

To the End there shall be War

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Date: 17 July 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles this evening and read in two places. If you would turn, first of all, to the very beginning of the book of Nehemiah, that's page 398, I think, if you have one of our blue church Bibles.

And then also, if you put your finger into Daniel chapter 9, towards the end of the chapter, page 747. And it'll help you also, I think, if you just have a look at the colored diagram on one side of the handouts that you have this evening.

We've been studying for a little while the book of Ezra, and we've had a quick look also at Haggai the prophet who ministered in the time of Ezra. And I thought that we would continue in that same period of history while it was familiar in our minds and continue with understanding and learning some of the themes.

It's been easy to see, I think, already in our studies in Ezra that Edward's been giving us, that this is a period of great conflict, great battles for the people of God.

And that's something, I think, that this period of the return from exile highlights so very particularly for us. But of course, it is just part of the great ongoing cosmic conflict, which is the battle for the redemption of man, and the battle for the establishing of the kingdom of God on earth, that in fact is the whole of the story right from the beginning in Genesis to the end in Revelation.

[1 : 32] And that's what this diagram seeks to lay out for you. The Bible story is the story of the onward march of the kingdom of God. And the great victory is won against the devil himself in the person of the Son of Man, who is the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the focal point of that whole heavenly conflict is at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, where Jesus' resurrection announces the great victory.

But of course, only in Jesus' return will the full extent of that earthly conflict finally be over. And so what that means is that all through history, right from the beginning of the Bible, right to the end, that includes us now today, the Christian church throughout the world today, that whole story is a story of conflict, of warfare, right to the end.

The great cosmic heavenly conflict between God and his angels and the devil and his angels, that's been played out in the story of this earth and its peoples, and will be so right till the very end.

And the earthly history of Israel, and indeed Christ's church, is the playing out of that great conflict. And that's the conflict that we see in this particular period of history, whether it's Ezra and Nehemiah and the people who are back in the land of Israel, rebuilding the temple and its walls, or the same period, whether it's Daniel or Esther, still in Persia, Babylonia, living for God in that place there.

[3 : 19] And it's the same conflict that you and I are still involved with today in our Christian lives, along with the whole church all the world over. So it's that theme of conflict, I think, that these particular books of the Bible open up for us so very clearly and in such a down-to-earth way.

So we're going to read just the very first few verses of Nehemiah this evening. We're going to begin our study properly next week. But I want a bit of an overview this evening. You'll recall the story of Ezra, where in 539 BC, the Emperor Cyrus decrees that the people of God are to return back to Israel and begin the rebuilding.

That begins a couple of years later, and immediately, conflict arises. Opposition to the work, which then stops for many, many years.

And you'll remember that Ezra tells us through his book that it's not only in those years that he's talking about that the conflict was there. It goes on all through the reigns of all these different kings who are on the other side of the sheet here.

Both Darius, Darius I, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, all down that history line, which lasts for nearly a hundred years. And here we are at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah in the 20th year, as it says.

[4 : 42] Now, it happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th year. That is the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. So that's about 13 years after Ezra came to Jerusalem, about 90 years after the first exiles.

First came back to Jerusalem under God's decree to rebuild the temple and the city. And here we see that Nehemiah tells us that it happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th years, as I was in Susa, the capital of Persia, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me that the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. Well, turn over to Daniel chapter 9.

Because why is it that all these decades after God decreed for his people to go back and the emperor put them back to start this great rebuilding work, why is it that after all that time, there's still such great trouble and so much battle surrounding the people of God?

[6 : 08] Well, in Daniel chapter 9 and 10, Daniel prays and receives a great vision from God that explains so much of the heavenly picture behind what is happening.

Just a few verses. Daniel chapter 9 and verse 25. Know therefore, Daniel, and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks and 62 weeks.

It shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the 62 weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.

And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood. And to the end, there shall be war.

Desolations are decreed. Look down to chapter 10, verse 1. And in the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, a word was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belshazzar.

[7 : 22] And that word was true. And it was a great conflict or and it concerned a great war. And he understood the word.

And had understanding of the vision. Amen. Amen. Well, I suppose our text for this evening is from Daniel chapter 9, verse 26.

To the end, there shall be war. Before we get into the detail of the book of Nehemiah next week, I want to step back this evening and have a look at the big picture of the whole Bible story to get a wide-angled view, if you like, to help us see where this story fits.

And I think that will help us learn best from it. It's important, isn't it? I think from time to time to remind ourselves that although the Bible is in 66 books written over many hundreds of years, nearly two millennia, it does tell one single story.

And it's the story of the coming of the kingdom of God. That is the complete and the perfect reign and rule of God coming to the uttermost ends of the universe, the entire created order.

[8 : 46] The very first chapter of the Bible lays out that aim. God creates mankind and he says, let them, as the image bearers of God in this created order, let them have dominion.

Let them reign, reign over all things. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Reign over this created order.

Take the beauty and the perfection and the blessing of the garden of God, of God's own dwelling place and bring it to the ends of the earth to fill this world with his glory.

That is God's plan and that is his purpose. And when you turn to the very end of the Bible, the last couple of chapters, Revelation 21 and 22, what do we find? We find the garden of God has become a wonderful, vast, you might call it a garden city, filled with the people of God and filled with blessing.

God's people sharing in the tree of life and rejoicing forever and ever, reigning with him just as God purposed it to be.

[9 : 52] But of course, there's a lot of chapters in between those two bookends. And they tell, don't they, that the fulfillment of God's goal in creation comes only through a very long and sad and painful story, although ultimately through a very wonderful story, which is the story of redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that story is the story of great war, of holy war. Because only through a great cosmic victory over all evil can this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

And that's because the dark powers of evil invaded this world and it became a kingdom in rebellion against its Lord and Master.

That's what Genesis 3 depicts for us. As you know, when humanity rebelled against God under the influence of the one that Revelation chapter 12 calls that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan.

So instead of being the bearers of God's image and rule in this world, human beings became instead the bearers of evil, the servants of the evil one, the God of this world, as the apostle Paul calls him, calls Satan.

[11 : 08] But God, in his infinite mercy, did not abandon this world, didn't abandon human beings, but rather he promised to become man himself and to do what the first man failed to do, to multiply a seed of his own, to turn this earth into his kingdom and to fill it with his glory.

And so even as God pronounces a curse upon man for his sin and upon the whole of his world, in Genesis 3.15, he promises that not only will there at last be a descendant of the woman who will crush forever the serpent himself, but that he would have all through history a true seed, a people of faith, into whom God himself would put enmity, struggle, battle, warfare against the serpent and the natural seed of the serpent.

Those who oppose God and hate God and oppose God's people and his cause in this world. And because before all things will at last be as God has purposed and planned, the devil and all his seed must be utterly destroyed.

And so the story of the whole Bible is one long story of that bitter holy warfare. The war between the seed of promise, that is the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent, all of those who are opposed to God and his kingdom.

Now make no mistake, the victory of God in this created order can only be through the utter destruction of the devil and all these demonic cosmic forces of evil.

[12 : 59] And that's the wonderful picture that we see in the end of the book of Revelation. But chapter 21 and 22 can only come after chapter 20 pictures the devil and all of his own being thrown forever into the lake of fire, the place of everlasting destruction.

Now that is the final denouement, the end of the great story. But that conflict is seen everywhere through the pages of the story of the Bible.

It begins immediately in Genesis chapter 4 where you have Cain, who is the seed of the serpent, murdering Abel, his brother, the man of faith. Then you have Cain's offspring, we're told, who grew up and built cities, the city of man opposed to God and opposed to the people of faith, the seed of Seth, who started to call upon the name of the Lord.

It goes on to Genesis chapter 11 in the story of the Tower of Babel, which epitomizes the city of man and all its self-aggrandizement and power arrayed against God, but with utter futility.

And on and on goes exactly the same story. We see it in Abraham's battles, in the battles of Israel against Egypt and their kings and their gods and then against Canaan, as God, the great king, leads his own people against the kings and the gods of Canaan.

[14 : 23] He wages holy war against their vile gods with their horrible, terrible sacrifices of baby children, their violence, their sexual perversity and so on.

The story of the Bible is one great story of holy war. It's the war between the offspring of the kingdom of God and the offspring of the devil himself.

I don't know, you might think that kind of talk sounds rather outlandish. But let me tell you, that is precisely the way that the Lord Jesus Christ himself talks about his own ministry.

If you read in John's Gospel chapter 8, you'll see he confronts his opponents and he says, You are the children, the offspring of your father, the devil.

In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus talks about building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. So clearly Jesus saw his own mission as a great war against the kingdom of hell and against its ruler, the devil himself and all his minions.

[15 : 36] And of course, the decisive blow to crush the evil one forever, that was dealt at the cross. Jesus himself says in John chapter 12, On the eve of Calvary, now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself, rescuing his own offspring from the bondage to evil and for his glorious kingdom.

And that is the message of the New Testament Gospel. Again and again in Colossians 2, Paul says that Christ disarmed rulers and authorities of evil forever through his death on the cross.

Victory was won. And the resurrection of Jesus proclaims that victory. The Gospel is the news of victory. Your God reigns.

No longer the God of this world. But of course, the New Testament tells us that in God's great mercy, instead of destroying all his enemies right now, he has declared a day of salvation.

[16 : 48] A great time when human beings may find acceptance with him, when they can abandon allegiance to God's enemy and bow the knee to him and surrender to his great victorious Christ.

Now is the day of salvation, says Paul. And we are ambassadors for Christ, for this victorious king. And God is making his appeal through us.

Be reconciled to God now, while his mercy can still be found. And that means that we, the church today, Christian people today, we are in his victorious conquering army.

We are awaiting the final judgment of God on all his enemies, who in the end will not submit. But we're calling them to surrender, to change sides. We are waging holy war with Christ himself.

Although, as Paul tells us, of course, our weapons are not earthly weapons of warfare. We fight evil. We release captives with the weapons of the word of God, with the glorious gospel message.

[17 : 54] The life-giving gospel, the liberating gospel. That is what unblinds eyes. That's what releases hearts that are bound by Satan. Even as we pray to God to release prisoners from bondage to evil.

And our battles, the New Testament tells us plainly, are not simply with flesh and blood. But as Paul says in Ephesians 6, it's on your sheet there, it is against the cosmic powers of darkness in the heavenly realms.

And that will be so right until the end, because to the end, there will be war. And what Daniel saw in his vision, that God's holy city, that his kingdom would be built, although through a great conflict right to the end, that is exactly what Jesus himself affirmed in his teaching.

There will be ongoing battles against the powers of hell. But the end will come, said Jesus. And victory is assured, and the gates of hell will not prevail, because our Savior has triumphed.

As Revelation chapter 12 tells us, the devil will make furious war against God's people in this world, but he knows that his time is short. That's why he makes such furious war.

[19 : 17] But you see, what we are engaged in as Christian people in the world today is simply part of this same holy war, this same conflict to establish the everlasting kingdom of God, the same conflict that has been waging right since the very beginning, and all through history.

In the Old Testament, it's the battle to prepare for the first coming of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, to come in history to redeem his people. In the New Testament, and in the history of the church ever since, it's the battle that prepares for the second coming of the Lord Jesus, to end the world, to judge the world, and to bring in his eternal reign over all things.

But it's all part of the same story. It's one great battle. And that means, doesn't it, that we should never be surprised that we should see the same kind of patterns at work all the way through the scriptures, and in the church today.

Whether it's the story of the gospel being taken to the ends of the earth and the acts of the apostles, and we see battles without and battles within the Christian church. Or whether it's the story of the returned exiles, rebuilding the temple and the walls, and facing battles without and battles within the community of God's people.

And you see, we need to keep this big picture of the unfolding story. We need to keep it clear in our minds. Otherwise, we won't really understand how what we read in the Bible, in these pages in front of us, how it relates to our own lives, and to the church today, and to our part in the same story, which is still going on, and still has to reach its great final denouement in the coming of Christ.

[21 : 02] So before we get into the detail of this particular book, I want to think about this big picture, of this whole period of history, the return from exile, the whole stage of history that we're dealing with in these various books of the Bible, because they're all very much bound together in this period after the exile.

And the chart here, the handout on the page with these columns, is there to just try and help us see the chronology and where these books fit together. Because we have a history of events going on on two different stages simultaneously.

In the one stage, we have Babylon and Persia, where the exiles are coming back from, but some people are still there. And Daniel is still there. And his whole story takes part in the Persian court.

And then Esther is still there. And her story unfolds there. While at the same time, back in Jerusalem, you've got the story of Ezra and Nehemiah unfolding. Then of course, you've got the related prophets who bring the word of God into these different situations.

Haggai and Zechariah, back in Jerusalem, and Malachi. And also, of course, Daniel himself, who is a prophet and receives the word from God. I hope that little chart will just be helpful to you, just also this evening.

[22 : 16] But in your own reading, in your own study of these things, these are often neglected parts of the Bible. And in fact, it is a very, very crucial period in the history of salvation.

John Calvin, he, in his expositions of the prophets, he calls the return from exile, after the appalling tragedy of the exile, he calls it, in a very real sense, the beginning of the kingdom of Christ.

Because it begins, this uninterrupted period, leading up to the great act of redemption in the coming of Jesus himself, to Calvary, and then, of course, awaiting his return in glory.

And certainly, it is the last great movement in the Old Testament, the last great movement in the history of salvation before the coming of the Messiah. And so, we should hardly be surprised, should we, that it's a period of intense opposition to God's people and to his purpose.

For the Christ to come, and for Christ to come to his temple and to his land and to his people, the people must be back in the land and there must be a temple and a city. And there must be the preservation of the holy seed that Jesus might at last come.

[23 : 34] So, I want to think particularly about just four things this evening. And the first is this, and it is the relentless warfare around God's promise.

Always through Scripture, we see relentless warfare surrounding the promise of God. And these books show us in a very graphic way how every single battle for the gospel and the kingdom is related to that one great battle, the great onward march of the promise of redemption towards its great consummation, which is, of course, assured and certain through Christ.

And every battle is related to that great story, even when perhaps individually they may seem totally unrelated and as if they have nothing to do with each other.

Let's just think, first of all, about Daniel. Everybody knows Daniel's story and Daniel's personal battles and the enemies that got Daniel thrown into the den of lions trying to kill him in Daniel chapter 6.

Why did they so hate Daniel? Was it just jealousy and political maneuvering because he had a high place in the court? Well, certainly that was part of it.

[24 : 44] And, well, this week's news alone shows us just how ruthless the backstabbing can be when there's political intrigue.

Never mind Turkey. I'm talking about Westminster. But if you read the story of Daniel, you find that the focus of all the attacks on Daniel was on something very specific.

It was on his faithfulness to the one true God, to the God of Israel. To these people, Daniel was a religious fanatic of the wrong sort who had to be stopped.

Actually, it's quite interesting, isn't it, how little changes because it was fellow Tory MPs who absolutely put a stop to Andrea Leadsom's bid for the leadership. And the main reason that they were giving for not having her in the frame was because she was a religious fanatic.

She was known to be an evangelical Christian who attends a Bible study in the House of Commons every week. But because of that and because she wasn't pro-gay marriage, she had to be wiped out.

[25 : 47] It's amazing how little changes. But in Daniel, you see that the focus of the attack on Daniel was on his regular prayer life. And his prayer life was marked by his bodily positioning which mirrored the position of his heart towards Jerusalem.

because Daniel was a man whose heart and therefore his prayers were focused utterly on the health and the future of the kingdom of God.

That's the purpose that filled his prayers. We can read his prayers in Daniel chapter 9 and 10. We know that. And we're told that those prayers were going on at exactly the same time as the events of Daniel chapter 6.

It was in the early years of Darius the Mede, which is almost certainly another name for Cyrus. So in the year 539 is when Daniel was praying. It was a momentous year for the kingdom of God.

And Daniel's urgently interceding with God in his prayers. He's saying, read it later, turn your wrath away from Jerusalem. Look with favor on your sanctuary.

[26 : 55] Do not delay. Come to the aid of your people. And in Daniel chapter 9, verse 23, we're told that Daniel has a vision and he's told as soon as you began to pray, God gave an answer and that the Jews would return and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt.

But, what did we read? In times of trouble. In that very year, of course, as we know, in Ezra chapter 1, a decree went out from Cyrus and the exiles set out to return.

How do you think that's a coincidence? Or is it not? Surely that we are meant to see that these personal attacks on Daniel and the battles that he were facing were all tied up with this great concern in his earnest prayers for the onward march and movement of the kingdom of God and the restitution and the rebuilding in Jerusalem.

Daniel chapter 10 and verse 1 is even clearer. We're told it's the third year of Cyrus. That's about 537 B.C. when Daniel saw a vision of God and it was about a great conflict, a great war and he saw this vision of war in the heavenly realms with dark powers and authorities arrayed all against God's people.

And that was the very year in which the returned exiles began to build the temple in Jerusalem and met with fierce opposition.

[28 : 24] So fierce that the building had hardly started and it had to stop again. And you remember in Ezra chapter 3 we were told that the building began with great rejoicing and then immediately opposition arose and the building stopped for some 16 years.

Now you see that was the real heavenly warfare that Daniel saw in his vision. That's what it was and what it meant on the ground in the history of God's people.

The real flesh and blood opposition to the rebuilding of the walls and the temple. It was political it was psychological it was physical violence. There was the moral failures they were battling against among the people too.

But all of it had one purpose to stop the advance of the kingdom of God and its purposes on earth. And Daniel himself although he was far far away in Babylon from all of that he was personally caught up in exactly that battle because that is where his heart was.

Just as Joshua and Zerubbabel in Jerusalem and Ezra and Nehemiah later on were caught up personally on earth in those battles. Look at all these different reigns of these emperors on the chart.

[29 : 42] That opposition was relentless through decades and decades nearly a hundred years of sabotage against the rebuilding in Jerusalem of attempts to destroy the distinctiveness and the holiness of God's people through intermarriage through all other kinds of deviations from God's law.

Even an attempted genocide to try and wipe out the whole of the Jewish people from the entire empire. That's the story of Esther of course.

The book of Esther fits in somewhere between Ezra chapter 6 and 7 in the reign of Xerxes after 486 BC. Remember the story of Esther? Mordecai the Jew offended Haman the chief official of the king by refusing to bow down to him as though he was some sort of divine being.

And Haman responds not just by wanting to punish Mordecai or even Mordecai's family. What does he want to do? Wipe out the entire Jewish race from the face of the earth. Well if you slight a big man somebody who's very powerful then he will take revenge won't he?

in a big way. That's why the future of Turkey is rather fearful at the moment isn't it? But what could explain such an extraordinary vast response to a personal slight like that if the powers of darkness did not have hold on this man to be their servant?

[31 : 13] It's no accident by the way in the book of Esther in fact it's absolutely deliberate that we're told that Haman is the Agagite the descendant of Amalek one of the great enemies of Israel going way way back Amalek the descendant of Esau the hostile enemy of the seed of promise you see it's just part of the relentless warfare of the seed of the serpent against the seed of faith and every manifestation of God's promise and his kingdom right through the story of history and all through the Bible their aim is single it is to snuff out the line of promise the line of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Judah and David so that great David's greater son the Christ the God man will never come to reign and to win the victory and to destroy them forever what you see you read in the book of Daniel in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah and Esther is just the manifestation in that particular time and place of the great ongoing conflict the war that Daniel saw would be waged to the very end to the end there shall be war the relentless warfare around

God's promise and the greater the forward movement of the kingdom of God in any age the greater the opposition and the warfare will be it's so so important for us to grasp that because see often all of these things just seem disconnected to us and unconnected did Daniel's plight in the lion's den seem to have anything whatsoever to do with what Joshua and Zerubbabel were doing hundreds of miles away in Jerusalem that he probably knew nothing about no doubt it didn't seem like that but they most certainly were related just as in the life of the church today there may be all kinds of people facing different struggles some people facing particular struggles at work some people facing particular battles and personal temptation some facing real opposition and conflict and physical violence some perhaps finding their own area of service made very very difficult by certain things or certain people all these things might seem totally unconnected they might all be happening within the life of even one congregation and nobody realizes there's any connection at all and yet the truth is friends it's astounding how often these sorts of things are arising all over the place just at the very time there is particular progress and blessing and fruitful outreach in the life of the church and growth in its ministry remember what

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16 a great and effective door has opened for me for mission he means and there are many adversaries and that's exactly what we're seeing here way back in the 6th century BC and Daniel tells us so it will be to the very end that is a real challenge for us isn't it as the church today because what it means is there's never going to be an age of a golden age of peace and serenity in the church of Jesus Christ never until the Lord Jesus comes until the very end and wherever the kingdom of God is advancing in this world there will be conflict and the greater advance the greater the battles are going to be what that means for us as a church is we can't increase our ministry we can't increase our witness here in

Glasgow without experiencing that that's sobering isn't it especially sobering for a church leader let me tell you but at the same time it is a great encouragement also because when we see that and when we grasp the bigger picture what our own personal lives are involved in and what our church life together is involved in all these struggles we face whether it's personal things or corporate things it is because God is marching on and establishing his kingdom not because he isn't not because his plans are faltering and he is involving us in these wonderful purposes that he has for this world the relentless warfare we may always seem to be facing is because his promise is real and because his kingdom is being established and because his purposes will never fail and we have a part in that and that brings me to the second thing

I think these books show us so clearly and it's the vital witness of God's people in the midst of all of this these books show us so clearly that the personal stand of individual believers may be crucial to the onward march of the mighty purposes of God for eternity in any particular age and place there's no question is there in these books that as we read them we see that God alone is sovereign at his feet all earthly kings are as nothing Cyrus is merely the servant of God in fact hundreds of years before Cyrus is even born God says through Isaiah the prophet they'll use this king called Cyrus to send his people back to Israel God alone is the great sovereign initiator who works salvation for his people but nevertheless these books show us so clearly that God chooses to work through his people and it's their stand and it's their faithfulness under trial which is so crucial in how the story plays out take Daniel it's impossible isn't it to overestimate the impact of that one man's faithful witness over decades over successive reigns in the

[37 : 44] Babylonian and Persian Empire how on earth did Cyrus know anything about the Lord the God of heaven whose temple is in Jerusalem it wasn't for Daniel and others like him in fact there are many scholars who think that the magi that we meet in Matthew chapter 2 who come from Persia from the east to worship the newborn king that they got all their understanding of the king of the Jews who was to come from Daniel and his writings many years before think of all that Daniel accomplished and maybe there's a message there for young people in particular even teenagers because it was in his teens we know from the book that Daniel purposed in his heart to serve the one true God all his life how could he have known when he purposed that way all the things that God would do and accomplish through him like Ezra do you remember he set his heart to study and do and teach the word of God in Ezra 7 verse 10 and look at what

God did with his ministry or Nehemiah who had the skills and responsibility of high office but couldn't couldn't just go on playing out his life in comfort when he saw that the kingdom of God was in such need and in such strife and needed the help the vision the labor the leadership of somebody like him and what he could provide there's a great great challenge there isn't it I think for all of us in our day not to be found wanting when the overwhelming need of our day is for God to have men and women who will live above all things for his kingdom and its advance for his cause and increasingly is there not a need for men and women who will stand for Christ in the face of great personal risk and great loss and even danger for the gospel's sake as Esther did and unknown to her she saved the promised line of the

Messiah and who knows whether you and I have come to the kingdom for such a time as this isn't this a day for fearless witness friends in the decades to come there's going to be great great need for courageous and fearless witness to Christ in the western world never mind the Muslim world remember what Mordecai said to Esther God will surely accomplish his purpose with or without us is what he said but it will make every difference to us whether we are personally find wanting or not for if you keep silent at this time he said relief and deliverance will arise from another place but you and your father's house will perish God is sovereign God will accomplish his purposes for his kingdom and we will be a part of it but the question is will it be as a

Judas or as a John that's a sobering word isn't it it's a sobering word for every historic church every historic denomination in the western world today you will play a part in God's kingdom will it be as a Judas or as a John it's also sobering word for every church for every Christian believer for every one of us who calls ourselves a servant of Christ it's not just a public stand and witness that's vital to God's purpose even the private lives of God's people matter so deeply and we see that in these books Daniel's personal prayer life was vital Daniel 10 he's told I have come because of your prayers said the angel Nehemiah's personal honesty and his scrupulous holiness as we'll see was vital to God's purpose and that's why Nehemiah prays so often remember me oh Lord for all of this so here's here's an astonishing thing for us to think about your personal holiness and your faithfulness in prayer and your personal walk with God really matters it has a role in the cosmic battle for eternal future of this entire world isn't that striking imagine that you and I really matter in the progress of the kingdom of God

God sees it and God uses it for the advance of his kingdom when we are faithful to him that's why there's such an emphasis in Ezra Nehemiah on holiness and faithfulness in living as God's people it's not enough just to be back in the land just as there is in the New Testament letters it's not enough to just be called Christians we're to live out the life of Christ and his holiness and it's all related to this great spiritual battle it's all contributing to bringing God's kingdom to its ultimate fulfillment and glory our own personal stand against sin and our faithfulness in some particular situation we're facing it may be a vital thing that helps to advance the kingdom of Christ on this earth because God sees it and the devil sees it and he sees the faithful life of God's people just as he saw Job's life and when devils see that they fear and fly in the face of what is to them the terrifying evidence of the triumph of God's grace over the sin that has hold on the souls of men isn't that an encouraging thing to think about every victory in your personal struggle for faithfulness for holiness it matters your prayers towards Jerusalem that is your prayers that are focused on the advance of the true gospel of

[43 : 51] Jesus his true temple his people in Jesus Christ they matter and they'll be answered and God uses them so we can go on and we must go on devoting ourselves fully to the work of the Lord why says Paul because none of our labors in the Lord are in vain our personal stand is important to the advance of the kingdom of God on earth heaven sees it and God uses it to push back the influence of evil one and to bring his great victory to bear more and more in this world as we'll see in the story of Nehemiah we see more and more of the vital witness of God's people third I want to flag up something we've already seen in Ezra and in Haggai and that is the strengthening word of God's presence because in the midst of this war in this ongoing battle for the kingdom we are not alone and God himself comes to us and he gives us all that we will need through his presence in his word of self-revelation remember

Jesus words in John 14 to his followers who are so frightened I won't leave you as orphans I will come to you not the great commission as he ascended behold I will be with you always even to the end of the age and there's no challenge to be faithful there's no command to us to stand firm without also the promise of God to us in his word that enables us to stand and that empowers us to stand and we see that so clearly in these books God came to Daniel didn't he personally promising what he would do and assuring Daniel about his own personal future telling him in Daniel chapter 12 and you Daniel you will rise to your own inheritance at the last day and in Ezra we saw didn't we how God came to his people to strengthen the returnees to encourage them in the fight of faith through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and they spoke God's word to them first Haggai spoke a great word of challenge yes indeed you're all seeing to your own lives and forgetting about me you need to repent and change but then he came with great encouragement be strong and work for

I am with you my spirit will remain with you in your midst fear not and then Zechariah came we're told with words of good and comforting words promising them that God's house would be rebuilt promising the Lord would again comfort Jerusalem showing them that wonderful vision in Zechariah chapter 3 of Satan being banished remember the accuser pushed out because of God's wonderful atoning love for his people and that wonderful promise in Zechariah chapter 4 that it's not man's might or power but it's my spirit says the Lord that will turn mountains into plains before you and the result well we saw it didn't we in the book of Esther they continued to build and to prosper under the preaching of Zechariah and Haggai you see what's happening when the word of God comes into a situation that seems hopeless that is full of discouragement whether it's due to opposition or backsliding or whatever it is when God's word comes to his people the assurance of

God's living presence that that brings it transforms things and his kingdom is able to advance and prosper as his people are encouraged by his presence because the Lord's spirit is in the midst wherever God's word is being heard and so his people's eyes and hearts are turned to him and to his kingdom and to his purposes and to his mighty power you see it's people who have a focus there and God's purpose and his kingdom and God's power and God's presence who are able to do things for him and that's what Haggai and Zechariah taught the people to see that they fought from the place of victory from God's victory and they saw that Satan must flee not only because God's kingdom is assured but also because their sins have been covered by the rich garments given to them by God himself that was God's word of promise to them in those days how much more do we have the wonderful victory made more secure and more certain through the resurrection of our

Lord Jesus Christ friends one of our greatest needs as Christian people is to realize the sheer magnitude and the wealth and the sheer invincibility that we have because God is with us and because he will never leave us or forsake us until the end and we have the words of the prophets made more certain I will never leave you as orphans I will come to you my spirit will remain in your midst and so he comes to assure us of his presence and his power with us as we meditate and as we study and as we rejoice in the word of the gospel because that's where we hear his voice and when we hear his voice we know he's near he's with us and can strengthen us for every battle that's why we need to be praying every day and especially every Lord's Day as we gather together Lord Jesus let me meet you in your word we need the strengthening word of

[49 : 41] God's presence that alone can assure us and equip us for everything we face in life and lastly these books surely remind us of the unassailable wonder of God's purpose there's a great emphasis on the unstoppable nature of what God's doing in this work he's building his kingdom but he is taking his people with them and within that great purpose of God for all this world forever at every stage in history and in every place in history be it Babylon or Persia or Jerusalem or Judea and Samaria or Antioch or Rome or Greece or anywhere in the whole earth today all the while God is working for his people to bring about his great salvation he's working through his people as we've said to use them to speed his coming but also this is so so important for us to grasp especially if we're feeling hard-pressed in the midst of a really tough struggle right now all the way through this he is working in his people to build us into a holy people to build us into the spiritual house that will be fit for his dwelling place for all eternity very particular emphasis in Nehemiah after all the rebuildings been done that not only must they have walls of salvation to protect the people from enemies without they must have God's word of salvation within to lead them as a people who are holy to the Lord because that is God's unassailable purpose for his people and the great heavenly warfare that we are all still caught up in it's being played out day by day in our own

Christian lives it is the crucible through which God's grace is at work in us to make us like Jesus that's what James and Peter tell us isn't it it's through these fiery trials that our faith is being tested and perfected so that we will be kept for the salvation that God has purposed for us through the great conflict God is working out his good purpose to form Christ in our hearts by faith he is making his bride perfect and spotless he's making us blameless and holy so that we'll be found that way at his coming in earthly warfare we know don't we that soldiers become battle-hardened you often see it in their faces can't you I remember that general Mike Jackson I think was his name who led the UK forces in Bosnia had a face like an old leather bottle didn't he you thought that's a man who's seen a lot of conflict but for the believer the marks of war the scars of war they leave in our lives the marks of the Lord Jesus don't they because when we carry his cross when we stand firm with him against all his enemies that won't harden us at least not in wrong ways now his battle scars will soften our hearts by his grace his battle scars will work in us his likeness and that's what we see in people like Daniel and Ezra and Nehemiah so striking at the end of

Nehemiah we see a man absolutely consumed with the Lord's household with zeal for his honor for his people so much so that the pro their approaches of those who hated God fell constantly on Nehemiah and it was so because in all of these warfare in all of these battle things he was being shaped into the image of the one who was to come because like all the people of faith as Hebrews 11 tells us he was living looking to the reward but you see that reward it's what's being forged now in all of our lives as followers of Jesus as we take up our cross as we follow him as we face a world that hates him and will therefore hate us the reward is God's unassailable purpose which is through all these things to make us more than conquerors to make us like the Lord Jesus himself so yes to the end there will be war in this world you will have tribulation says

Jesus but be of good courage because I've overcome the world God's purpose is marching on and our stand is crucial but we don't stand alone God stands with us to lift up our heads to show us the great hope that we have to remind us through his word that he is near and he will strengthen us and to tell us that even now we can take great great comfort in his unassailable purpose which is to make us like Jesus and we can know that he allows no wound for our harm but only those that are necessary for our everlasting healing to shape in us the shape of the Christ so may that encourage us whatever whatever battles we face this week in our own lives and this year in the life of our church and let's stand as they stood with Jesus let's pray heavenly father we thank you that your word is honest with us it hides nothing of the truth the hard truth of the battle that all of us do face and shall face to the end but how we thank you for your promise and your power we pray that you would lift our eyes to the heavens that we might walk this week in the sure knowledge of the victory of

Christ which is within us and which is unassailable right to the end for Jesus sake we ask amen