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# BIBLE GREATS



Queen Esther

*Volume III: A Series of Sermons on Great Champions for God*

Gene Taylor

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# Preface

This series of sermons emphasize theme: **“Champions For God.”** Those who would be champions in the sports world today or any worthy endeavor must have a goal and dedicate themselves to reaching that goal with patience, self-discipline, determination and respect for the rules. In Hebrews 12:1-2, those who would seek to win the race of the Christian life must “lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

The Bible records the lives of many contenders for the faith who became “champions” in every sense of the word—champions for God. This series focuses on five of them—Gideon, Nehemiah, Esther, Peter and Paul. These champions offer lessons in obedience, faith, courage, patience, perseverance, spiritual growth and evangelism that will enrich the lives of all who hear them. The lives of these great Biblical characters demonstrate that the crown of life is not for the fainthearted but for those who diligently run the race.

These sermons may be presented as a series or independently for each lesson is complete in and of itself and does not build on previous lessons.

Gene Taylor

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# Gideon: A Champion of Obedience

## Introduction

1. The story of Gideon is one of faith and courage. (Heb. 11:32-34)
2. Due to disobedience, Israel was in oppression. (Jud. 6:1-6)
  - a. Out of the 350 years between the death of Joshua until Samuel the prophet, about 100 years were spent in disloyalty to God.
  - b. The books of Judges and First Samuel present fifteen “deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies.” (Neh. 9:27)
3. God raised up Gideon, a “mighty man of valor.” (Jud. 6:11-16)

## I. Background: The Period of the Judges

- A. Time span: From the death of Joshua to the death of Samson.
  1. The period of Judges from Othniel to Samuel lasted about 350 years. (Jud. 11:26)
  2. This is the period of the Theocratic regime in which God Himself is Israel’s King. (1 Sam. 8:7)
- B. Setting.
  1. The generation contemporary with Joshua was courageous, faithful, and, for the most part, free from the obstinacy and doubt which had dishonored their fathers (Judges 2:7). But as each tribe received its portion of the land, though, they became engrossed in establishing and cultivating it thus becoming self-centered.
  2. Living among idolaters, whom they had failed to drive out, the Israelites copied their example, intermarried with them, and became contaminated by their abominations and idolatry. (Jud. 2:10-13)
  3. The people abandoned God and became their own standard of conduct. (Jud. 17:6)
  4. The old inhabitants of the land of Canaan, left alone, gathered strength to fight against Israel.
  5. Surrounding nations such as Syria, Philistia, Moab, and Midian took advantage of Israel’s ease and began to plunder them. (Jud. 2:14-15; 3:7-8)
  6. “‘In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes’ (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:25)...Each tribe took thought for itself how best to serve and maintain an adequate territory, so that separate interests of all sorts soon became prevalent, and regard for general welfare was more and more forgotten. This separation of the parts of the nation was aided by the early disunion and jealousies of the several tribes, no one of which held the preeminence...Then, too, the ancient inhabitants still retained their hold on large tracts, or on important positions throughout the country. The neighboring powers still looked upon the newcomers as an easy prey to incursion and devastation, if not to actual subjugation. Nor did Israel escape the pernicious influence of idolatry, both of Canaan and the surrounding countries.” (*Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, pp. 617-618)

7. "The book of Judges is one of the saddest parts of the Bible, humanly speaking. Some have called it the 'Book of Failure.' The last chapter of the preceding book, Joshua, anticipates continued blessing upon God's people in the rest land of their inheritance (Joshua 24:19-28). But one does not proceed far into the account of Judges before he senses that all is not well." (*Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 152)
  8. Israel was in trouble because the people failed to:
    - a. Complete the task they were given to do—drive out the other nations.
    - b. Carry through with the lessons they learned in their reform.
      - 1) When God raised up judges to deliver them, the people only responded so far as it served their selfish ends of the moment.
      - 2) They did not sincerely love God nor did they serve Him from the heart. When things got somewhat tolerable for them again they would swiftly abandon Him and go back to their old ways.
    - c. Deal with a family, national, or community problem. They were so self-centered that they did not seek solutions to their problems until they were desperate.
- A. A divine summary of the times. (Jud. 2:7-19)
1. During the rule of Joshua Israel served God. (7-9)
  2. After the death of Joshua a generation arose who did not know the Lord nor what He had done for Israel, therefore, they did evil kindling the anger of the Lord against them. (10-14a)
  3. God, therefore, delivered them to enemies who were victorious over them causing them to be greatly distressed. (14b-15)
  4. God raised up judges to deliver them and they would have peace. (16)
  5. When the judge would die the people would revert back to their old ways and forsake the way of God. (17-19)
- B. The judges.
1. The judges were not judicial officials who presided over Israel's courts.
    - a. They had no civil authority but acted with spiritual authority as agents of God.
    - b. During this period the government of the people consisted of the elders having authority in their respective tribes.
  2. The judges were deliverers (Judges 3:9) who were directed by the power of the Spirit of God, whom God raised up to lead Israel to freedom from the oppression of opposing nations. (Jud. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14)
  3. The judges and their work. (Jud. 3:7 - 16:31)
    - a. Othniel's deliverance from Mesopotamia. (3:7-11)
    - b. Ehud's deliverance from Moab. (3:12-30)
    - c. Shamgar's deliverance from Philistia. (3:31)

- d. Deborah's deliverance from the Canaanites. (ch. 4-5)
- e. Gideon's deliverance from Midian. (ch. 6-9)
- f. Tola delivered Israel. (10:1-2)
- g. Jair judged Israel. (10:3-5)
- h. Jephthah's deliverance from Ammon. (10:6 - 12:7)
- i. Ibzan judged Israel. (12:8-10)
- j. Elon judged Israel. (12:11-12)
- k. Abdon judged Israel. (12:13-15)
- l. Samson's deliverance from Philistia. (ch. 13-16)

## II. The Call of Gideon (Judges 6:11-24)

- A. Gideon was the son of Joash, an idolater from the family of Abiezer.
- B. His home was Ophrah. Most believe it to have been located in the western division of the tribe of Manasseh. (Jud. 6:11, 15; Josh. 17:2)
- C. He had an element of character about him that God could use so "the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!'" (Jud. 6:12)
- D. When he is first encountered, he is a failure in unbelief.
  - 1. He is then presented evidence designed to develop faith.
  - 2. Upon his belief, he demonstrated repentance.
- 3. He then yielded his will to the will of God.
- 4. He became a consecrated and devoted servant.
- 5. He was raised by God to be a leader and savior of his people.

## III. Some Lessons on Obedience from Gideon

- A. Gideon threw down the altars of Baal. (Jud. 6:25-31)
  - 1. Since idolatry was the prevailing sin in Israel, here is Gideon's chance to display his loyalty to God and his abhorrence of idols.
  - 2. Idolatry is a constant sin in all ages.
    - a. There is no hope for some. ("Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone." Hosea 4:17)
    - b. The symbol of idolatry had to be removed if Israel were to have hope.
  - 3. How do you define idolatry.
    - a. Something that comes between you and God. Something that takes precedence over God.
    - b. Consider the lesson of the rich, young ruler. (Mark 10:17-22)
- B. Sifting for service in Gideon's army. (Jud. 7:1-8)
  - 1. Gideon's army consisted of 32,000 men. (1-3)
  - 2. "Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were...as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude." (12)

3. The first test, the “fearful and afraid” were let go. (cf. Deut. 20:8)
    - a. Fear is contagious; a lack of discipline harms all.
    - b. Fear is the opposite of faith.
    - c. We often want to avoid danger. (Matt. 10:34-39)
    - d. About 10,000 men remained but God once more declared that the army was too large. (4)
  4. The water test- only 300 qualified. (4-8)
    - a. Though under pangs of thirst, only 300 of Gideon’s men exhibit caution and self-control.
    - b. Most were careless in the presence of the enemy. Are we?
    - c. How do we talk about the church while at work?
    - d. In the final end it had become “strength through subtraction.”
- C. The Victory Of Faith.
1. No weapons were used - no worldly methods. (Jud. 7:12,16-22)
    - a. This delivered them from the delusion that they won the battle by their own power and might.
    - b. The strength of the church is not in numbers or schemes.
    - c. Some brethren want to imitate the world around us.
    - d. Appeal to the carnal man and that is what you will get.
  2. The reason for their success was found in three parts:
    - a. *Unity*. They heard only the voice of their captain.
    - b. *Obedience*. They followed the example of Gideon.
    - c. *Faithfulness*. “Every man stood in his own place.”
  3. United in the battle cry, “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon.”
    - a. Our sword today is God’s word. (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rom. 1:16)
    - b. The word is all-sufficient and always victorious. (Isa. 55:11)

## Conclusion

1. Enlist in God’s army today!
2. Do not fear for faith in God’s word will bring victory over sin and death.

# Nehemiah: A Champion Builder for God

## I. The Book of Nehemiah

### A. Name: Nehemiah.

1. The book carries the name of its author and main character.
2. Originally the book of Nehemiah was united with the book of Ezra in the Hebrew text but was treated as a separate book when the Scriptures were translated into Latin.

### B. Author.

1. Nehemiah. (1:1) Some parts of the book contain his memoirs and an insight into his heart and feelings. (1:1 - 7:5; 11:1-2; 12:27-43; 13:4-31)
2. "There is every reason to believe Nehemiah is the author of this book, especially those parts which are of the most interest and give it its true characteristics."  
(William S. Deal, *Baker's Pictorial Introduction to the Bible*, p. 122)

### C. Time and time span.

1. Time. "The book of Nehemiah was probably written between 430 and 420 B.C."  
(*Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, p. 158)
2. Time span.
  - a. The events of the book begin in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes reign and relate two visits of Nehemiah to Jerusalem probably spanning the years 445-425 B.C.
  - b. "The time covered by this book is some twelve to fifteen years, perhaps 444-432 B.C., or 431 B.C. It is a natural sequel to Ezra." (Deal, 121-122)
  - c. "The book of Nehemiah focuses on the events surrounding the third return from the Exile, in 444 B.C. Nehemiah served twice as governor of Judah. His first time as governor spanned twelve years (5:14), and ended when he returned to Babylon (13:6). He then returned to Jerusalem 'after certain days.' If the king was still Artaxerxes I, as seems likely, then Nehemiah's second governorship began prior to 424 B.C., when the king died." (*Nelson's*, 158)

### D. Historical setting.

1. Ezra and Nehemiah.
  - a. Twelve years had elapsed between the close of the book of Ezra and the beginning of Nehemiah. (cf. Ezra 7:8; 10:16-17; Neh. 1:1; 2:1) with Nehemiah then recording the events of the next twenty years.

- b. Ezra and Nehemiah worked together during the reading of the Law to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and instigated the written covenant between the people and God. (8:1, 9; 9:3; 10:1)
  - c. They also led the processions at the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. (12:31-43)
3. Pertinent dates and events.
- a. 464 B.C. Artaxerxes I succeeds his father as king of Persia.
  - b. 458 B.C. The second return of Jews to Jerusalem under Ezra.
  - c. 446 B.C. Enemies force the Jews to halt construction on the walls of Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:7-23) News of this reaches Nehemiah. (Neh. 1:3)
  - d. 445 B.C. Nehemiah leads a third small group to Jerusalem to reorganize the construction effort. He is appointed as governor of Judah.
  - e. 444 B.C. The walls are erected. (6:15)
  - f. 433 B.C. Nehemiah returns to the king's court (cf. 2:6; 13:6) after twelve years. (5:14)
  - g. 425 B.C.(?) Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem. (13:7)

E. Nehemiah the man.

1. He was the son Hachaliah of the tribe of Judah and was likely born in Babylon during the captivity.
  - a. His family was prominent in Shushan, the capital city of Persia. (1:1-2)
  - b. His brother, Hanani, had charge of the city of Jerusalem. (1:2; 7:2)
2. He was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes (1:11). "...Being a cupbearer doesn't sound very impressive. The position sounds comparable to the dishwasher, or at best to the butler or the table waiter. But the cupbearer was far more important than that. The cupbearer tasted the wine before the king drank it and he tasted the food before the king ate it. If the dinner was poisoned...no more cupbearer, but long live the king. And through the practice of this custom, an incredible intimacy developed between the taster and the partaker, between the cupbearer and the king. In fact, it has been suggested by ancient historians that the cupbearer, like no one other than the king's wife, was in a position to influence the monarch." (Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, p. 23)
3. His character. "Nehemiah is one of the really outstanding men in Old Testament history. A man of wealth, with high rank and unquestioned character, he devoted himself without reservation to a discouraging and apparently hopeless undertaking in the interest of the religious, social, and economic welfare of his people. With almost superhuman energy in the face of determined and clever opposition, he led the people in rebuilding the walls of their city. He showed his

loyalty to the law of Moses by his religious reforms. For the sake of his nation's future mission he took his stand against mixed marriages. His concern for the poor among his people is evinced by championing their cause against the abuses by their wealthy brethren. His courage, born of confidence in his own integrity, is revealed in his famous reply to the threats of his enemies—'Should such a one as I flee?' The quality and the depth of his spiritual life is shown in the prayers recorded in his book. His unselfish and generous nature is shown by the fact that he gave all these years of devoted service to his people without any monetary compensation whatsoever. Without his magnificent contribution one wonders if this discouraged and struggling little colony could have survived. Nehemiah deserves a place among the greatest benefactors of his race." (H.I. Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*, pp. 269-270)

3. His mission. He came to Jerusalem for no other reason than to rebuild it and its walls and to reestablish the glory of Israel. (2:5, 17)
4. His contemporaries.
  - a. While he served as governor of Judah, Ezra, the high priest, continued ministering to the spiritual needs of the Jews there. (cf. Neh, 8,12)
  - b. He also had the assistance of the prophet Malachi who challenged the abuses of the priesthood. Many of the evils denounced in the book of Malachi are part of the historical record of Nehemiah.

#### F. Purposes.

1. The book of Nehemiah is about rebuilding—the walls of Jerusalem and the spirituality of the Jews.
2. "The writer desired to set forth a true historical account of one of Israel's greatest events—the rebuilding after the restoration...This book also reminded people that this great work was done both at the direction of God and under His protective care. They were never to lose sight of the fact that all things which had any divine connection in Israel were done under God's protecting, directing care." (Deal, 121)

## II. Nehemiah: Champion Builder (Nehemiah 2-6)

- A. To rebuild the wall of Jerusalem was a huge task. (2:17-20)
- B. This great task was accomplished through the cooperation of the people. (ch. 3)
- D. The people were mocked as feeble (4:1-2) but they had a "mind to work." (4:6)
- E. Enemies conspired to stop the work (4:7-8) but the people continued to work and cooperated even more. (4:15-23)
- F. The people had a goal. They cooperated to see it accomplished. The wall was built. (6:15)

## Conclusion

1. Nothing worthwhile can be accomplished, even in the service of the Lord, without hard work and dedication.
2. Opposition to God's work can always be expected.
  - a. Satan still raises up enemies, both within and without, to hinder the work of the Lord just as he did then. (2:17-20)
  - b. We need to learn that opposition, no matter how strong, is no reason to stop doing the work of the Lord.
3. If outright opposition will not cause one to stop serving the Lord, often ridicule and making fun will prove effective.
  - a. The enemies of Nehemiah made fun of his work trying to discourage him, but without success. (4:1-6)
  - b. We must take our stand for right no matter what others may call us or how they may make fun or ridicule.
4. When everything else failed, his enemies tried to get Nehemiah to compromise. (6:2)
  - a. An old ploy of Satan is getting the righteous to compromise.
  - b. By this means he weakens their influence for good and the work of the Lord is hindered or completely stopped.
5. "Much in Nehemiah is of great value to the church; it is a pattern for progress in spiritual things. It also contains truths which have excellent personal application." (Deal, 121)

# Esther: A Champion of Courage

## Introduction

1. No book in the Bible more clearly illustrates God's loving, providential care for His people than the book of Esther.
  - c. "God's hand of providence and protection on behalf of His people is evident throughout the book of Esther, though His name does not appear once." (*Nelson's NKJV Bible, Slimline Reference Edition*, p. 435)
  - d. "The providence of Jehovah permeates the sacred text as we become acquainted with Ahasuerus the Persian Ruler, Vashti the modest Queen, Mordecai the faithful Jew and Haman the wicked counselor." (Johnny Ramsey, *The Book of Esther*, p. 2)
2. At the same time, God's purpose and will is served by His faithful servants Esther and Mordecai who set an example for all of God's people in all ages.
  - a. "But the spotlight (in the book of Esther–GT) is upon a beautiful young woman who comes upon the scene for a strategic occasion to preserve Abraham's seed from extinction." (Ramsey, *ibid.*)
  - b. The key verse of the book shows the purpose of God will be accomplished but if one wants salvation, he must actively and courageously seek and do the will of the Lord: "If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14)

## I. The Book of Esther

### A. Name: Esther.

1. The book carries the name of its main character.
2. "This book was named for its heroine. Her name means 'Ishtar' or 'Venus,' probably from her great beauty. This was the Persian name given her; originally her Hebrew name was Hadassah, and it meant 'myrtle,' from the myrtle wood trees, which are probably in some way associated with the thought of beauty." (William S. Deal, *Baker's Pictorial Introduction to the Bible*, p. 125)

### B. Author: Anonymous.

1. He was evidently familiar with Persian life—the architectural plan of the palace and court (1:5; 2:11, 21; 7:8), court etiquette (4:11; 8:11-18), palace intrigues (2:21-23; 7:9), banquet customs (1:6-8; 5:5). He also had access to official Persian court records (2:23; 6:1; 10:2) and to what Mordecai wrote concerning the regulations for the feast of Purim. (9:20-23, 29-32).

2. Suggested authors are Mordecai, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the men of the Great Synagogue.
3. "The authorship of this remarkable book has never been fully established. Some among the Jews assigned it to Mordecai; others to the men of the Great Synagogue who helped Ezra in establishing the canon; but neither among the Jews nor the early Christians was there a definite statement. It is apparent, however, that the book was written by a Jew, who understood Jewish customs and people, one who was a long-time resident in Persia, also understanding the customs of that land." (Deal, 127)

C. Time and time span.

1. Time. 450-440 B.C. It was probably written after the death of Ahasuerus (465 B.C.). (cf. Esther 1:1-2; 10:2)
2. Time span.
  - a. The events of the book occur before the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Chronologically, the events occur between chapters six and seven of the book of Ezra.
  - b. The events of Esther cover a period of ten years (483-473 B.C.), from the third year of Ahasuerus' reign (1:3) to the twelfth. (3; 7; 9:1)
  - c. "The events described in Esther occurred between 483-473 B.C., and fit between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, between the first return led by Zerubbabel and the second led by Ezra." (*Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, p. 162)

D. Historical setting.

1. The exile. "Surely no darker words are found in Scripture than those of the last chapter of 2 Chronicles... 'there was no remedy' (2 Chron. 36:16). What tragedy in those words! Israel's judgment of exile in Babylon was inevitable and just. If there would be restoration of any sort, it would be totally of God's grace. This is the bright message of Ezra..." (Jensen, *Jensen's Self-Study Guide*, p. 13)
2. Pertinent Biblical references.
  - a. Deuteronomy 28-30. Moses enumerates the blessings which will accompany faithfulness and the curses which would be consequences of disobedience. God also promised a period of restoration after that captivity. (cf. 30:1-10)
  - b. Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah prophesied that the duration of the captivity would be 70 years. From the first group of captives to the return of the first group (606-536 B.C.) was a period of 70 years. (cf. 2 Chron. 36:20-23)
  - c. Isaiah 44:28 - 45:13. A century and a half before it occurred, Isaiah named Cyrus as the one who would cause Israel to return to her homeland.

- d. Daniel 9. Daniel “was ministering in Babylon in the service of Darius the Mede (who was made king of Babylon by Cyrus, Dan. 5:31; 9:1) when the exiles received permission to return (cf. Dan 1:21; 6:28). Though aged Daniel did not return to Jerusalem with the exiles, he supported the project in spirit (see Dan. 9:1ff).” (Jensen, 10)
  - e. Haggai and Zechariah. These two prophets, as seen in the books which contain their message, sparked commitment in the returnees after they had stopped construction on the Temple while settling into their new homes. (Ezra 5:1; 6:14; Hag. 1:3-8)
  - f. Esther. The book of Esther describes the providential care of God for the Jews who remained dispersed abroad following the return of the first group of exiles.
3. The kingdom of Persia (the Medo-Persian Empire).
- a. Its kings.
    - 1) Cyrus (539-530 B.C.). He allowed other captives to return also. (Ezra 1)
    - 2) Cambyses (530-522 B.C.).
    - 3) Gaumata or Pseudo-Smerdis (522 B.C.). He was a usurper.
    - 4) Darius I (522-486 B.C.). (Ezra 5-6)
    - 5) Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.) (Ezra 4:6; Esther). He is also referred to as Ahasuerus.
    - 6) Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.). (Ezra 4:7-23; 7:1 - 10:44) Both Ezra and Nehemiah’s work belong to this period.
  - b. Its unique policy.
    - 1) The Babylonian policy was to displace the people of captured nations and resettle them abroad thus destroying any national ties and stemming rebellion.
    - 2) Cyrus reversed these policies. He appears to have been concerned with the well-being of his subjects and sought to win their support by his generosity. He allowed the people who had been taken captive to return to their homeland and even gave them protection and financial support to rebuild their cities and restore their worship and the houses of their gods. He appears to have been a polytheist who sought personal approval of **all** gods. This seems to have been the philosophy of all Persian monarchs. (6:10; 7:23)
4. The chronology of the return from Babylonian exile. As His people had gone into Babylon in three stages, the people of God return to Palestine in three stages.
- a. Zerubbabel (probably the same as Sheshbazzar, 1:11) and Joshua led the



- b. A replacement was sought for her and Esther, a Jewess, won the king's heart and became his queen. (2:1-20)
  - c. In those days, Mordecai, her cousin, discovered a plot against the king's life. (2:21-23)
2. Then great danger came upon the Jews.
- a. After Haman's promotion to second in command, he demanded that he be worshiped as a god. When Mordecai refused, Haman plotted to kill the entire Jewish race. (ch. 3)
  - b. Mordecai petitioned Esther for help because even she would not be spared. (ch. 4).
  - c. Esther approached the king, endangering her own life (4:10-11,16), and entreated him and Haman to come to a banquet she had prepared for them. She requested their presence again the next day. (5:1-8)
  - d. Burning with rage because Mordecai would not bow to him, later that day Haman constructed a gallows on which to hang him. (5:9-14)
  - e. Suffering from insomnia that night, the king requested that the chronicles of his reign be read to him. He discovered that Mordecai had not been rewarded for thwarting an assassination plot. (6:1-3)
  - f. The next morning the king asked Haman, who had come seeking permission to kill Mordecai, how he would honor the man in whom the king delighted. Thinking he was surely the man to whom the king referred, he was put in charge of honoring Mordecai. (6:4-14)
3. At Esther's second banquet, she revealed the plot against her and the rest of the people and named Haman as the one responsible.
- a. Haman was hanged on his own gallows. (ch. 7)
  - b. Mordecai was appointed to the position Haman had held and authorized to write decrees allowing the Jews to resist on the day of the massacre. (ch. 8)
4. The Jews were delivered and slew their tormentors. (9:1-17) To remember this day of deliverance, Esther and Mordecai instituted the Feast of Purim. (9:18-32)
5. The book closes describing Mordecai's advancement, thus assuring protection and care over all the Jews scattered throughout the nations. (ch. 10)

### III. Lessons from Esther

- A. "It (the book of Esther) provides the Christian reader with a remarkable demonstration of the courage, faith, and heroic action of the persons involved in the story." (Deal, 126)
- 1. Queen Vashti.
    - a. A lesson to young ladies: never for anyone or any occasion, descend to the depths of displaying your body for lustful purposes.
    - b. A woman's body is sacred and no man has the right to see it disrobed except her husband.

2. Esther's courage and Mordecai's wisdom resulted in a great blessing to a great many people.
  3. "Mordecai's unwavering dedication to the Almighty's sublime leadership is one of the rich fibers of the entire Bible. That man of God would not bow down to Haman's pride or pseudo-authority. It takes genuine depth to see through human threats and pompous actions—especially when one is in the definite minority and struggling for survival." (Ramsey, 5)
- B. "Another brilliant message of Esther is always be ready for service in God's vineyard. Mordecai seized the opportunity to prepare Esther 'for such a time as this' (4:14) and the pretty damsel was ready to engage in the necessary dangers attendant to the challenge." (Ramsey, 4)
1. Esther proved to be courageous, versatile and perceptive in her response to the will of God and her attitude toward service.
  2. It is the Christian's duty to be alert, diligent and submissive as a servant of the Lord.
- C. The providential care of God for His people no matter where they may be.
1. Although God's name is not found in the book, a reading of it shows divine activity on every page. An example: Haman is hanged on the very gallows he prepared for Mordecai because of his wickedness.
    - a. Mordecai's courage in saving the king's life received no immediate notice or reward.
    - b. Yet, in the very shadow of certain death on Haman's gallows, the deed came to light and received its proper credit.
    - c. The Lord's time schedule may differ from ours but His memory is infallibly correct.
    - d. Always remember that God, in His providence, is behind the scenes and vengeance belongs to Him. (Rom. 12:19)
  2. "Oh, how we need to learn that the destiny of the world is in His almighty grasp and not in the puny machinations of men! Beleaguered saints in John's day learned that Caesar had not pushed God off the throne of glory (Revelation 4:1) just as Babylon's ruler acknowledged the God of Israel as the One who holds sway in the lives of men (Daniel 3:29). For Christians today to live in doubt and fear—in view of the awesome power of our Father above—is but an open confession of our shallow concept of creative genius. Since 'He ruleth by His power forever' (Psalms 66:7) wisdom demands that we recognize His absolute sovereignty." (Ramsey, 3-4)

## **Conclusion**

1. "This seventeenth Old Testament book tells us of the perfect blend of God's providence coupled with fervent spiritual resolve on the part of Mordecai, a faithful descendent of Abraham and his beautiful, yet loyal kinswoman Esther, in preserving Israel from extinction." (Ramsey, 14-15)
2. May each of us, trusting in the great love and providential care of our Heavenly Father, have that same resolve, courage and commitment, to serve God faithfully so that we might be a blessing to the cause of the Lord, to all our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the world who so desperately needs the influence and compassion of those who are truly dedicated to Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

# Peter: A Champion of Spiritual Growth

## Introduction

1. The last words from the inspired pen of the apostle Peter encouraged Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet. 3:18)
  - a. Spiritual growth was obviously a very important topic to him.
  - b. It was a topic with which he could closely identify.
2. The life of Peter stands out as an example of the transforming power of the gospel.
  - a. The man who first responded to the call of Jesus by the Sea of Galilee was nothing like the apostle who stood on Pentecost and delivered the bold sermon recorded in Acts 2 or the old man who penned the epistles which bear his name.
  - b. “Peter was the most human of the Twelve and the most valuable to Christ; a diamond in the rough, with great polishing possibilities. He was transfigured and transformed. He developed.” (Frank S. Mead, *Who’s Who in the Bible*, p. 195)
  - c. “Whatever problems Peter faced as a disciple, he shines like new armor in the book of Acts.” (William L. Coleman, *A Dozen Daring Christians*, p. 56)
3. There are great lessons to be learned from a study of Peter for, of the twelve apostles, we are told more about him than any other and, furthermore, most of us can identify more with him for the Bible presents him with all his flaws.
  - a. “Of all the human personalities whom Jesus remade, Simon Peter is the one (next to Paul) about whom we know the most, and the man who seems most like ourselves.” (William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, p. 45)
  - b. “It is possible to follow the rapid changes in the growth of Simon, the simple fisherman of Galilee, into Peter ‘Prince of Apostles’ (Foakes-Jackson). He came to justify the promise of service held out by Jesus, but only after severe sifting by Satan. When he did turn, he strengthened his brethren. The process by which this goal was reached will repay the study of any one who seeks to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (A. T. Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Simon Peter*, p. x)

## I. Peter During the Ministry of Jesus

- A. His life before meeting Jesus.
  1. Also called Simon or Simeon (Acts 15: 14; 2 Pet. 1:1), Peter was born in Bethsaida, a village near the Sea of Galilee. (John 1 :44)
  2. His father's name was Jonas (Matt. 16:17) or John. (John 1:42)
  3. Along with his father and his brother Andrew, he was a fisherman at Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. (Matt. 8:14)
  4. He resided at Capernaum as did his wife’s mother. (1 Cor. 9:5)

B. The call of Peter.

1. His brother Andrew brought him to Jesus who gave him the surname “Cephas.” (John 1 :40-42)
  - a. “There is something ironic about the name Peter. When Jesus first met Peter his name was Simon, a name that was quite as common then as Dick or Tom is now. But Jesus renamed Simon, giving him the surname of Peter. How strange this new name must have seemed to those who knew Simon. Perhaps they recoiled in laughter when they heard his new name. It seemed to make about as much sense as calling a bald man ‘Curly’ or a stout man ‘Slim.’” (John David Stewart, *The Twelve*, p. 43)
  - b. “When Simon first met Jesus he was anything but a rock. He was impetuous and outspoken, rarely thinking before he talked.” (Stewart, *ibid.*)
2. Harkening to the call of Jesus, he became His constant companion and one of His apostles. (Matt. 4:19; Luke 5:10; Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:14-16)

C. Peter’s ardor, earnestness and courage made him a leader among the disciples from the very first.

1. His name always appears first in the list of the Apostles. (Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13)
2. He, along with James and John, was also one of the three in the inner circle of disciples accompanying Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

D. Peter was not anything like the other eleven.

1. He was impulsive often acting impetuously before giving thought to what he was doing or saying.
2. Examples of the impulsive nature of Peter.
  - a. Seeing Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee, he jumped in the water when wisdom might have suggested he consider the depth of his faith first. (Matt. 14:22-33)
  - b. At the transfiguration, he spoke up when he should have been watching and listening. (Matt. 17: 1-8)
  - c. In the upper room when Jesus was washing His disciples feet, he spoke up and disclosed the fact that he did not understand what was really going on. (John 13:2-17)
  - d. When Jesus was arrested, he took his sword and cut off a man’s ear. (John 18:10)
  - e. In Matthew 26:31-35, he affirmed his loyalty of Jesus by saying, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” but a few short hours later he denied Jesus three times.

3. "Christ saw potential beyond the facade. If Peter was noisy, it didn't rattle the Messiah. When Peter was impetuous, Jesus was patient. Even when Simon was cowardly, Christ could easily see beyond that. Peter would make it. All he needed was time and understanding." (Coleman, 57)

## II. Peter's Low Point as a Disciple: His Denial of Christ

### A. The circumstances of the denial.

1. He had been with Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry.
2. He had expressed great confidence in Jesus. (Matt. 16:13-17)
3. He had said he was willing to die for and with Jesus. (Matt. 26:31-35; John 13:36-38)
4. He had defended Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. (John 18:1-11 )
5. He had fled with the other disciples (Mark 14:50; Matt. 26:56) but then followed "at a distance." (Luke 22:54)
6. He denied the Son of God.
  - a. He, along with John, had gone to the court of the high priest. (John 18:15-17)
  - b. He denied Jesus three times. (Mark 14:66-72)
  - c. The Lord looked upon him. (Luke 22:61)
  - d. He remembered the words of the Lord and he went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:61b-62)

### B. Some precedents of the denial.

1. Self-confidence. (Matt. 26:31-35; Luke 22:31-33; John 13:37)
  - a. He seemingly felt no need to pray for strength. (Mark 14:32-42)
  - b. He became an easy victim for Satan. (Luke 22:31-32)
  - c. He was frightened, not by Pilate or a soldier, but by a maid. (Mark 14:66- 72)
2. He followed Jesus from a distance. (Matt. 26:58; John 18:15-18)
  - a. John followed closest to the Lord and he was unmolested.
  - b. Peter lingered among the enemies of Jesus and exposed himself to their attacks.

### C. Things which magnify his denial.

1. He had been fully warned. (Matt. 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34)
2. The time during which the denials were uttered.
  - a. Jesus was passing through the most trying ordeal of His life.
  - b. Peter added to the suffering of Jesus.
3. He had received many special tokens of the Lord's love for him.
  - a. He had been allowed to be present at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8) and in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Mark 14:32-33)
  - b. He had been given the "keys of the kingdom." (Matt. 16:19)

4. The manner in which the denials were made.
  - a. He was not content with one denial but cursed and swore and denied Jesus three times.
  - b. He pretended to be worse than he was.

### **III. Peter After the Death, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus**

A. Peter was a changed man following the resurrection of Jesus.

1. No longer unstable and impetuous, he became a dedicated servant of the Lord who boldly laid his life on the line for his Master.
2. "It is interesting to see how greatly he improved after the resurrection." (Coleman, 57)
3. "If the life of Christ had a profound effect on Peter the fisherman, the resurrection was explosive. No longer the vacillating fickle follower, Simon's determination after Christ's resurrection became immovable." (Coleman, 58)

B. Examples of Peter's transformation.

1. On the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, he preached the gospel in its fullness for the first time (vv. 14-41) and continued to preach it (Acts 3:11-26) even though he was put in prison for his preaching. (Acts 4:22; 5:1-11)
2. He rebuked the hypocrisy and lies of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5:1-11)
3. He was sent with John to Samaria to investigate reports that some Samaritans had accepted the gospel. (Acts 8:14-15) While there he rebuked Simon the sorcerer for wishing to purchase the gift of God with money. (Acts 8:20-23)
4. He preached to the first Gentile converts even though he knew the Jewish Christians would be upset with him. (Acts 9:32 - 10:48; 10:28; 11:2-3)
5. He was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa but was miraculously released. (Acts 12:1-17)
6. He took a leading part in the Jerusalem conference over circumcision. (Acts 15:1-21; Gal. 2:6-10)
7. Tradition says he was crucified "upside-down" in Rome because he said he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as Jesus.

### **IV .Peter's Formula for Growth (2 Peter 1:5-11)**

- A. The things listed in this text are to be added to one's faith, i.e., they must be incorporated into one's life as a Christian.
- B. The elements of growth.
  1. Virtue. The determination to do right.
  2. Knowledge. Knowledge of the word of God because it is the only source which can tell you what is right.

3. Self control. The application of the above knowledge in one's life using it to govern one's thoughts and actions.
  4. Perseverance. Remaining steadfast to the Lord and His cause.
  5. Godliness. Being like God, as He would have you to be.
  6. Brotherly kindness. Tender affection toward brethren in Christ.
  7. Love. Devotion to God, Christ and your fellow man which is expressed in obedience to God and service to man.
- C. If one is to be fruitful in his service to Christ, these things must abound in his life.
1. The one who lacks them is blind to what his life in Christ should be.
  2. One must make a diligent effort to add them to his faith and thus begin to develop to maturity in Jesus.
  3. Such growth makes salvation sure, keeps one from stumbling and grants him entrance into the eternal kingdom of the Son.

### **Conclusion**

"Peter is an example of a man who was transformed by the power of Christ. He was changed from a fickle, tempestuous person into an individual with rock-like character. He even amazed those who knew him. When he was standing before the Sanhedrin, he spoke out so forcefully that they were amazed at his boldness. But they also recognized the reason for Peter's transformation. He had been with Jesus." (Stewart, 45-46)

# Paul: A Champion of Evangelism

## Introduction

1. The apostle Paul is one of the most amazing characters to grace the pages of the New Testament.
  - a. No other person in the New Testament scriptures demonstrates his appreciation for the grace and mercy of God more than Paul.
  - b. After his conversion, he fully devoted himself to the service of his Lord and the proclamation of His word.
2. It is profitable to study the life of this great man especially noting his work as an evangelist.

## I. Saul: The Zealous Jew

- A. As Saul of Tarsus, he was one of the foremost men in the Jewish nation.
  1. His first mention is at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58) where he was consenting to Stephen's death. (Acts 8:1)
  2. Following this event, he continued to persecute Christians.
    - a. He consented to their imprisonments and deaths. (Acts 26:9-11)
    - b. "Some suppose that Paul here refers to casting his vote as a member of the Sanhedrin; in which case he must have been married and the father of a family. But this there is no reason for believing (compare 1 Cor. 7:7,8); and the phrase may be taken as expressing merely moral assent and approval." (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, p. 286)
- B. Paul assessed his position among the Jews in Philippians 3:4-6.
  1. "Circumcised the eighth day." This was the official sign or token of the covenant the Jews had with God. (Gen. 17:11)
  2. "Of the stock of Israel." He was not a proselyte but one of the original stock, a descendant of Jacob.
  3. "Of the tribe of Benjamin."
    - a. This tribe was always respected as a faithful tribe.
    - b. It gave Israel her first king.
    - c. It held a place of honor in the army and was faithful to Judah under Rehoboam when the division of the kingdom took place following Solomon's death.
  4. "A Hebrew of the Hebrews."
    - a. He was a Hebrew of Hebrew parents.
    - b. His parents had not lost their identity as had the Greek-speaking Jews.

5. "Concerning the law, a Pharisee."
    - a. The Pharisees were the strictest sect of the Jews.
    - b. Those Judaizing teachers Paul taught against needed to remember that at one time he had been a strict Jew.
  6. "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church." There was no one who had more ardor in embracing the cause against the church than Saul.
  7. "Concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." No one, not even his fellow Jews, could make an acceptable charge against him as to his efforts in keeping the law.
- C. Paul spoke of his background in Acts 22:3-4.
1. "A Jew."
  2. "Born in Tarsus of Cilicia" which, according to Acts 21:39, was "no mean city."
  3. "Brought up in this city." Jerusalem.
  4. "At the feet of Gamaliel."
    - a. Gamaliel was one of the foremost teachers of his day.
    - b. Gamaliel served as an advisor to the council and he was known by all. (Acts 5:34)
  5. "Taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law."
    - a. He was given the best education possible in Jewish circles.
    - b. Gamaliel had no regard for Greek learning but was given the highest title given a Jewish teacher—"Rabban" or "our teacher."
    - c. Thus Paul was educated as a Jew by Jews for Jewish purposes.
  6. "Zealous toward God."
  7. "Persecuted this Way to the death." See Acts 7:58-60.
- D. Later, as the apostle Paul, he could never recount or assess his background without giving glory to God for bringing him out of it. (Acts 22:6-21; Phil. 3:7-17)

## **II. The Conversion from Saul to Paul (Acts 9:1-19)**

- A. Saul left Jerusalem for Damascus with letters from the High Priest.
- B. About noon a light came from heaven and he fell to the earth blind.
- C. A voice spoke to him in the Hebrew tongue. Those who were with him heard it but did not understand its message. (Acts 9:7; 22:9)
- D. He asked who it was that spoke to him and Jesus identified Himself.
- E. He was convinced and went as told into the city and waited three days.
- F. Ananias, a devout preacher, came, restored Saul's sight and told him to be baptized.
- G. Saul obeyed and was baptized to "wash away his sins." (Acts 22:16)
- H. Saul the persecutor had now become Paul the apostle.

### III. Paul: The Devoted Evangelist

#### A. How others viewed him.

1. Some, in spite of his conversion, viewed him as an unwholesome person.
  - a. At the time of his conversion, most were amazed or afraid of him.
    - 1) They were amazed because they knew him from before. (Acts 9:21)
    - 2) They were afraid, for if they were Christians, his former deeds were vividly implanted on their minds. (Acts 9:26)
  - b. The Jews considered him:
    - 1) An apostate, one who persuaded men to worship contrary to the law. (Acts 18:12-13)
    - 2) An insurrectionist who wanted to stir up trouble and start seditions among all the Jews. (Acts 24:5)
  - c. Festus thought he was insane. (Acts 26:24-25)
2. Others viewed him in a favorable light.
  - a. The elders of the church in Ephesus loved him and were concerned with his welfare. (Acts 20:36-38)
  - b. Heathens thought he was a god because of the miracles he performed. (Acts 14:11; 28:6) This was not Paul's desire and was done without his consent. (Acts 14:14-18)
  - c. Jesus considered him a chosen vessel to bear His name. (Acts 9:15-16)
  - d. The apostle Peter, as stated in 2 Peter 3:15-16, viewed him as:
    - 1) "Beloved." He loved Paul even though (or maybe because) Paul had withstood him to the face. (Gal. 2:11-12)
    - 2) "Brother." A term of endearment and equality.
    - 3) "According to the wisdom given to him, has written." A recognition of the inspiration of Paul's writings.
    - 4) "In all his epistles...are some things hard to understand." He understood that Paul understood and wrote concerning the deeper things of the gospel.

#### B. How Paul viewed himself. (The keys to his success as an evangelist)

1. Servant. (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1)
  - a. He refers to himself in this way on at least five occasions.
  - b. A servant is "a slave, a bondman, man of servile condition; a. one who gives himself up wholly to another's will." (J.H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, pp. 157-158)
  - c. Paul willingly gave up all for the blessings he had in Jesus.
    - 1) He counted all the prestige of his former life as a loss. (Phil. 3:8)
    - 2) He counted his life as being not dear to himself. (Acts 20:24)
    - 3) He willingly obeyed every wish of his Master.

2. Preacher. (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11)
  - a. He only used this term in his epistles to Timothy.
    - 1) The same word in verb form is used in the command to Timothy to “preach the word.” (2 Tim. 4:1)
    - 2) He was what he wanted Timothy to be.
  - b. He did not preach from personal desire but from a feeling of obligation and love. (1 Cor. 9:16)
    - 1) He felt a great sense of debt and obligation because of the grace given to him. (Rom. 1:14)
    - 2) His obligation was to all men and he was constantly ready to pay his debt—he paid with the gospel.
  - c. It was as a preacher that he was able to plant the seed of the word in the hearts of people. (1 Cor. 3:6)
  - d. In his role as a preacher, he begat many in the gospel. (1 Cor. 4:14-15)
3. Apostle. (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; etc.)
  - a. He began eight of his epistles with this term.
  - b. He referred to himself as an “apostle” in at least 17 different places.
  - c. An apostle is “a delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders.” (Thayer, 68)
  - d. He identified himself with the twelve who had accompanied Jesus during His personal ministry.
    - 1) While not trained at the feet of Jesus, he declared that the knowledge he possessed was given him directly by revelation. (Gal. 1:12)
    - 2) He affirmed he was not inferior to the most eminent apostle. (2 Cor. 11:5)
  - e. He served in every way as an apostle of Jesus.
    - 1) He performed miracles by the authority of Christ. (Acts 19:13-15)
    - 2) He preached with power the gospel as revealed by the Holy Spirit. (see Rom. 1:16; Gal. 1:6-12)
  - f. It was as an apostle that he considered himself as a wise master builder. (see 1 Cor. 3 and Eph. 2)
4. Earthen vessel. (2 Cor. 4:7)
  - a. Notice the statement in 2 Corinthians 4:7.
    - 1) “Treasure.” The gospel (Kingdom of heaven). (Matt. 13:44-46)
    - 2) “Earthen.” Pertaining to the earth, that which is physical.
    - 3) “Vessels.” Containers.

- b. The gospel was given to men (physical beings) and was not preached by angels (spiritual beings) or the Holy Spirit Himself.
  - c. The earthen vessels were the inspired men who carried the gospel to mankind.
  - d. Paul, in his teachings and writings, was inspired of God. (Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Cor. 14:37)
5. Ambassador. (2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20)
- a. An ambassador is one who has been:
    - 1) Personally selected by the chief executive of a government. (Acts 9)
    - 2) Sent into a foreign state. (Acts 26:17)
    - 3) Given credentials to prove his position. (Acts 28:3-4)
    - 4) Sent to represent the chief executive. (2 Cor. 5:20)
  - b. The term could be applied to Paul in every aspect of its meaning.
  - c. He could not establish a home because of the nature of his task. (1 Cor. 4:11)
6. Prisoner. (Phile. 1)
- a. Paul often suffered as a prisoner of the state. (2 Cor. 11:23)
  - b. He also thought of himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ (Phile. 1), i.e., in captivity to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:5)
    - 1) Christ was the great captivator. (Eph. 4:8)
    - 2) Christ had laid hold on Paul. (Phil. 3:12)

#### **IV. Qualities of Paul the Evangelist**

- A. He considered himself a debtor. (Rom. 1:14-17)
- B. He had respect for the gospel. (1 Cor. 1:17; Rom. 1:16)
- C. He was honest and sincere. (2 Cor. 4:1-7; Gal. 4:16)
- D. He declared that which was profitable. (Acts 20:18-35)
- E. His message was limited. (1 Cor. 2:1-5; Phil. 2:5)
- F. He did not back down from those who taught contrary to the doctrine of Christ. (Rom. 6:17-18)

#### **Conclusion**

- 1. It is impossible not to be impressed with the life of this great man and his example of devotion and service to Christ and his fellow man.
- 2. Though traditionally it is believed that his life came to an end with the axe of the headsman in Rome, he lives on with the Lord (Phil. 1:23) and in the hearts and lives of all who love the Lord.
- 3. May we, in evangelism and in all other areas, make our lives more like his. (1 Cor. 11:1)



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