

Old Testament Survey 11 - Return, Restoration, and OT “Ends”:

Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther, Wisdom, and the Twelve

for the Bible Institute at Gulf Coast Baptist Church

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Introduction

The Old Testament ends with creation struggling. The nations have gone their own way, and have been under the heel of the empires that Daniel prophesied. Israel has been restored to their land, but they have not been made free of bondage. They are longing for the Deliverer that Isaiah, Micah, and other prophets told them was coming.

The OT is the foundation of God’s covenant program, setting up the Messiah and kingdom hope. We have explored Genesis as it provided an account of the origins of man and the reason why redemption is necessary, as well as the people who God elected to use to reveal himself to the ancient world. God’s covenants with those people, promising them a kingdom with rule from the heavens. In order to bring this kingdom to power, the Messiah, the first begotten One - totally unique to human history - would come to offer God’s righteousness to man. The failure of God’s people to fulfill their side of the covenants resulted in them being set aside in judgement. The restoration of God’s people was prophesied along with the Redeemer who would come to bring it to pass. This lesson examines the restoration and gives the big picture of the offer of the Kingdom that is soon to come.

Big anchors

- Post-exilic community is real but “not yet” the promised fullness
- Wisdom literature teaches covenant life in a broken world: worship, suffering, skillful living, meaning
- The Twelve close the OT with both confrontation and expectation (messianic/kingdom anticipation)

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

These three books chronicle the beginning of the move back to the Promised Land by God’s people. Ezra rebuilds the temple and focuses repairing the damage done physically and spiritually to God’s people. Two key texts from the book summarize Ezra’s character and ministry: studying God’s Word, obeying it, and teaching it to others, as well as Ezra’s prayer of confession reflecting the seriousness of Israel’s sin and the need for repentance after the return from exile. *Ezra 7:10* “**For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.**”

Ezra 9:6 “**O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head...**”

Nehemiah journeyed from the court of Ahasuerus to Jerusalem to see to the rebuilding of the walls of the great city. The hand of God is seen throughout this example of leadership in action. Nehemiah demonstrates what can happen when a dedicated leader is used to rally God’s people to do God’s will. *Nehemiah 2:18* “**Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their**

hands for this good work.” Nehemiah 8:8 “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” In both books we see a return to God’s Word being read and followed. The departure from God’s Word caused the nation’s decay and ultimate discipline.

Esther is a book that does not have God’s name mentioned, but behind every event God’s providence is clearly seen under diaspora pressure. Courage, danger, and deliverance is put on display as good triumphs and evil is brought to justice. *Esther 4:14 “...and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”*

Poetry and Wisdom

Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon have comforted hearts and put wisdom and passion on display in equal parts. The passion and heart of God’s people can be seen as they rely on God to deliver them from peril. Several of the Psalms show admiration for God’s law, and God’s attributes. There is no universally agreed “greatest” psalm, but if one psalm is most often viewed as standing above the others in influence, familiarity, comfort, and theological depth, it would likely be: Psalm 23: the Shepherd’s Psalm. *“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”* It stands out because it presents God as the Shepherd, Guide, Protector, and Host. It speaks both of daily life and death. It is deeply personal as well as devotional, as many Psalms are. It connects beautifully to Jesus as the Good Shepherd described in the Gospels.

Major themes in the book of Psalms are God’s provision, Rest and peace, Guidance and righteousness, Protection in suffering and Eternal fellowship with God. Proverbs has many “key” verses, filled with wisdom and truth sayings. Among them would be:

Proverbs 1:7 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 3:5–6 “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

These verses demonstrate the vital importance of acknowledging God’s wisdom as superior to man’s wisdom and the need for man to submit to God and His ways.

Ecclesiastes is the testimony of a man who had everything the world could offer—wisdom, wealth, pleasure, power, accomplishments—and yet discovered that life apart from God is ultimately empty. Written from the perspective of “the Preacher,” traditionally understood to be Solomon, the book examines life “under the sun” and exposes the futility of living merely for earthly gain. Ecclesiastes wrestles honestly with questions about meaning, work, suffering, time, and death, ultimately concluding that true purpose is found in fearing God and keeping His commandments. It is a deeply practical and realistic book that points believers away from temporary earthly pursuits and toward eternal truths. *Ecclesiastes 1:2 “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”* This verse introduces the book’s central theme: life “under the sun” apart from God is empty, temporary, and unable to provide lasting satisfaction. *Ecclesiastes 12:13 “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”* This verse is the great

conclusion of the book. After examining wealth, pleasure, labor, and wisdom, Solomon concludes that true meaning is found in reverencing and obeying God.

Song of Solomon is a poetic celebration of love, marriage, purity, and devotion. Traditionally attributed to Solomon, the book presents the beauty of covenant love between a bridegroom and his bride through rich imagery and lyrical dialogue. On the surface, it honors God's design for romantic love within marriage, but many believers have also seen in it a beautiful picture of the love between Christ and His people. Unlike Ecclesiastes, which emphasizes the emptiness of life apart from God, Song of Solomon highlights one of God's good gifts within life: faithful, joyful, and enduring love. ***Song of Solomon 2:1 "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys."*** This is one of the most recognized verses in the book, expressing beauty, love, and devotion. Traditionally treasured devotionally and sometimes applied typologically to Christ. ***Song of Solomon 8:7 "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it..."*** This verse captures the enduring strength and permanence of true love, which is one of the central themes of the book.

Job is one of the first OT books that was written, and it chronicles a case study in the timeless struggle between the powers of God and the powers of Satan. With a man, his family, and his friends the backdrop, God reveals that His plans are above most of human understanding. Job begins as the beneficiary of God's physical blessings and loses most of them through testing. He is greatly discouraged and questions why God has allowed him to even be born. God graciously reveals Himself through dialog to Job and his friends and restores Job's blessings after a long discourse. ***Job 1:21 "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."*** This verse reveals Job's worshipful response in the midst of devastating loss and establishes one of the book's great themes: trusting God even in suffering. ***Job 13:15 "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him..."*** Perhaps the clearest statement of persevering faith in the entire book. Job declares his confidence in God despite not understanding his suffering. ***Job 19:25-26 "For I know that my redeemer liveth..."*** Job expresses hope in a living Redeemer and confidence beyond death, often viewed as a remarkable anticipation of resurrection truth. ***Job 28:28 "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom..."*** This summarizes the true source of wisdom, a major theme in Job and the wisdom literature as a whole. ***Job 42:5 "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee."*** Job's suffering ultimately brought him into a deeper knowledge of God. The book concludes not with all questions answered, but with greater revelation of God Himself.

Minor Prophets: Haggai/Zechariah/Malachi (return + future hope)

Nearing the end of the canonical Old Testament books, we see the nation falling into old habits, even before they are fully restored. This is a harbinger of bad things to come. Haggai's message is a call for God's people to put the Lord first and rebuild the Temple after returning from Babylonian captivity. The people had become distracted with their own homes and personal concerns while neglecting the house of God. Major themes are spiritual priorities, obedience and renewed devotion, God's presence with His people, future Messianic glory with the central

message being “*Consider your ways*” (*Haggai 1:5*) Haggai teaches that spiritual neglect leads to emptiness, but obedience brings blessing and renewed fellowship with God.

Zechariah encourages the returned remnant with visions of God’s future plans for Israel, Jerusalem, and the coming Messiah. It is one of the most Messianic books in the Minor Prophets. Major themes are repentance and restoration, God’s faithfulness to Israel, the coming King and Messiah and future kingdom glory. It’s central message is the fact that God has not forgotten His covenant promises. Zechariah looks beyond the rebuilding of the Temple to the future reign of the Messiah, including prophecies concerning Christ’s first and second comings. Key prophetic elements are the Branch, the Pierced Messiah, the King riding on a donkey, and the future kingdom centered in Jerusalem

Malachi rebukes the spiritual apathy and hypocrisy that had developed among the priests and people after the restoration period. Though the Temple had been rebuilt, the hearts of the people had drifted from God. Major themes include: spiritual complacency, corrupt worship, the covenant faithfulness of God, and the coming Day of the Lord. Its central message is that God desires sincere worship and covenant faithfulness, not empty religion. This theme could be the backdrop for the gospels, identifying Israel’s major problem. Malachi closes the Old Testament with both rebuke and hope, pointing forward to: the coming messenger (fulfilled in John the Baptist), and the coming of the Lord Himself. The Old Testament ends anticipating the coming Messiah and the future intervention of God in history.

Conclusion

Each time God gave a different household a rule of life, providing everything that was needed for obedience and blessing, man frustrated the process. Man’s failure to keep up their end of the bargain revealed something about God’s creation - it needs its Creator. God demonstrated His faithfulness repeatedly as man failed in countless tasks that it was given. The Old Testament is a record of God’s provision and man’s failure. Understanding it should leave every individual empty at the foot of the Cross of Christ. Mankind has nothing of value to offer God, yet God continues to pursue a relationship with His creation. This is truly Amazing Grace.

A review of our study includes:

Creation & Fall (problem)

Abrahamic Covenant (promise program)

Mosaic Covenant (nation under stewardship)

Davidic Covenant (kingdom hope focused)

Exile (discipline)

New Covenant promise (restoration hope)

Awaited consummation (king + kingdom + global blessing)