




Editor's Note

Recently I heard someone describe the year that's coming to a close: "It's in the books." It's an old expression that just means something is coming to an end. However, the closing chapters of both the Old and New Testaments remind us that God also has books (Mal. 3:16; Rev. 22:18). As believers, our names are written in His book. What earthly gifts can compare with that?

But there are other books, records of our

works...whether good or (literally) worthless. As we face a new year, this is a good time to do some evaluation of our use of time and our service for the Lord. May our hearts desire to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord" in the coming year as we await His return. We send out the first issue of 2021 with joyful thanks to the Lord for preserving this little ministry to elders and other servants. 

Biblical Foundations

Introducing the Prophets: Prophets of the Exile

by Robert Spender

Seventy years of captivity were predicted by Jeremiah and affirmed by Daniel as God's plan to purge His people and prepare for the coming Messiah. The exile occurred in stages with the initial deportation of Daniel and friends (605 BC) being followed by the exile of King Jehoiachin, Ezekiel and key citizens (597 BC) and eventually the people of Jerusalem (586 BC).

By sending Daniel and Ezekiel ahead, the Lord prepared the way for His people. Their messages explained the Lord's plan and gave hope to the exiles. In exile the Jews struggled with the loss of the temple and sacrifices but maintained their identity and worship. Key changes took place but their community stabilized providing a solid foundation for the returning remnant. At the same time, the prophet Obadiah provided a Jerusalem perspective with his graphic portrayal of Edom's animosity as a reminder of the Lord's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3)

Ezekiel, prophet of God's glory

Ezekiel was a brave man. As an exilic priest, Ezekiel was called to be a prophet through an amazing vision of the glory of God. Overwhelmed by the vision, Ezekiel was cleansed by God's word to prophesy to the exiles living in the Babylonian suburbs. Initially Ezekiel's message confronted the blatant rebellion of Israel by portraying the destruction of Jerusalem and accentuating God's reason for judgment. This he did through object lessons and parables to such an extent that many viewed the prophet as crazy. Similarly, speaking God's message today may evoke criticism but the Lord encourages believers to endure for Him (Heb. 12:2-3).

Ezekiel's steadfast obedience becomes very clear when we see this priest cutting

his hair, eating unclean food and lying in the dirt in order to reach God's rebellious house. The Lord may ask His people to enter strange places and endure unfavorable circumstances but He desires to use them to open stubborn hearts even today.

Through Ezekiel's messages we see the lengths the Lord was willing to take to bring His people back. Exile meant the destruction of the temple and ceremonial worship but as Ezekiel soon discovered the priestly rituals were a façade since idolatry had become Judah's focus (Ezk. 8:17). As a priest, Ezekiel's visionary trip to the temple should have been uplifting but viewing the idolatry of the priests made it a heart wrenching experience (chs. 8-11). His visions of the Lord's glory leaving Jerusalem in stages illustrated God's longsuffering nature while setting the stage for His return through the Messiah as pictured at the end of the book.

He spoke through sign acts and parables; the Lord at one point silencing his tongue, not even allowing him to mourn the death of his wife. This became a powerful sign, for when the Temple was destroyed the Lord opened his mouth enabling him to speak freely again (33:22). As a watchman, Ezekiel addressed area nations but more harshly critiqued Judah's leaders as false shepherds who ate God's sheep rather than caring for them. So the Lord would remove them to establish a better shepherd from the line of David (34:23), the Good Shepherd of John 10 and inaugurate a new covenant (36:26). Ezekiel reminds us of how important it is for those who lead to follow the Lord in whatever capacity they have been placed (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Ezekiel's closing visions picture the restoration of Israel, the rebuilding of the

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Church elders have work to do; sheep to feed and tend, and they have God-given guidelines to follow. They love the sheep, because they love the Shepherd, so wherever there are humble, caring men at work, things usually work out.

However, in times of crisis, needs multiply and there is bound to be unrest among the people. This is not limited to the world, but can also affect the church. People really are like sheep after all, and sheep quickly show the effects when trouble invades. The Lord Jesus observed this and was “moved with compassion on them because they were faint, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.” (Matt. 9:36). But the elders are charged with shepherding the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2) even in difficult days. Understandably, this requires greater diligence in times of crisis.

While everyone knows this, not everyone has the maturity to “endure hardness.” Questions arise when needs multiply and seem to go unmet. At times, this can lead to bitter grumbling, against the Lord, and against the elders. “Where are the shepherds?” “Why aren’t they doing their job?” It can also raise questions about the Biblical responsibility of elders in shepherding work. That’s not necessarily a bad thing; going back to the Word brings light to those who “are exercised thereby.”

At this point I want to state a couple of disclaimers to avoid misunderstanding. First, there is no deficiency in the Biblical record on the subject. We have everything we need so that the “man of God might be mature and completely equipped for every good work,” (2 Tim. 3:17), and that includes shepherding work. Secondly, different people have different perspectives on what certain verses mean. This is not a judgment but a simple fact of life; people see things differently. They place different degrees of emphasis on things, often influenced by how they are affected personally.

This is not the place for an “in-depth” study of the Biblical responsibility of elders. (See the 5 part series on the subject in Volume 1, issues 3–7 of ESN in the archives.) Rather, our current focus

is simply on how these different perceptions can arise, and how that information can help us be better servants.

Generalizations can be dangerous, but if not pressed too far, they can make a point. One is, that the religious upbringing or background of saints often has a telling affect on their perspectives about church order and government. Believers who were raised in a group that emphasizes the “unofficial” nature of elders; that they are fellow saints “just like me;” that they are also sheep who need the Good Shepherd; that a number of Scriptures locate them “among” us as they work; such folks will likely have a certain perspective on the subject. Very different can be the perspective of believers who were raised (or most familiar with) the conventional arrangement of church government where trained “professionals” are hired and paid to care for “religious duties.” Over the years, in discussing the subject with people from this background, it is not unusual to hear sentiments like this expressed: “OK, so we believe in a plurality...that’s fine, but single or plural is not the question. The question is, are they doing their job?”

Now I am not faulting such a question. Under certain conditions, it can be healthy to take a look at what the elders are doing. But we need to be cautious about those last two words: “their job.” That might simply mean “Are they doing whatever God wants them to do as outlined in the Scriptures,” but it can (and often does) mean “Are they doing whatever needs to be done in the church; that’s their responsibility, right?” And this is where the problem comes in.

A person with this perspective has typically never been exposed to a church setting where the needs and problems of the flock are known by the people, and the normal way of handling them is by asking “What shall we do?” Elders, as experienced men are present and leading from among them, having God’s authority to make sure things move along; that justice is done; that someone will intervene if things start to get off the track. But it does not mean that they will bear all the burdens and solve all the problems as a group. Much less does it mean that

they will keep the saints from even knowing what the issues are.

Some public speakers and authors model the workings of the church after successful business corporations. One such writer of the past made referred to “the beautiful lost Corinthian order,” i.e., an order no longer available. But the simplicity of the functioning of a New Testament church is both beautiful and available; it just needs to be taught and practiced. It will not happen by just letting “nature take its course.”

How shall we handle the discrepancy of perspectives on the shepherding work of elders? Here are some suggestions:

- Perspectives, even if wrong, are often honestly held. It’s good to identify them, and work with those who hold them. To deny them accomplishes nothing. Very often our backgrounds (e.g., emotional family ties and what we are used to) influence our views on any given subject.
- Proper instruction is essential. In the church, this comes formally from the teaching times, and informally through conversations and relationships. Elders should take full advantage of opportunities to reinforce sound doctrine, especially the practical exercise of the priesthood and giftedness of every believer.
- Avoid majoring on minor points, while neglecting the big picture. For example, many details are not recorded about the proceedings at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, but two things are very clear; the leaders were leading, and the involvement of the people of the church is unmistakable throughout.
- Elders should ensure that Bible ministry emphasizes “the equipping of the saints,” (Eph. 4:12), and includes an ongoing education about what local churches seeking to follow the Biblical pattern believe; how those truths work out in practice, and the foundation Scriptures upon which they rest. Those who lead and those who preach can gently draw atten-

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tion to the wisdom of God's plan for the church, even if only in passing.

- Elders should have some knowledge (and if necessary, training) in the basic work and goals of shepherding believers. They are not "professionals," but visiting the saints, providing general Biblical counseling, and displaying skills of clear communication are essential.

- For those coming into fellowship, clear statements about NT church principles can prevent future misunderstandings. We must not assume that people will automatically know we aim to follow Biblical convictions; not "Brethren" traditions, and that imitating conventional church governments is not a goal.

- Elders should be open to hear other viewpoints, be good listeners, humble and teachable, always checking input with the Scriptures. Agreement within the leadership team on a subject is not a proof of correctness, but it offers a compelling step in trustworthiness.



Prophets (continued from page 1)

temple and the return of God's glory to a secure and fruitful land flowing with the healing waters of the Lord (47:12). Once again the dry bones of God's people would be revitalized into a new nation in anticipation of the final kingdom under the Messiah (37:24). Yet future, these visions affirm the Lord's intent to keep His promises. Ezekiel's message transitioned from the reality of exile, to Israel's future to emphasize the sovereignty of the Lord over history and the centrality of His presence with His people both near and far. Throughout the book we see the Lord's desire to dwell with His people and preserve His holiness through the obedience to His word. While Ezekiel's latter visions reveal a time yet to occur for Israel they underscore the necessity of Christ's sacrifice to satisfy the requirements of our holy Lord in moving His plan forward.

Daniel, prophet of God's Sovereignty

The book of Daniel divides nicely into two parts. The first six chapters record Daniel's work with leaders of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires. The next six chapters present visions revealed to Daniel regarding the future of his people, including the rise of Greece and Rome and the coming Messianic kingdom. Although some visions are not chronologically ordered, the basic movement is from Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) to Persia (Cyrus); the background for Daniel's ministry. Daniel and friends were exiles, but focused on a better foundation. Like Abraham who was seeking an eternal city they kept their eyes on a greater horizon.

Daniel's decision to shun the king's food met with success and advancement as did the testing of his compatriots. In

each case they clearly testified to God's sovereignty in a foreign environment. Daniel's ability to interpret dreams and visions placed him in center stage before kings but he never failed to give the glory to God. Throughout this book, it becomes apparent that a key message of Daniel is the sovereign authority of the Lord. Hinted at from the outset, (1:2) this theme reveals a God who can disclose secrets and deliver His servants. Eventually one king from each empire joins Daniel in acclaiming the sovereignty and everlasting dominion of the Lord (4:34 & 6:26). Central to this theme is the coming of the Son of Man who receives an everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days (7:13-14).

But Daniel also spoke of coming troubles linking them to a chronology of 3½ weeks or times (7:25, 9:27 & 12:7) as a period of extreme testing for Israel. Daniel's prayer in chapter 9, at the close of 70 years of exile, set the stage for the greater revelation of 70 weeks (of years) leading to the Messiah who would completely deal with the besetting problem of sin (9:24). The coming trials foreseen by Daniel initially relate to the Greek and Roman empires, but envision a greater time of testing surrounding the abomination of desolation, a future event predicted by Christ (Matt. 24:15). This too is under God's sovereign control. Daniel's message, including his insight into the resurrection (Dan. 12:2-3), ought to provide assurance to believers today during a time of increasing global confusion and govern-

mental perplexity. Knowing that the Lord shows Himself sovereign over every ruler and kingdom affirms the believer's status as a citizen of heaven with a glorious future in view.

Obadiah, prophet of God's justice

Interestingly, the shortest book in the Minor Prophets is one of the most difficult to date. While not in Babylon, Obadiah's description of those fleeing Jerusalem's destruction placed him at the time of Judah's destruction. His focus on Edom during the fall of Jerusalem pictures the perennial enemies of God's people, much like Ezekiel 35. Perhaps the greatest sin of Edom was their pride (Obad. 4), that led to violent crimes against the fleeing Judeans and opened the door to their own destruction (7). Pride causes great blindness so Obadiah's warnings should be heeded by every generation. After enumerating the four sins of Edom, all evidences of false security, the prophet outlined the nation's crimes using thunderous repetition for emphasis (Obad. 10-14).

His closing message expands globally to view the Day of the Lord when opposing nations will be judged and Israel will possess the land (17, 19, 20), a message that parallels Daniel's visions

regarding the coming kingdom. The bitterness of exile represents a necessary stage in God's plan to renew Israel and prepare for the coming Savior. However, believers can rejoice that these prophets not only predicted the sufferings of Christ but "the glories to follow," (1 Peter 1:11).



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Wives' Corner

Discretion by Marti Miller

“As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout,
So is a lovely woman who lacks discretion.” —Prov. 11:22

I have been pondering for some time the best way to encourage women to be mindful of their conduct and how they appear to others. It seems there is a growing need to talk about discretion. How do we encourage young women today in this area?

As a youth I was taught that I should be careful in my conversation, conduct, and character, because all these display what kind of person I am. While I learned these things in my youth, I came to understand from experience what that meant as I became an adult. There were times I acted out of character as a Christian and it brought embarrassment to those who loved me—something which I deeply regret—and yet I am thankful for those who lovingly corrected me and were patient with me.

The word for *discretion* in scripture is sometimes translated as *taste, perception, behavior, advice, judgment*. Such characteristics benefit us, others, and the faith, if we are careful to model them appropriately.

In studying Abigail in Scripture, we read, “she was a woman of good understanding and beautiful appearance” (1 Sam. 25:3). Her understanding served

her well as she had to step into the role of speaking out against her husband’s attitude and behavior, something that we would be wise not to do except in an extreme situation—and hers was that situation! His name was Nabal, meaning *fool*. The verse above also says, “he was harsh and evil in his doings.” His own servants said, “he is such a scoundrel that no one can speak to him” (v. 17). Nabal lacked discretion in his behavior.

Abigail understood his character, words, and actions were not upright and she was compelled to speak out to protect her husband and home from the wrath and destruction of David.

Consider this with me. As a fool, Nabal spoke harshly, did not listen well, slandered others, partied, and became drunk as the story unfolds. These were like a neon sign over his head that said, “I have no idea what is proper in my conduct, character, or conversation, and acting foolish is my choice of lifestyle.” Abigail had to apologize to David for her husband’s lack!

Behavior matters. Becoming a Christian means we are to be like Christ. We are to represent Him to the world around us. As 2 Corinthians 5:20 says, we are His ambassadors. I cannot accurately


represent Him if one moment I am busy cursing and the next, saying that I love Jesus. Am I willing to listen to others, giving considerate thought to what they say? Would a lost person know I belong to Jesus Christ if I were just like them in their way of life and appearance?

We, as older women, are to teach the younger women how to represent the Lord Jesus in our actions and lifestyle. It

seems that humility and modesty in speech and overall appearance are important to the Lord (Rom. 13:14; 1 Tim. 2:9-10; Titus 2:8, 3:2). These things come from a humble sense of what

pleases God and what does not stir up in others a desire for unrighteousness.

Elisabeth Elliot has a quote that I appreciate. She said, “The fact that I am a woman does not make me a different kind of Christian, but the fact that I am a Christian makes me a different kind of woman.” I think that sums up biblical womanhood for Christian women. We are not called to blend with this world; we are called to stand out as children of the living God!

“And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28). 

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THE SMALL PRINT

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Specific Bible versions used are indicated at the first quotation in each article.

Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers” 1 Peter 5:2a NKJV