them. But they and we should realize that a lack of "those willing to follow" makes a negative statement about our leadership, because one of the attributes of God's leader is the ability to motivate people to follow them in doing God's work.

A sixth character trait of an authentic, anointed leader is **having critics**. When you start to do something, especially God's work, you can expect opposition and criticism - even from godly, spiritual people. Nehemiah certainly had the confirmation of critics (4:1-3).

A seventh character trait is **a prayer life centered on the work of God**. Observe the number of times Nehemiah tells us that he prayed. Nehemiah prayed when people mocked and laughed at him (4:4-5). And he prayed before he spoke to the king (2:4). He shows us what it means to apply the exhortation of the Apostle Paul, "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

An eighth character trait of God's leader is **being with the people as they do God's work**. Nehemiah was on that wall right along with everybody else.

A ninth character trait is **a righteous indignation toward the opposition and obstacles to God's work**. What is the difference between righteous indignation and anger? If you are angry because something or someone has blocked your way and you are determined to have your own way, that anger is a sin. But if you are doing the Lord's work and are angry with all the powers of hell that are blocking the Lord's way, then your anger is righteous indignation. For example, when Jesus saw that the religious establishment had turned the house of God into a marketplace and a den of thieves, He expressed righteous indignation. (see John 2:12-16) A leader of God's work can become very angry in the sense of righteous indignation when that work is being opposed. And Nehemiah was that kind of leader.

A tenth character trait is **a great dedication to the work of God**. Consider these verses from Nehemiah 4:

"We continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, 'Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day.' Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water." (21-23) That is a good

illustration of being dedicated to the work of God.

An eleventh character trait, strangely enough, is **having tunnel vision**. Tunnel vision can be negative or positive. It becomes negative when we stubbornly refuse to listen to reason. But it is positive when it will not allow us to become distracted from doing God's work. They could not get Nehemiah off that wall he was building. Many people tried in all kinds of ways to trick him into coming down, but they could not distract him from his objective for he had focused vision on the work of God.

A twelfth character trait is **having strong convictions**. In chapter 5, when Nehemiah realizes that some of the people are exploiting their brothers by charging them interest, he forces them to agree not to defraud their fellow Jews (1-13). Nehemiah was a man with strong convictions.

A thirteenth character trait is **great confidence**. Nehemiah knew he was doing a great work and was absolutely certain God had called him to it. This gave Nehemiah an unquenchable confidence as he did the work God had commissioned him to do.

A fourteenth character trait is **fearless courage**. Courage is obviously an important characteristic of the profile of the leader God can use.

A fifteenth character trait is **perseverance**. In Romans 5, the Apostle Paul sheds light on how perseverance is developed: "We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (3-5) Perseverance means staying with something and not giving up - even in suffering, we endure.

Character trait sixteen is **having organizational skills**. Scripture prescribes a definite structure for doing God's work

in the church. (compare 1 Corinthians 12:28, specifically the gift of administrations) In Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah appointed Levites, commanders, and guards. He also registered the people by families. That is being organized!

A seventeenth character trait is **focusing on a priority target**. Observe the priorities of Nehemiah in chapter 10. He got the people to agree that they would not let their children intermarry, that they would not work on the Sabbath, and that they would not work the land every seventh year. He insisted that they charge themselves a temple tax, give the first part of every crop to God, and give the firstborn of their children and livestock to God. The people of God promised Nehemiah that they would give God a tenth of everything. Nehemiah knew what his priorities were, and he led the people to agree with his priorities.

An eighteenth character trait is **leading with a shepherd's rod**. Like a good shepherd, the leader uses the shepherd's rod to guide and discipline God's people. Like a good parent, a leader must love his people enough to discipline them.

A nineteenth character trait is that a leader is **in touch with his humanity**. The leader is human and knows it. He is not only in touch with his own humanity; He is in touch with the humanity of the people he leads.

Finally, Nehemiah shows us the twentieth character trait of God's leader, which is **finishing the work God has assigned to him to the glory of God**. Nehemiah finished that wall to the Glory of God! We should never lose sight of the finish line as we attempt the work that God wants to do through us. God's leader is a person who can say with Jesus, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work You have given Me to do. ... It is finished." (Read: John 17:4; 19:30)

Chapter 7

Guess Who is Coming to Dinner!

The Old Testament records four major deliverances of God's people. The first comes through Joseph, who saves the Hebrew people from famine and starvation. The second is the Exodus - Israel's rescue from Egyptian slavery and tyranny. The third is the Jews' return from the Babylonian captivity. The fourth deliverance is recorded in the Book of Esther.

The books of Ruth and Esther record stories of women with beautiful characters who made great contributions to God's work. Ruth tells about a Gentile woman who married a Jew and became part of the messianic line. Esther tells the story of a Hebrew woman who married a Gentile and saved the Jewish people from genocide, preserving that messianic line. Since the Book of Esther reads more like a drama, I will present my survey of the Book of Esther as if it were a play.

Act 1

The Plans of People

Scene 1: A Persian Party

It is 482 B.C., and the setting for this Persian party is the 127 provinces of Media-Persia, which comprise the Persian Empire. The central character is a queen who gets fired, Queen Vashti. Her husband is King Xerxes, or Ahasuerus (depending on the Bible translation). This party has lasted about six months and a week, and the liquor has flowed freely. The only restriction observed at this party is that nobody had to drink more than they wanted to drink. (Esther 1:8)

Queen Vashti entertained the women separately. But trouble started when she was summoned by her emperor husband to come and parade her beauty before men who had been drinking for six months and a week. You can understand why she refused. Unfortunately, King Xerxes did not understand at all.

Scene 2: The Termination of Queen Vashti

Xerxes' nobles advised the angry king that Queen Vashti's behavior not only wronged the king but also every other man in the kingdom. Because she disobeyed him, their wives will also disobey and disrespect them. So they urged the king to banish Vashti and find another, more suitable (and docile) queen. Then, when the other wives see what happened to Vashti, they will respect their husbands. (16-20)

King Xerxes and all his aides thought this made good sense, so he followed their counsel and sent letters to all his 127 provinces in all the local languages, stressing that every man should rule his home and assert his authority. (21-22)

Scene 3: A Persian Pageant

To choose a new queen, a beauty pageant was held throughout the empire. This pageant, however, was no ordinary beauty contest: All the most beautiful women in all the land will be brought to the king's harem. Then he will sleep with each one to decide whom he likes best for his new queen. (2:2-4a) Allow me to paraphrase the king's response, "This suggestion naturally pleased the king very much, and he put the plan into immediate effect." (4b)

This beauty contest was really a cruel form of forcing women into the king's harem. The relationship an ancient monarch had with the many women in his harems was not like a husband-wife relationship. An ancient monarch like Artaxerxes

had two harems, which we might call Harem A and Harem B. When these women were actually arrested all over the Persian Empire, they lived in Harem A, where they were given beauty treatments that lasted for a year. Then they were summoned to spend the night with the king. The next morning they were returned to Harem B, where they would live the rest of their lives, seeing the king only if he was pleased and asked for them again. Much of the time, the king was so drunk he would not even remember that a woman had been there. From the monarch's perspective, the purpose of that woman's life was that one night she spent with him that he did not remember.

The next characters we meet are Mordecai, an exiled Jew, and his lovely young cousin, Esther, whom he had raised since the death of her parents. Esther was incredibly beautiful, so she was forced into the king's beauty contest. Mordecai had instructed Esther not to tell anybody that she was Jewish. That secret will prove to be an important expression of the providence of God in Esther's life.

When Esther was summoned to spend her night with Xerxes, he enjoyed her the most and made her queen of Media-Persia. God has now placed a Jewish young woman on the throne of the world's most powerful empire. (Years later, another Artaxerxes, the stepson of Esther, will give Nehemiah permission to go back and rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem.)

One day, when Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, he overheard two men plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Queen Esther, who informed the king. The king's life was saved, and the two conspirators were impaled. Mordecai's good deed was recorded in the chronicles of the king, but the entry was never brought to Xerxes' attention and rewarded. This incident will also prove to be a timely expression of the providence of God in this intriguing story.

Scene 4: A Persian Purge

Here we meet the villain of our drama, a very wicked man named Haman, one of the king's top officials. As he walked down the street, he demanded that everyone bow down to him. Everybody did - except Mordecai, who would not violate the Lord's Commandment to bow down only to Him (see Exodus 20:3-4).

Haman was filled with rage and vowed to destroy not only Mordecai but all of his people. (Esther 3:5-6) He persuaded the king to make a decree that all the Jews in the Persian Empire would be killed on February 28 of the following year (7-11). He and the king cast lots, or rolled dice, to determine this day. In the Persian language, the word meaning "to roll dice" is "Pur". The Jewish Feast of Purim, which is still celebrated today, gets its name from this solemn event that could have meant the total genocide of the Jewish people.

When Mordecai learned about the murderous decree, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city crying with a loud and a bitter wail (4:1). Throughout all the 127 provinces of Media-Persia, all the Jews were mourning, fasting, weeping, and filled with despair.

When Esther heard that Mordecai was wailing and crying out to God in sackcloth, she sent a messenger to find out what was wrong. In reply, Mordecai told the messenger to ask her to intercede with the king on behalf of all the Jews all over the Persian Empire. Esther, in turn, replied that seeing the king without being summoned would result in death, unless he held out his scepter, and she had not been summoned for a month (4:11). Mordecai then gave the messengers a beautiful message to tell Esther: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from

another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." (12-14)

So Esther asked Mordecai to gather the Jews to pray and fast for her, and she would pray and fast too. "When this is done," she told him, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (16)

When Esther went into the presence of the king, Xerxes gladly extended the scepter and promised her that he would grant her request even if it involved half of his kingdom. (5:1-3) She then invited him and Haman to a banquet. There the king again asked her what her request was, but she invited him and Haman to another banquet the next day, where she promised to tell Xerxes what she wanted (6-8).

Haman was delighted about being singled out and invited to have these private dinners alone with the king and queen! But Mordecai's defiance still infuriated him. When he arrived home after the first dinner, he expressed his exasperations and rage toward Mordecai. His friends and family encouraged him to have a gallows built for Mordecai, then go in to work early the next day and ask the king's permission to have him hanged on it. (14) So Haman had the gallows built that night.

Act 2:

The Providence of God

Scene 1: A Sleepless Night

In chapter 6, the providence of God becomes the theme of the Book of Esther. Providentially, that same night after the first dinner with Esther and Haman, the king cannot sleep. He asks that his chronicles be read to him. The one reading his chronicles to him happens to read the entry regarding the way Mordecai had uncovered the assassination plot and saved the

king's life. When the king discovers how Mordecai prevented his assassination, he asks if Mordecai was ever rewarded for this wonderful deed. When he discovers that Mordecai had not been rewarded at all, he asked if anyone had come to work yet. The servant told him that Haman had come in to work early.

Scene 2: The Tables Turned

Wanting to honor Mordecai, Xerxes summons Haman (who was at the court to ask if he could hang Mordecai) and asks, "If you were the king, and you wanted to honor a man, how would you do that?" Haman, of course, thought he was the man the king wanted to honor. So, he suggests a grand plan. "Put that man on your white horse and have your highest official walk before that horse and announce, 'This is the man the king desires to honor!'" (6-9) "Go and do that for Mordecai," the king tells a shocked and humiliated Haman. (10) He obeys, then hurries home, by now afraid, only to be quickly summoned to Esther's second banquet.

At the banquet, the king again asks Esther what her request is. Esther answers that she wants her life and the life of her people to be spared. (7:3-4) The king roars, "Who would dare to try to take your life and the lives of your people?" Esther says, "Haman, who has manipulated you to pass a decree that I and all my people will be exterminated on February 28."

Haman now knows he is doomed. In his rage, Xerxes gets up and walks away from the dinner. Pleading for his life, Haman falls on Esther's couch. When the king returns, he sees Haman on Esther's couch and says, "Will he now rape the queen? What shall I do to such a man?" (8) One of the king's soldiers tells the king about the gallows Haman had constructed to hang Mordecai. The king issues orders that Haman be hanged on that gallows! (9-10)

Scene 3: The Decree for Deliverance

The Jews who live in Persia still have a problem - the decree of their destruction. Since the laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed, Xerxes, Esther, and Mordecai write a second decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves and annihilate their enemies on the 28th of February (Chapter 8). It is now July, and within six months, the king's couriers reach the whole empire with the good news: Here is a decree of life for all of the Jews who are under a decree of death. That decree of life saved the lives of all the Jews.

Personal Applications

What are the devotional applications of this beautiful Book of Esther? First, we need to spread the news of Jesus' decree of life to a world of people who are under a decree of death.

Second, we can rest on the fulfillment of God's promises. Esther pictures the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham to bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him (Genesis 12:3).

Third, the Golden Rule can be applied in reverse. The death of Haman is a negative illustration of the Golden Rule: (Do unto others as you would have them do to you.): "Do not ever do anything to anybody that you would not want them to do to you."

Fourth, God's providential care is over those who love and obey Him. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "Moreover we know that to those who love God, who are called according to his plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good." (Romans 8:28) Even when Esther was forced into that horribly cruel beauty pageant, God was still in control of her life,

working for His good purposes - which turned out to be the fourth major deliverance of the Jews from genocide.

The providence of God in the circumstances of your life and mine is one of the most important messages of Esther. Do you believe that God is sovereign over the circumstances of your life? There is a condition to receiving this promise - if you do not love God and do not follow His purposes and plans, He will not cause all things to work together for good. But if you do love Him, and express your love for Him by being called according to His will and His ways, then you can believe that He will fit whatever happens to you into a plan for good - His good and ultimately your good too.