

Spiritual Rebuilding I

II Chronicles 36.15–23

6 September 2009

For several reasons, the subject of recovering and rebuilding has been on my mind lately. Certainly the church is one reason; the diocese of Pittsburgh has suffered a heavy blow spiritually and financially, a blow which has affected St Peter's more than appears on the surface, and I have been thinking about how we recover from that and rebuild an effective church in the diocese, and how St Peter's might recover from the way it has affected us. Another reason is seeing some people who have suffered disasters in their personal or family lives, and are struggling to recover and rebuild those lives. I also see some situations that I suspect will get to the stage of needing rebuilding eventually—for all these reasons, I suppose, the theme of recovery and rebuilding has been on my mind, and I've been looking in God's word for guidance for that.

The best known part of Scripture when it comes to recovering from disaster, whether physical, economic, or spiritual, is comprised of two Old Testament books, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and our first reading this morning introduces them. If you look at the passage in your leaflet, though, you'll see that the passage is not from either of those books, but there is a

connection. If you'll turn to the inside back cover of your service leaflet, you'll see how it works. On that page you'll see a list of all the books in the Old Testament, with a brief comment by some of them. I hope the comments will be helpful in putting the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in context, so please look at the list in the leaflet for a minute.

The part we're going to be hanging out in for a while is the last two books that have comments. I haven't put comments on any of the rest of it yet because I don't want anyone reading ahead! The disaster suffered by the people of God in Old Testament times—sometimes described, rightly, as the Old Testament church—was the result of the strife and disobedience that are described in the books of Kings and Chronicles, and involved the destruction of the kingdom, the scattering of ten of the twelve tribes beyond recovery, and the capture of the remaining people and their deportation to a distant country as slaves. That's a bigger problem than any of those I talked about that turned my mind to this subject—if recovery and rebuilding after something like that is possible, then it is certainly possible in the situations which we come across in our lives. And the writer of II Chronicles, having told all about the disaster, just can't end his book without pointing to that recovery, which is why his closing verses are our introduction to the subject today.

But before we even think about the details, let's think a bit about this list of the books of the Old Testament, or at least the first part of the it, the part with all the comments. Perhaps the thing that stands out the most clearly about this list is that the books on it are almost all, in some sense or other, *history* books. They're not all history in the sense that the history books you read in school are, but even the ones that aren't history still expand on historical events in some way. The first few chapters of Genesis are spiritual history rather than human-events history, but from chapter 12 onwards Genesis is regular history involving named historical individuals and their roles in certain selected events of the day, as is the next book, Exodus. Leviticus describes the type of worship and spirituality, if you like, that began during one of the most significant periods in the history of God's people, the period covered in the book of Exodus. Numbers—a very odd name, but some interesting people have odd names—continues the story of Exodus right up to the end of the wilderness period. Deuteronomy, another odd name, is a summary of the main events of Exodus and Numbers, with some warnings from Moses about the temptations that would face God's people when they finally arrived in the place to which God was leading them. Then a series of books which tell the story of the arrival in the promised land, their becoming a great nation under David and Solomon, then being divided by jealousy and being

weakened under a series of mostly useless kings until the nation is completely destroyed. Then the two books about the rebuilding of the nation after two generations in exile. It's all history.

It's worth stopping to think about the significance of that for a minute. If the Bible is the Word of God Written, as the Articles of Religion call it, why is so much of that word expressed in a description of historical events? Why isn't it just a list of commandments, or a series of uplifting meditations on spiritual themes? Why history, and so much of it such unedifying history?

The Bible itself doesn't give a specific answer to that question, but here's what I think. I think there are two reasons why God uses history to speak to us. First, because history is 'second hand experience', and experience is almost the only thing human beings really pay attention to. All parents have had the experience of giving their children an important commandment like 'don't play with matches' and then having the kid come crying to you with a burned finger. It seems basic to human nature to ignore commandments, but sometimes—sometimes—we'll listen to the voice of experience. History is second hand experience, someone else's experience, but we still learn from it a bit more effectively than from a list of do's and don'ts.

Second, history is about interaction. Human history is about the interaction of human beings with each other—George III and George Washington, Churchill and Hitler, the Hatfields and the McCoys. It’s almost impossible to describe interaction between human beings without it sounding like history. He said this and then she did that. And one of the most important things the Bible has to tell us is that *God interacts with His people*. He doesn’t just look over our shoulders and grade our performance, He interacts with us. We do this, and then He does that. He changes His mind because of things we do or say, and we, if we’re smart, change our minds because of things He does or says. The historical parts of the Bible are the history of God’s interaction with human beings, so we can see how that interaction works before we blunder into something we’re going to regret later. We understand why God is interacting with us today the way He is by looking at the way He has interacted with people in the past. You’ve all heard that people who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it; that’s as true spiritually as it is politically, or militarily, or in any other aspect of human existence. We’re going to make mistakes, we know, but at least we can make new mistakes, not repeat the mistakes others have made. We can learn from the mistakes God’s people have made in the past, and we can also learn from the things they got right in the past.

That's what we're going to do, I hope, when we look at the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Unlike many of the other books in the first part of that list, these two describe some things that God's people did right, and from which good things followed. They were in a pretty bad situation at the beginning, but the story about what they did and what God did is a happier story than many in the Old Testament, so this shouldn't be painful learning, and I hope you'll all read and think about the story with prayerful hearts, trusting that through His word God will help us all recover and rebuild in all those areas of our lives, temporal and spiritual, where we have suffered a blow.

We haven't even got to our reading, let alone the books themselves, but I hope the time taken for this introduction has been useful. Let me end with just one comment on the passage we read this morning. Look at vv 20, 21 and 22. Both the blow suffered by the people, and the hope of recovery from it, have a direct relationship with God's word. Vv 20 and 21 say that the exile, the disaster, took place to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah. Our translation mixes the order of things up a bit and ends up being misleading here; if you look in other translations you'll see that the phrase *in fulfillment of the word of the Lord* comes earlier in the single sentence which covers the two verses, so that the sentence actually reads *He carried*

into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants etc in fulfillment of the word of the Lord, until the land had enjoyed its sabbath rests and the seventy years were completed. The disaster fulfilled God's word. Disaster is what follows when we disobey God, and He has made that clear to us in His word. But v 22 says that recovery also takes place in fulfillment of God's word. The proclamation of Cyrus referred to in that verse was the signal that the people could return to their homeland, which was the beginning of their recovery, and Cyrus made his proclamation because God promises recovery and rebuilding to those who will follow His word.

That's just a thought for us to take home, I don't think we need to do more on a holiday weekend. We'll look at the beginning of Ezra next week; and we'll see that it is a message of hope. It was hope 500 year before Christ's time, and now that Christ has come, it has an even stronger message of hope for Christ's people and Christ's church when we find ourselves needing one. Take a look at these books in your Bibles at home, they're not long and not difficult, and the more time we've had to think about what they say, the more God will be able to speak to us through them as we read them together.