



Editor's Note

We often hear comments from elders that Bible hour ministry from the Old Testament is less frequent than they would like. This issue marks the conclusion of our series overview of the Old Testament by Dr. Robert Spender (my kid brother Bob!) which began back in July of 2017. I hope you have been enjoying it. Hopefully, it has sparked some ideas for profitable messages for the believers where you labor.

I'm very pleased to say that beginning in September of this year, Lord willing, the overview series will take up the New Testament books by brother Warren Henderson of Montana. Once again we'll alternate issues, with the goal of helping elders feed the flock with "the whole counsel of God." The material presented represents a lifetime of study by these men. I hope you take advantage of the series.



Biblical Foundations

The Postexilic Prophets *by Robert Spender*

The Postexilic Period

The postexilic period began when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BC and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Those who returned initiated the temple construction, which soon stalled due to opposition from surrounding neighbors. To motivate His people, the Lord sent Haggai and Zechariah who encouraged the people to complete the temple. Later, as the New Testament era drew closer, coldness set in and Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament canon, confronted the priests and people about their apathetic ways.

Haggai: Prophet of Priorities

Haggai, a forceful, "in your face" type of prophet, opened with a firm message to the community about completing the temple after years of neglect. The people's reply that the "time has not come" to rebuild reflects their procrastination and shift of focus to their own houses (1:2-4). To gain their attention the Lord sent a drought causing economic hardship. The more they worked the less they earned (1:6). Mercifully, the Lord raised up two prophets to interpret the situation and stimulate people back to work (cp. Heb. 10:24). Haggai challenged them to reexamine their priorities (1:5 & 7) and work on the Lord's house. Amazingly, the people listened and finished the temple. Haggai provides three indications of their faith: obedience, reverence, and diligence (1:12-14).

What a great example for our service for the Lord today! Their faith evidenced the Lord's presence and their work illustrated the outcome of that faith, an important message from this book (1:13, 2:4). However, as work progressed it became apparent that the rebuilt temple could never attain to the beauty of Solomon's temple. Haggai stepped in to assure

the builders that the glory of the second temple would greatly outshine Solomon's temple (2:9). Haggai understood that the true glory of Israel was the Lord, not the place. Little did they realize that the Lord Jesus would walk and teach in the postexilic temple refurbished by Herod. Sadly, the leaders of Jesus' day missed that message. Believers today should be reminded to focus on Christ above the structures that enable our meeting with Him.

Haggai next consulted the priests to make the point that holiness does not rub off but pollution does (2:12-13). Temple work—or any other ministry—matters only if the Lord is in it. The people's obedience would bring blessing from the Lord both physically and spiritually (2:19). In closing, Haggai affirmed the Lord's sovereignty over all nations and identified Zerubbabel, their Davidic governor, as a symbol of His coming authority.

Zechariah, Prophet of Hope

Zechariah was a prophet of hope who chided Israel for their sins while pointing to a greater future based upon God's grace. His book opens with eight night visions of encouragement for the postexilic community. By beginning and ending with angelic earth patrols, these visions illustrate the Lord's sovereignty over all nations, His preparation of Judah's leaders, and the purification of the land. Amid the visions are two vistas of Israel's greater future through the coming messianic Branch who would "remove the iniquity of the land in one day" (3:9) and unite the offices of priest and king (6:13). Zechariah's visions can encourage Christians to examine their environment and present their struggles to the Lord while seeking His help to strengthen their faith.

The next two chapters (7 & 8) focus on

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Before we begin, here is a quick reminder that past issues of ESN have devoted considerable space to the raising up and work of elders, so the emphasis of this series is to help maturing disciples progress from accepting these truths to embracing and defending them.

In the previous issue, we noted that the church is led by a plurality of men called elders. Also called “overseers” (rendered “bishops” in the KJV), they work as a team to feed, lead, and protect the church. This is the unwavering pattern throughout the New Testament, illustrated by Acts 14:23 applying to the early period of Paul’s work, and 1 Tim. 3:1-8 and Phil. 1:1 written many years later. Paul’s view of church leadership does not “evolve” as the church grows! James (5:17) and Peter (1 Pet. 5:1-5) show that the other apostles held the same view. In addition, the word is used of the church in predominantly Jewish areas (Acts 11:29) and in the churches of the Gentile nations (Acts 16:4, 5).

Observe that *two* words describe those who lead in the church, not three. “Pastor” is a spiritual gift, and is never used as a noun to describe church leadership. Elders do “feed” or “shepherd” God’s flock, but as a title, the word is used only of the Lord Jesus (cp. 1 Pet. 2:25, John 10:16). Also, in a more informal, supportive way, leadership in the church may include others as the Lord directs. In the early church there were apostles and prophets (Acts 15:2; 13:1), gifted men (Eph. 4:11) and those we might call “missionaries” (Acts 11:22).

After a brief summary of the work elders do, our three main topics will note that the eldership is a team that cares for one another, that leads from among the people, and that trains others to carry on the work.

How Church Elders Function

A detailed study of the work of church elders is beyond the scope of this series, and has been covered in past articles [see ESN Vol. 1, Nos. 3–7 in the archives], but a brief summary can be given here. The work of elders in the church involves four areas: feeding, lead-

ing, overseeing, and protecting.

- *Feeding.* The saints need a healthy diet of good spiritual food, first from the Scriptures, but also in dialogue, counsel, admonition, and care.
- *Leading.* They need vision for their spiritual and daily walk, which comes from a biblical understanding of origins (past), purpose (present), and destiny (future).
- *Overseeing.* Internal disputes and differences can arise to disrupt the relationships in the church, and overseers must discern and confront them, not allowing these to go unresolved lest bitterness draw others out of fellowship.
- *Protecting.* Wolves can rise up or come in and through false teaching undermine the faith of believers. Paul warned the elders about them in Acts 20:29–30.

A Team that Displays Care for One Another

A verse of surpassing importance is Acts 20:28 in which Paul instructs the elders of the church at Ephesus as follows: “Take heed to yourselves, therefore, and to all the flock...” The order is critical. The ministry of the team can only be as effective as its integrity. Both informally and when they meet, elders must intentionally budget time to inquire about, support, and pray for one another. How can a man be effective in caring for people if his own heart is overburdened or breaking? A normal elders’ meeting agenda might include time in the Word and prayer, a brief check on how brothers in the team are faring, and then the needs and problems of the assembly. Specifics on how this can be done are myriad, but the common thread is love for one another. The Lord was very clear about that!

A Team that Works from Among the Flock

On the subject of how a local church can apply the principle of plural, servant leadership, Scripture gives substantial liberty to allow for changing needs of people and cultural differences, but one key point is essential. The elders (as sheep themselves) are to work from

“among” the saints rather than lording it over them (see Acts 20:28, 1 Pet. 5:1–3, 1 Thes. 5:12). This is sometimes neglected to the detriment of the church. Elders must not be known primarily for “closed door” elders’ meetings from which the saints are barred.

Rather, being motivated by humble hearts and attitudes, by an awareness of being accountable to the Lord, elders must make time to get to know the people. Hospitality and visitation are indispensable; where practical, small groups in homes provide insights that public meetings rarely do; is free time on Sunday mornings, for example, used for moving among and interacting with the saints, or caring for team business items?

A Team that Equips Others, Preparing to Pass the Baton

One barometer of the effectiveness of elders is how they delegate responsibilities, involve the people, encourage spiritual gifts, and eventually replace themselves. It is true that the Holy Spirit makes overseers (Acts 20:28) but this does not happen in a vacuum. Younger men must be trained and their gifts developed in full sight of the church family. This crucial work is sometimes neglected because time is spent putting out “small fires.”

One major benefit of training and equipping the next generation is that it helps the people to respect and embrace the biblical pattern for leadership in the church. Consider the following questions to bring out the point.


- Would a young man observing the honor and care elders show to one another wish to be part of such a team or decline (as is sometimes heard, “I’m glad to serve but I don’t want the title”)?
- Do the elders practice informal (or formal) training of eligible young men, such as taking them along on visits, letting them assist in small groups, inviting them to visit the elders’ meetings?
- Is there a list of young men whose names, schooling, and possible gifts are known to the elders and who are

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prayed for regularly?

- Have such young men ever been asked a question like, “If you had a problem or concern or suggestion to improve our assembly, would you feel comfortable coming to us? If not, what could we do to change that?”

In Titus 2:10, Paul exhorts servants to “adorn the doctrine” by their holy conduct. Since elders are servants, we can apply that thought to their work. Elders can adorn the doctrine of biblical church leadership by caring for one another, working from among the saints, involving them wherever possible, and by acting

as mentors to young men in the church. But even in this, speakers can gently and graciously point out the wisdom of God’s design for church leadership; in this case it’s plural, pastoral teamwork by ordinary men. “In the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). 

Prophets (continued from page 1)

four exilic fasts commemorating Jerusalem’s destruction. Returnees questioned the continued celebration of these fasts since the temple and related institutions were being restored. Zechariah’s answer is surprising. Because the Lord had decreed the destruction of Jerusalem, the fasts were not from Him. In short, the people were fasting for themselves. In fact, the Lord would turn them into feasts (8:19). Too frequently we continue to follow old practices simply because we have always done them instead of examining everything we do in light of God’s word.

The second half of Zechariah includes two sections titled “burdens,” shifting discussion to the future of Israel. The first burden (9-11) links opposing nations with Israel’s continued struggles to accept God’s plan. God’s promises included the coming of Israel’s true King but in a way the people were not expecting (9:9). The Lord then assigned Zechariah the role of a shepherd but his eventual rejection for a minimal wage symbolized Israel’s rejection of the Lord’s true Shepherd (11:12). Israel broke the covenant but the Lord remembered it (9:11). Based upon His mercy, the Lord would strengthen and restore His people after their exile (10:6-12). The second burden of Zechariah (12-14) presents Israel’s future facing of the coming Day of the Lord including the deliverance of Jerusalem and the defeat of opposing nations.

Revelation about the Lord’s plan for Israel’s future would have greatly encouraged the postexilic community, specifically, revelation about the coming shepherd-king (cp. Isa. 40:10-11). Prophecies about the coming of Jesus Christ receive emphasis in the New Testament, especially those concerning His death. For example, references include His entry into Jerusalem (9:9), His betrayal (11:12-

13), the scattering of the disciples (13:7) and Israel’s presence at the cross including their future struggles over the pierced One (12:10; cp. John 19:37, Rev. 1:7).

Many connect the arrival of Israel’s King on Mount Olivet with the return of Christ (14:4 & Acts 1:11). His arrival will split Mount Olivet to provide an escape route for Israel and initiate global change. The prophet also described God’s judgment of the nations and cleansing of His people during a glorious global reign. However, Israel’s rejection of the Shepherd left the sheep vulnerable, so their struggles continued. Exile and opposition reduced the population but God’s grace kept them from total elimination (Mal. 3:6). Indeed, coming troubles would refine the remnant who would uphold the Lord’s name and embrace a new covenant (Zech. 13:9).


The study of Zechariah affirms the fulfillment of prophecy in the work of Christ and provides assurance that the Lord will complete His plan for every person who trusts in Him.

Malachi, Prophet of Restoration

The prophet Malachi addressed growing coldness toward the Lord around mid fifth century BC. The temple was rebuilt but continued Persian governance raised questions about the Lord’s presence, fostering apathy. Malachi employs a disputation style to refute contemporary objections to the Lord’s work. His opening affirmation of love, for example, directly challenged the people’s lax attitude by pointing to God’s choice of Jacob rather than Esau. The only reason Israel survived was the immutable grace of the Lord (3:6). Israel’s continued existence today affirms Malachi’s words, reminding us of God’s sovereign plan for both Jews and Gentiles as stressed by Paul (Rom. 9:11-13). Malachi chided the

disrespectful priests who presented polluted sacrifices (1:8), stole animals, and callously viewed their position (1:13). Divorcing wives to marry local idolatrous women provided another example of pervasive corruption. The Lord’s strong reaction regarding divorce affirmed His “one flesh” design for creation (Gen. 2:24) and undergirded Jesus’ comments on the hardness of the human heart (Matt. 19:8). In addition, both people and priests were guilty of robbing God by withholding tithes. Seeking covenant obedience (Mal. 2:10), the Lord revealed a coming messenger who would purify the people to bring about repentance and return.

The book of Malachi provides a warning about growing insensitivity toward the Lord and inverting His values, a trend marking our current society. The people’s view that evil was good in God’s sight (2:17) and that the arrogant were blessed (3:15) illustrates how far they had drifted. We are kept from wandering by remembering Him and His word (4:4). Malachi closed by mentioning Moses, a picture of the law and Elijah who symbolized the coming of a new day. The arrival of the Messiah was years away and although the Lord Jesus linked John the Baptist with Elijah, He also affirmed the future Day of the Lord to herald a coming time of judgment and restoration. Malachi reveals the Lord’s heart to restore and walk with His people.

Studying the Old Testament brings with it many blessings including increased hope, a greater knowledge of God’s word and background for New Testament truth. It teaches us about the Lord, who He is and how He works, especially His gift of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The more we study this great Book the more we learn of Him! 

Wives' Corner

Foundations by Rachel Kichar

“If the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”
—Psalm 11:3

What a good question, even when it's asked by the enemy! Can you hear his persuasive tones in the terrifying description of David's circumstances in the first few verses of this Psalm?

I hear the echoes of this same question over and over these days, spoken by political figures, social media, the Christians around me—and most often in my own heart. There's no question that the foundations of our civilization are being destroyed in an unprecedented way. What can the righteous do? Here are a few of the answers I found.

“He that is righteous, let him be righteous still” (Rev. 22:11). The end is very near. Hold fast what you have till He comes (see Rev. 2:25). We don't have long to wait!

“The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears” (Ps. 34:17). Let's never forget we have a direct line to the One in charge! Righteousness and justice


are the foundation of His throne (Ps. 97:2) and not even the most tumultuous events on this earth can make that foundation tremble!

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Prov. 18:10). The character of God is the only refuge that can give us true safety. He is the one fixed point in a world adrift, the solitary hope in a landscape of despair, and the ultimate answer to every question. In the years ahead, we will need above all else to know Who He is and to be so intimately acquainted with Him that the hand of faith can reach out and find Him even in the dark.

“Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous!” (Ps. 33:1). As the world gets darker, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ—and in the faces of His members—will shine all the brighter! It is for us not merely to survive, but to thrive in the peace that God alone can give. So while the people around us worry and complain, and harangue, and despair, let us rejoice in our God—in His character, in His readi-

ness to help, in His grace to sustain us through all suffering, and in all the ways that He will glorify Himself amid the raging of the nations.

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Let's dig our battle line alongside David: *“In the Lord I put my trust” (Ps. 11:1).* And when the enemy tries to convince us that we are without recourse—“what can the righteous do?”—let us look with David up to the throne that is established in righteousness and say, *“The Lord is righteous” (v. 7).* There's no limit to what the Righteous One can do! 

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