

# RISING ABOVE RUIINS

PROVIDENCE  
AND THE  
SURVIVAL  
OF GOD'S PEOPLE  
IN THE BOOKS OF

EZRA  
NEHEMIAH  
ESTHER



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# PROVIDENCE

I believe in providence. I believe God has a plan. I no more believe history to be a series of accidents than I believe the world is the product of evolution. I cannot explain how the variable of “free-will” blends with sovereign grace, but I do see that God keeps his promises in spite of mankind’s stubbornness. God made an incredible and irrevocable promise to Abraham that he would keep. God would make a nation based on the foundation of faith. From that nation would come a Savior, and with him a kingdom of which there would be no end. The Jew was the main character in a sacred drama that was played out upon the world’s stage with each act being an era and each falling curtain a hold-your-breath “cliff-hanger.” Again and again Israel’s disobedience seemed to jeopardize the future, and yet an amazing grace seemed to be at work always “raising the dead” giving these stiff-necked people (all too much like ourselves) another chance.

Out of defeat the tiny nation, which the world again and again found to be “indigestible,” would rise. The history of the Hebrew is not only a story of providence it offers a spiritual paradigm so beautifully expressed by the Apostle Paul, “*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God to those who are called according to his purpose*” (Rom. 8:28). History also teaches us where we came from, for each of us is the sum total of all the trials, experiences, and encounters we have had. Our adversities are often the anvil upon which our character is fashioned. The trials are the fire in which our steel is tempered.

The Babylonian captivity, tragic as it was, helped to set the stage for the spread of a kingdom that was far greater than Abraham imagined and larger than the world itself. Out of Babylon would come a remnant that would carry three ideas that changed the world forever. The first was the synagogue. No more would religion require a temple in order to survive. When Nebuchednezar destroyed Jerusalem and leveled Solomon’s glorious temple he imagined he had killed a people by erasing their God. Such was the simplistic, pagan idea of religion. “*The natural man understandeth not the things of the Spirit of God*” 1Cor 2:14. The synagogue was born in Babylon and insured the survival of the Jews as a nation. When the remnant returned to build the temple they also built synagogues which would be centers of learning and centers of life. Jesus began his preaching ministry, not in the temple, but in a synagogue.

The second treasure carried out of Babylon was the Word of God. What was a collection of sacred works became one book. Ezra was the forerunner of a new army of men whose life would be dedicated to the copying, teaching, and preserving the Holy Scriptures: the scribes. These Scriptures became a gift to the world and have become the bed-rock of the world’s moral, judicial, religious systems. Ezra gathered together in one volume the eternal words of God, and this was done by a people who, after losing everything, realized they still had what was most important: the Word.

The third treasure to come out of the captivity was the Zionist movement. The homesickness of Ezra and Nehemiah was the beginning of an unexplainable longing for Zion that is still unfolding before our eyes today. God is not finished with Israel. Ezra, Nemehiah, and Esther are rich in spiritual trues and treasures for all who will sincerely seek for them.

No person or family is exempt from hardship. Most of our troubles are by-products of our own invention. Many sorrows are simply the fruits coming from seeds sown by our own hand. Much of the pain we endure is of our own making, and yet the story of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther assures us that there is hope. When our dreams crumble, and even when we seem to be led away in chains to some distant Babylon we may dream of Zion, and begin to love and live again. We may find comfort even in calamity, believing that “all things are working together for good to them that love God.” We can learn in suffering what we would never have learned in success. We may become stronger by the very fires that try us. We may build again.



Sometimes we suffer because of the folly of others. All Israel suffered because of the failure of their leaders to lead in Spirit and in truth. Yet even when we are forced to endure the consequences of acts done by others, we can find our duty and seize our destiny. And as the slavery of Israel resulted in a blessing to the world, so too our infirmity may become a light to someone walking in darkness. So whether living in Babylon, or rebuilding in Jerusalem, we may apply the words of Jesus who said "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven."

Providence is God working all things together for good to them that love God. While I may never be able to understand or sort out the "all things" of this spiritual equation, I have simply to know one thing. I love God. If God has my heart, the heavens may thunder and hell may boil up about me, and I may be led away to Babylon in chains, yet through it all, providence provides stepping stones of peace and angels help along the way lest we dash our foot against the stone.

## ONE

Have you ever been home sick? The story of the Jewish Restoration is the story of "going home" after seventy years in captivity. How God set these prisoners free is the story of pure grace moving on the winds of providence. "*The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.*" The wind, said Jesus blows where it wills. He said that we "*hear the sound thereof, but canst not tell from whence it cometh and whither it goeth*" Jn. 3:8. The wind blew across the heart and spirit of the Persian as quickly as a storm sprang up over the sea of Galilee. Cowper said "God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform" in his poem about providence and the prerogative of the Almighty.

In the fullness of time (Jer. 25:12-13) God caused a shift in the political landscape and the great tectonic plates of the political earth moved. One kingdom is toppled, another raised up. In that very first year the Spirit of God blew across the inner life of Cyrus' soul and exercised him to become aware of the longings of the captive Jews he inherited with his new kingdom. It is comforting to realize that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord (Prov. 21:1). He could crush a tyrant or brush him aside; or he can turn him towards his own purposes with ease. Yet the awesome strength of God never crushes a man's free will and his personal responsibility for his actions. "*Behold,*" said Jesus, "*I stand at the door and knock if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him and sup with him and he with me.*" God can, but never knocks down the door.

Moses also stood before a king and found a different disposition. "Let my people go" was the simple request. However in this case Pharaoh chose to resist omnipotence. Faith sees how foolish such stubbornness is. How much better to avoid the plagues and just yield to God's plan and God's wisdom. Pharaoh could have spared himself and his people bloody rivers, frogs, and lice, and boils and sorrow. It was the pride and hardness of his heart that turned God's request into a contest. No one can win in such an unequal match. Cyrus was moved in his spirit to let God's people go. Perhaps he could not explain his sudden sympathy for these peculiar people, but he made the decree. He was, no doubt, convinced that the idea was born in his own heart, but we know better. This should invite us to pray for those who have the rule over us. This should cause us to trust that God has a plan called providence upon which it is better to rest than to resist.

Cyrus worshipped his own gods, yet for a moment he bowed before the Unknown God. He owed his prosperity and good fortune to something or someone in the eternal heavens and demonstrated a measure of humility with this acknowledgement. Pagan humility is still humility, and humility is still legal tender in the banks of heaven. "*God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble*" (Ja 4:6; 1Peter 5:5). It seems to matter not if that humble being wears silken robes of Persia or flaxen garments of Palestine. God looks on the heart. "*The fool says in his heart there is no God.*" Cyrus



was no fool.

When God begins a work he always starts that work in someone's heart. It is remarkable to think that each heart holds an opportunity to do something great and each life may, if surrendered, be an instrument God may use. After the decree was made again God worked in men's hearts. As Ezra continues his story he tells of God "*raising the spirits of the heads of Judah and Benjamin.*" Before every army there must be a captain, and before every flock a shepherd. Before every congregation there must be Holy men of God, moved by the Holy Ghost. Everything rises and falls on leadership and the rebuilding of Jerusalem was no exception.

There are spiritual seasons that sweep across the inner world of men's hearts. There are times when the tides are high. It is then when ships must sail. It is then that men must act, for there is no guarantee that God will not sail without you. Sad is the saint who misses that boat.

Why every last Jew did not leave is a puzzle. Who, if given the chance, would not want to go to the holy land? Yet the record is clear, not all went. Secular Jewish history is not very kind to the first delegation, saying that in the first immigration the chaff went and the wheat stayed home. Perhaps there is some truth to that observation. Seldom do the comfortable, financially successful, and affluent forsake all to follow Jesus. This world is filled with rich young rulers who "go away sorrowing." Often it is the hope for better things that causes men to migrate. It is often persecution (Acts 8) or potato famines that challenge men to make a choice between the barren and the "maybe better."

Some would remain behind and yet strengthen rather than restrain the hand of the missionary. Some go and some give so others can go. "*All they who were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things.*" Every Jewish heart needed to search itself to find God's will in the matter. Every Christian must be moved by the very thought of missions, and strengthen the hands of those who go to do the work. Ezra makes it clear that the Lord provided for the work. Notice that when God places an order he always pays the bill. We can always afford to do what God asks us to do. We can not afford to be negligent (1:6).

The Bible is filled with directories and important lists. Ezra lists the names of those who returned. The manner by which they are listed is revealing. Although captive for nearly seventy years they still maintained their identity by towns and villages. Each town in the Old Testament was a tight-knit community. Each hamlet had its chief Rabbi, and each town had its elders. When these people dreamed of home they were dreaming about Arah, and of Azgad, and of Anathoth. Included in the list of cities that would by the Grace of God be again populated and hold a future was that of Bethlehem (2:21).

God keeps good lists. A search of the lists revealed that certain of those who expected to return as priests and handle the most holy things were not qualified to do so. A desire does not constitute a call. "*These sought their register among those who were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood.*" God's special ministers must be qualified. First, their names must be written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27); they must have experienced a "new birth." Second, they must be prepared. God calls prepared people. He who would run the Marathon must begin by running the mile. God has no assignment for the lazy. Third, they must be clean. Nothing polluted shall enter God's Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven is for those made clean by the blood of the Lamb.

These "would-be" priests may have been sincere, willing, and enthusiastic, but they were not found written in the sacred genealogy. All this teaches us that God is serious about the things of salvation. No sinner shall enter into the realms of Heaven, and those not found written in the Lamb's Book of life shall be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). A serious search should be made by every soul to make its "calling and election sure" (2Pet. 1:10).

We Protestants pride our selves in what we commonly call the "priesthood of the believer." We are in no need of an intermediary between us and God, except that of our great high priest, Jesus. Yet those who truly understand this priesthood, realize that such can only exist in the atmosphere of grace.



This priesthood rests on the merits of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This priesthood is not to be taken for granted, or taken too lightly. We should remember that Jesus came to save us “from” sin not “in” sin. Every Christian is commanded to walk worthy of the vocation to which we are called (1Thes. 2:12).

The priesthood spoken of in Ezra is a special class of people who are uniquely trained and suited for a particular service. To that extent the standards apply to the New Testament saint as much as the Old. God has a ministry for every believer. God has a specific plan, will, and purpose for each of his children. We must search the ledgers of reason and reality to determine if we are called and qualified. We may be moved to take up some holy errand but would be in error to do so if we are not trained, ordained, and clearly called.

It is difficult to learn sailing without a ship. It is difficult to study farming and never see a field. So it must have been hard to study for the priesthood and have no temple; yet each must be faithful with what God has given. A call to preach is a call to prepare. The first step to spiritual leadership is to be willing. The second is to be ready. The third is to be anointed or commissioned for the special task. The only ordination that is of any value is the one that comes from heaven, an anointing of the Spirit.

When there was a question about the records and license an appeal was made to heaven. The Urim and Thummin have long since vanished from the earth and like tongues, they have ceased; but the Spirit must witness with our spirit that we are the sons of God. No one knows what has become of these ancient stones that were cast like a lot to decide difficult questions. No one can explain how or why they worked any more than they can explain Pentecost or the moving of the waters at Bethesda. What we do know is that we must look to the Spirit if we are to be Spirit led, and no man is ordained until he receives a nod from God. That which is flesh is still flesh and any work to be spiritually effective must be like the water in Cana, changed into wine.

They set the altar upon its bases. Foundations for temples and lives are important and every fountain must have its source. The successful spiritual life must also have its head waters as well as this fountain that flows from beneath a holy altar. A study of each of the patriarchs involves a study of altars. From Adam to Abraham, from Noah to Nemehiah altars seem to be the mooring place, the anchor, the haven of rest along the path of providence. Saints seem to leave a trail of altars in their wake.

Man must start at the beginning. Here is where all good things begin, at the altar of God. It matters not if we are beginning a project as great as building a temple or beginning a day, we must begin here, we must begin with worship. No foundation is deep or sure enough unless there is first and altar (3:6).

An altar is a special place. It may be visible or invisible. It may be in a cathedral or in a catacomb. An altar may be found in a palace or in a prison. It is a trysting place, a point of contact, the gate of heaven (Gen. 28:17-18). An altar is a place of sacrifice, of surrender, and of seeking God. It is a place of prayer and a place of worship. It may be made of twelve stones or of none. It may be visible or invisible, but it must be real. It may be in a field or in a closet, but it must be visited often and be the cornerstone of every holy life.

When the foundation was completed the people celebrated and held a service of dedication. They wept and rejoiced. They sang, they praised, they remembered the old, but thanked God for the new. They would start again.

Failure need not be the last stop for any saint. No one need despair. Even when all we have is reduced to rubble and we are swept away as captives to Babylon, we may bow before the God of the second chance. If something as beautiful and special as Solomon's temple met with such an awful fate, let us not be too surprised if beautiful things in our lives crumble, or at times we too fail. Hope is found amidst the ruins of Jewish history. We can build again. We can arise up and build. No home, marriage, or relationship is so destroyed that it cannot, by the grace of God, be set up-right. As long as there is life, there is hope; and every prodigal son may “come to himself” and declare “I



will arise and go unto my father.’

After a night of toil and failure Peter listened to the advice of Jesus and experienced the greatest catch of his life as a fisher. *“Never-the-less, at thy word I will let down my net.”* Ezra tells of those who return after a long night of captivity, looking with hope as the sun rises at the dawn of a new day while daring to let down their nets again for a draught.



## Two Opposition

*“Now when the adversaries...”* There are always adversaries. There are always many adversaries to the cause and kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul was familiar with many of them. *“For a great and effectual door is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries”* (1Cor. 16:9). An open door does not necessarily lead to an easy road in the Christian life; and as the disciples discovered while on the sea of Galilee, even with the Lord of the Universe resting peacefully in the bow of the boat *“the winds were contrary”* (Mat. 14:24). The Christian life is one that ever sails against contrary ideas, systems, and circumstances. Doors that are opened by God need not to be forced or broken down. God unlocks the doors of opportunity for us. We need but gently lean against such doors for them to open, but when one opens, the one who steps through that open door may soon find that they may need to wear foul-weather gear.

Our weather systems are born in the polar regions where frigid air is introduced to our atmosphere only to collide with oppressively warm air that rises from the tropics. When two such opposite systems meet the result is severe weather. There are also disturbances in the spiritual realm when truth collides with error, light with darkness, good with evil. When Zerubbabel and his remnant moved in to fill the spiritual vacuum and repopulate Israel the wind socks of infernal weather systems began to rustle, and by the time work began on the foundations of the temple gale winds began to kick up dust in the devil’s kingdom. No good work goes unnoticed and opposition to God’s work is often an assuring indication that it is indeed God’s work. Satan cares little about man’s work, especially when it is religious work. Satan will not care if a church is involved in “religious” work as opposed to spiritual. Jesus told Nicodemous, “that which is flesh is flesh.” Religious work at its best is flesh. When a work is of God, and initiated and orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, it will be resisted by all the forces of evil and by all the enemies of Heaven.

Spiritual adversaries do not always make a frontal attack. Remember that the Serpent in the garden was “subtile.” The enemies of good do not always attack in ways that are obvious. The evil One has many deadly, but harmless looking weapons. Often, when we are guarding our front flank or the rear defenses from any hostile assault by the enemy, he attempts to enter our gates openly while dressed as a friend, or an angel of light. Satan has many well tested strategies. One method (as will be seen later in our story) is not so much to jeer as it is to join. *“Let us build with you.”* Many of the suggestions made by demons seem innocent, reasonable, logical, and pragmatic. What could be wrong with someone offering to help us in our cause? What is wrong with enlisting all the support and cooperation of every willing servant? Many churches go begging for willing helpers. Many would have counted it a “wind-fall” to have a group of eager enlistees, yet again and again the principle is taught in scripture, *“That which is flesh is flesh, and that which is spirit is spirit.”* God’s work is a spiritual work. *“Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, this is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts”* (Zech. 4:6). God’s work is not easy work, and yet, God’s work must be done in God’s way. On the mountain of temptation Satan seemed congenial and willing to help the Son of Man, offering to help and assist Jesus in reaching his goals.

It is upon this battlefield that most spiritual wars are lost. The weapon of our warfare must not be carnal, but spiritual, mighty unto God pulling down strongholds (2Cor. 10:4). Potential Christian workers are defeated without a shot being fired or a fiery dart hurled. We are on dangerous ground when we become “cause-centered” instead of Christ centered, whatever that cause may be. To be “cause” centered is to contaminate our reason and our righteousness, and once so compromised we become casualties. Even something as seemingly noble and divinely commissioned as building a temple is a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

Ecumenism seems on the surface to be a spirit of charity, graciousness, and reason, but it is spiritual surrender at best and suicide at worst. Ecumenism invites the enemies of God to handle God’s holy things. Ecumenism invites the unclean into the holy place. A major theme of the Bible is that man



is ever striving to worship God in his own way. God ever insists that only the prescribed way is acceptable. Cain killed Abel over methods. The practice of orthodoxy still evokes hostility from modern Cains who insist that one way is as good as another. *“Allow us to help you, allow us to work with you, we seek your God, as ye do.”* One modern refrain often sung today is that we all worship the same God, only by a different name. Scripture rejects this idea as clearly as Zerubbabel rejected these friendly overtures of the “adversaries.”

*“You have nothing to do with us”* was the reply of the governor that drew a clear line between light and darkness. To those who would dismiss Zerubbabel as being xenophobic or make excuses for him by calling him an “Old Testamenter” we need only turn to the “New” for an answer. The Lord’s table is open only to those who have by faith embraced the Lord Jesus Christ. Unbelievers are warned not to partake of the sacred symbols (1Cor. 11). Biblical separation insures the integrity of the church. The fact that it has been misused, misguided, or used as a carnal weapon, does not destroy the reason that has sharpened its edge. *“What communion does light have with darkness?”*(2Cor 6:14-18). Darkness is not changed to light by compromise. The ministry must be maintained in purity by purity.

The true colors of these pretenders was seen when they were rebuffed. *“Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah and troubled them in building”* (v.4). A man with a bad spirit is easily exposed by touching that spirit. Pride has a hair trigger that exposes evil intentions at even the slightest touch. Many feign sympathy to the cause of Christ and even cooperate in building the temple if allowed, but their motives are carnal not spiritual. A sinner may even join the Sunday School staff and appear to be qualified and efficient, and not be truly born again. Hold them to any rule or regulation that demands humility or submission and the very person who offered to help will now begin to hinder. They *“hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose”* (4:5). Every ministry will encounter those who, once so offended, will attempt to “frustrate” every attempt to build and resist every effort to succeed.

Rehum and Shimshai, the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites (the list of God’s enemies is endless) all protested the presence and plans of Israel (4:9). No sooner does any servant of God take up a sacred task, but he shall be met with a thousand objections. Even within a local church, critics will arise whenever someone attempts to take up a sacred task or respond to the call of duty. He who would be faithful must break away from indolence, apathy, and mediocrity in order to build. No sooner will a man or woman accept the call to rebuild the Sunday School, choir, missions program, or other such endeavor, but they will feel the fire of judgment. It matters not to these critics that the temple has been in ruins for ages around their own feet while their hearts were un-moved and un-concerned; woe to the servant who attempts to repair the breach. What was true in Zerubbabel’s day is no less true today. This should not discourage those who are called to rise up, it should only be a warning to expect foul weather and to be prepared.

*“Blessed,”* said Jesus, *“are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you”* Matt. 5:11-12. It should not surprise us that our reputation is attacked and our name disparaged when we challenge the domain of the one who has been called the “father of lies” (Jn. 8:44).

*“Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations”* (4:12). The adversaries wrote to the King of Persia in an attempt to stop the progress of the work in Jerusalem. *“They will not pay tribute,”* they will *“dishonor”* the king. Talk of unpaid taxes and of honor and “dishonor” are still used to alarm authorities and question the intent and interests of God’s people. It is not unusual for the enemies of good to disguise themselves in noble motives.

Not only did these Samaritians question the Jew’s motives, but they became false prophets and predicted serious consequences if the temple work was allowed to continue. Artaxerxes issued a restraining order (4:21) and the work stopped until the second year of his son, Darius’ reign(520BC).



At that time God sent two of his servants, Haggai and Zechariah to encourage and challenge the people to continue what they had been called to do. The books that bare their names tell their stories. It will suffice here to note that “everything rises and falls on leadership.” God’s people are often awaiting for someone to heed God’s call. *“I stand at the door and knock. If any man will hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and sup with him and he with me.”* Sometimes it is a matter of a single man or woman hearing the knock. Sometimes it is a simple matter of one listening to the will of God and saying “Lord, here am I, send me.”

We all need a word of encouragement from time to time. We all have at times become discouraged by obstacles and opposition to the point that work on some sacred task has grown idle. Blessed are those who help “stir up the gift that is in us.” Every church needs an occasional visit from Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai means “festive” and Zechariah means “God Remembers.” Thank God for those special people God sends our way that have a joyous spirit and happy temperment and are festive. They bouy our flagging hearts that sometimes “become weary in well doing,” they encourage us to continue. Thank God as well for those who cause us to “remember” important things. We are so prone to forget. *“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” “Do this in remembrece of me,”* said Jesus. *“Forget not to entertain strangers,”* and so on. Then there is the holy calling. Are there some unfinished projects, incompleated temples, slumbering dreams and forsaken visions? If so, let us again begin to build (5:2). “the prophets of God helping them,” Thank God for those prophets and preachers who have refused to allow us to live among the ruins. Thank God for those who have challenged us to continue in the things we have learned. Thank God for those men and women who have not only pointed the way, but have also lent a hand.

Again, it seemed, that the first hammer blow awakened sleeping demons. The enemies were quickly again at the gates demanding to know “by what authority, and by what right” (my paraphrase) do you build? So the Sanhedren inquired of both John and Jesus, and so every saint will be so confronted should they take up any work for God. Another letter was sent to Persia (5:6), this time an honest inquiry was made to search for legal authorization to work. It seems strange that the letter was so honest as it recounted an accurate description of the history of events. Perhaps the adversaries did not believe the Jewish elders. As it turned out it was discovered that a permit and an order to build had been issued by Cyrus, and now the son (Darius) was determined that his father’s wishes would be carried out.

Not only did work resume, but local authorities were to see that the project had sufficient funds (6:8)supplies, and resourses to be completed. An order was given that the work be not hindered. God will allow opposition to go only so far, and that is only to test and temper our resolve. There is a time when God will stay the hand of our opponents and order the forces of evil to leave us be. It was as if Jesus had spoken to the storm and even the wind and the waves obeyed him.

*“Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this”* (6:11). Foolish is the man who makes Darius angry. But more foolish is the man who wears thin the patience of the Almighty (6:12).

For five years the work went on “speedily.” For five years the people “prospered.” Finally the “house was finished” in the sixth year of the reign of Darius. Great was the dedication service and again prayers and sacrifices were raising up from the altar on Moriah. Again the children of Israel kept the Passover and the Jewish nation like Lazarus arose from the dead. The feasts were re-instituted and the people made an honest attempt to cleanse themselves and separate themselves from the “filthiness of the heathen” (6:21) in order to be a holy nation.

