

# **BIBLE SURVEY – EZRA, NEHEMIAH & ESTHER**

## **Preface**

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther cover material that affected the Lord's people after the exile in Babylon and covers events following their return to the land of Israel. There are many lessons found in these books, not least the amazing providence and overruling of God, seen particularly in Esther where the name of God is never mentioned. God's sovereignty is a great encouragement to believers in every age.

Because these books are quite short they lend themselves to systematic exposition and we would encourage you to preach a series of sermons that go through the entirety of each book.

I am again grateful to Philip Parsons who recorded the initial talks on these three books for the Serving Today radio programme. This book is based on Philip's notes for those programmes.

Derek French  
October 2007

---

---

## **Part 1. BIBLE SURVEY - EZRA**

The last part of 2 Chronicles recounts how God's judgement finally fell on the nation of Judah. In 606 BC Nebuchadnezzar came and besieged Jerusalem, carried off the temple treasures and organised the first of a series of deportations of Jews to Babylon. The young Daniel was among these first exiles.

The book of Ezra takes up the narrative seventy years later (536 BC) with the decree of Cyrus, Persia's first king in Babylon. Cyrus had just overthrown the Babylonian Empire and was thus undisputed ruler of virtually the whole of the Middle East including the land of Israel. The Persian Empire lasted some 200 years.

### **1. Author and Date of Writing**

When we were considering the authorship of Chronicles, we referred to the traditional view that Ezra himself or someone very close to him was the writer and compiler of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. In favour of this view is the fact that the style of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles is very similar, with fondness for lists, emphasis on religious festivals and similar phrases such as 'heads of families' and 'house of God' occur in all three books. The prominence of Levites and Temple Personnel is also significant and the words for singer, gatekeeper and temple servants are used almost exclusively in these three books. If Ezra or one of his contemporaries was the writer, then the book was

written around 450 BC. The book naturally divides into two parts. Chapters 1 to 6 describe the return of the first group of exiles and the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel. Chapters 7 to 10 describe the return of Ezra the priest about eighty years later (458 BC) and the reforms which he carried out and the revival which resulted.

## **2. Rebuilding the Temple**

The first group of Jews to return following Cyrus' decree numbered about 50,000 in all. They brought with them the various articles for the temple worship, which had been kept in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Most of those who returned were from the southern kingdom from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but there were others from the northern tribes. These people had been deported by the Assyrians, but as Assyria was now part of greater Persia, any Israelite exiles could return. In a sense the nation had become reunited. The first main task was to reinstate the sacrifices by rebuilding the altar of burnt offering. They then celebrated the feast of tabernacles, which would have poignantly reminded them of their years in exile. The foundation of the new temple was then laid on the same site as the old.

## **3. Opposition**

Whenever the work of God is renewed and there is any attempt at reformation, then we must always expect opposition. This time it came from those living

nearby who were enemies of the Jews. They first asked to help, but when this was refused they then opposed the work by appealing to the Persian Emperor and gaining permission to stop the work. But the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhorted the people to recommence building, and when this was queried by the local Governor, it was established that Cyrus had given permission, so the work was allowed to continue and the temple was rededicated in 516 BC. It wasn't as magnificent as the first temple, but its function was precisely the same and it lasted longer. The official letters in chapter 4 refer to the later building of the wall, not the temple. Ezra has included them at this point to emphasize the continued opposition to the returned exiles.

## **4. Ezra returns to Israel**

The remainder of the book tells of Ezra's return sixty years later with a company of Jews with the full blessing of Artaxerxes, including monetary assistance. Ezra was well versed in the Scriptures and it wasn't long before he realised that the people had become lax in the question of marriage to heathen women. After fasting and prayer, the majority of the people were persuaded that they should put away their foreign wives. This was done after public confession of sin. The resulting revival is similar to a later one described in more detail in Nehemiah. It is significant that chapter 9 of Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel, all contain prayers of confession of national

sins. The message of Ezra is surely that God is a covenant-keeping God, that he gives much grace to those who know and obey his word, and that revival of his cause is more often than not preceded by reformation.

## 5. Suggested sermon topics for Ezra

### 1. Returning from Exile

- First, God used the decree of the pagan emperor Cyrus to achieve the return from exile.
- Second, the decree fulfilled two prophecies, one in Isaiah which specifically mentioned Cyrus by name, written a hundred and fifty years before he came on the scene, and one prophecy in Jeremiah which stated how long the exile would last. See Isaiah 45:1 and v13 and Jeremiah 29:10.

And it happened exactly as it had been prophesied. The exile was seventy years and no longer. The first phase of deportation was when Daniel was taken to Babylon around 606 BC. Cyrus' decree as far as we know was certainly no later than 536, and might have been a year or two earlier. So that meant that it was a maximum of seventy years. The Babylonian conquest of Israel was in stages over a period of about twenty years. Some of the Jews were deported at the end of

that period so they had been in Babylon for only fifty years. The point is that God in judgement is never more severe than he says he is going to be, and if anything he is less severe. Our God is truly a gracious God!

- Third, those returning were from both Judah and Israel, not just from Judah. Some from the northern tribes were able to return because where they had been exiled to under the Assyrians was all now part of the Persian Empire.
- Fourth, God had kept his promise to Israel.
- Fifth, all this demonstrates that God's promises can never fail. This is a tremendous emphasis on which to end a sermon.

### 2. Rebuilding the Temple

- First, the vessels from Solomon's temple which had been carried away to Babylon were all brought back. They had been kept intact, they had not been melted down, they all came back from Babylon
- Second, they rebuilt the altar of sacrifice first. It is important to recognise the priority given to this work showing us that without sacrifice there is no approach to God. The book of Hebrews tells us that there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood

and the returning Jews knew they needed God's forgiveness.

- Third, they celebrated the feast of tabernacles. Obviously it was the appropriate time of year. Further, it was also a reminder to them of God's presence to them during the exile because the feast of tabernacles was a feast which emphasised their forty years' wanderings in the wilderness and how God had been with them during that time too. So it was a very appropriate feast to be celebrated, a thanksgiving to the Lord for his mercy.
- Fourth, they laid the temple foundations with great rejoicing. Having said that, there were some who wept, because they had seen the previous temple and could see that this temple was not going to be as marvellous and as magnificent as the early one. None-the-less the temple was rebuilt.

### 3. Opposition to the Rebuilding Programme

- First, opposition brings the work to a halt. No sooner had they started the work but there was opposition from those around who were not Jews which brought the work to a halt for a while. It's important to recognise that sometimes opposition can do that.
- Second, we should always expect opposition to God's work, particularly if we are starting

anything new or we want to reform the church in any way or do something which is bringing us into line with God's Word. This is something that God's people have experienced in almost every age.

- Third, even though the opposition had brought the work to a standstill, the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhorted the people to recommence.
- Fourth, we should seek to carry on with God's work, even in the face of opposition; we should not too easily give up. When opposition like this comes it is so easy for us to become very discouraged, and this is an understandable reaction. Remember though, that opposition is often at its strongest when God's people are being most faithful to Him. The Bible teacher, Iain Murray, has said, *"The Word of God never yet prospered in the world without opposition."*
- Fifth, they sought official permission to carry on the work, and it was given. Sometimes God does give his people grace in the eyes of unbelieving rulers.  
(NB. In your sermons on this subject always include a reminder of the Lord's promises to be with and sustain his people at such times:- *"My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness,"* from 2 Corinthians 12 and, *"Never will I leave you,*

*never will I forsake you*” from Hebrews 13. It is promises like these that strengthen faith and encourage perseverance when the pressure is against us.)

#### 4. Ezra’s Reforms

When Ezra came back some years later, he found there were a number of things which concerned him and which he sought to correct.

- First, mixed marriages of believers and unbelievers. Many of the returnees had married non Jewish women and this was forbidden. Deuteronomy 7:3-4 is a very strong warning and certainly when people did go against this warning in the past it had caused a great deal of trouble leading to idolatry. This was one of the main reasons why they were sent into exile.
- Second, the need for Biblical separation. Separation from the world’s attitudes and its sinful activities are a New Testament requirement.
- Third, Ezra showed his concern by prayer and fasting.
- Fourth, we should be concerned to keep all of God’s Word and not just the parts we find easy. Paul, when speaking to the Ephesian elders, said he had not failed to preach the whole counsel of God to them. He didn’t say, “this bit is not relevant to you and therefore

you can ignore it” or “this isn’t that important”.

- Fifth, fasting is still applicable under the New Covenant. It is not just an Old Testament practice but in Matthew 6:16-18, in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord himself refers to this. Jesus assumed that we would fast. Perhaps the biggest difference is that in the Old Testament there was public fasting, whereas Jesus said our fasting is to be in private. We do not do it to be seen by men. That is not to say that we could not as a group of Christians or as a church fast together but our aim is not to make people notice us. It is really an indication of our earnestness in seeking the Lord. Under the Old Testament there were some times of fasting which were mandatory but under the New Covenant it is voluntary and we are at liberty as to when and how often we fast. But it should not be neglected, particularly at critical times. This was a very critical point. Ezra could see that the work of God was possibly in some jeopardy and therefore he felt so strongly about it which is why he fasted.

#### 5. The Overall message of the book of Ezra

- First, God is a covenant-keeping God.

- Second, God gives more grace to those who know and obey his Word as he did to Ezra.
- Third, that revival is often preceded by reformation. When the people of God see the need for reformation and go ahead and do what they can, then God often meets them and will often graciously revive his church. Many revivals have begun with people realising the need for fervent prayer. Previously they had neglected it, and then they became burdened and gave themselves to extended prayer like Ezra did. Their own devotional life was transformed and reformed and then the Lord answered their prayers and blessing spread over wide areas with many thousands being converted.

NB. The need to pray earnestly for God to work in our day is just as urgent as it was in the days of Ezra. Over the years God has been pleased to bless in exceptional ways during periods of history when he has sent revival. **What we need to remember is that revival is not something we can arrange. God alone can do this** and therefore we need to be given to prayer for the Lord to come down in great power to turn many lives to follow his dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed that principle of prayer applies not just to the extraordinary

times of God's blessing, but even in the every day lives of his people. God alone can save men and women; therefore we must be given to prayer for him to accomplish that glorious end.

---



---

## Part 2. BIBLE SURVEY - NEHEMIAH

### 1. Author and Date of Writing

As mentioned in the previous chapter, from considerations of style and content, the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah appear to have been written or compiled by the same person, possibly Ezra. The larger part of Nehemiah is, however, written in the first person, which indicates that Nehemiah himself wrote the basic narrative. The last recorded event in Nehemiah can be dated as 432 BC, with the book as a whole no doubt appearing about 430 BC. It is one of the last of the OT writings.

### 2. Nehemiah Builds the Walls of Jerusalem

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes. This post almost certainly involved tasting the wine to see if it had been interfered with in any way and thus was a position of great trust. Nehemiah was a godly Jew who had followed the fortunes of the returning exiles with interest; so when one of his brothers returned from Jerusalem and told him how the walls of the city were broken down and the gates burned with fire, Nehemiah was greatly

distressed. His response was that of a mature man of God - he fasted and prayed. His sorrow of heart was reflected in his face and caused the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes to ask him the reason for his sadness. Nehemiah's 'arrow' prayer on this occasion (Nehemiah 2:4) was but the outcome of his private prayers and was given a gracious answer in the king's agreement for him to return to Jerusalem.

Because the reason for his visit was not generally known, Nehemiah decided to inspect the damaged wall secretly at night before announcing his intentions to the Jews who lived there. When he did propose the rebuilding programme and told them of his authority to do so, there was an enthusiastic response. The damage to the city was almost certainly not what had occurred under Nebuchadnezzar some 150 years earlier, but was most likely the result of recent attacks (see Ezra 4:7-23).

Chapter 3 details those who were responsible for rebuilding the various sections of the walls and gates of the city. All true work of God is opposed and Nehemiah's wall building was no exception. Neighbouring non-Jews resented the strengthening of God's people and tried various ploys to obstruct the work. Firstly they ridiculed, "*What are these feeble Jews doing?*" (4:1). When this failed, they planned to attack the builders but Nehemiah posted soldiers at strategic points for protection, while the workers

themselves also carried swords. In order to complete the task with the minimum of delay, they worked very long days of around fourteen hours (4:21.) A further distraction to the work came from within the Jewish community. Because of the high level of taxes paid to the Persian capital and its policy of hoarding gold and silver bullion, inflation had become rampant in Judea. This meant that some in the poorer families had become enslaved to the rich. Nehemiah remonstrated with his wealthy fellow-countrymen and rectified this social injustice. It was agreed that loans to fellow-Jews would be interest-free. The people doubtless listened to Nehemiah because of his own example of sacrificial generosity (5:14.) Other attempts were made to lure Nehemiah away from the work and to frighten him with false tales of assassination plots. None of these attempts was successful and the wall was duly finished in fifty-two days!

### **3. Reading the Law and Revival (ch 8-12)**

Nehemiah was not satisfied with merely completing the building work. About a month after the wall had been completed, Nehemiah, with the help of Ezra, called a public assembly of all the people to hear the reading of the law. As a result of the reading of the law, as it was the seventh month, they also celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. But the reading of the law had also revealed other areas of neglect of the worship and service of God, so two days after the

feast of Tabernacles a further public assembly was called. It was a day of fasting, of public reading of the Scriptures and of public confession of their sins as a nation. The leaders of the nation and heads of families entered into a solemn covenant that they would return to the true worship and service of the Lord and would no longer neglect his ordinances. After determining who should now live in the rebuilt city, they held a 'dedication' of the wall. It was a day of great rejoicing and thanksgiving to God.

#### 4. Nehemiah's Final Reforms

Nehemiah had to return to Babylon and was away from Jerusalem for the best part of a year. On his return he found further abuses which had begun in his absence. The Sabbath was being profaned and further mixed marriages had been entered into, despite the covenant which had been agreed after the revival of the previous year. Although Nehemiah was able to put a stop to these backslidings and restore a purer worship, it does show how quickly spiritual blessings can be lost.

#### 5. Suggested Sermon Headings from Nehemiah

##### 1. Concern for Jerusalem's decayed state

- First, believers may hold high office in government. Nehemiah 1:11b
- Second, prayer and fasting should characterize believers. Nehemiah 1:4

- Third, 'arrow' prayers (Nehemiah 2:4) are an outcome of a consistent prayer-life.
- Fourth, unbelieving officials will sometimes favour the believer. Nehemiah 2. We are sometimes surprised at this.
- Fifth, we should be concerned when the church falls into decline just as Nehemiah was about the physical condition of Jerusalem and the spiritual state of things. It should be Church leaders' concern when the church falls into decline and we should seek to do what we can to rectify it.

e.g. It is the work of a good pastor to be a good shepherd and if some sheep are wandering away we should do all we can to encourage them back. In Peter's reinstatement after the resurrection in John 21 where Jesus speaks to him he first said, '*feed my lambs*' which is a reference to the young believers, new Christians. Then he said '*tend my sheep*' which is a different word and it is talking about looking after the sheep, particularly those who are perhaps a bit wayward. Finally he said '*feed my sheep*' which is referring to those who are more mature in the flock. So there are three different aspects to the pastoral office. Nehemiah, in his care of Jerusalem and the Jews of his day, shows us a pattern for the New Testament pastor.

## 2. Building Jerusalem's fallen walls

- First, Nehemiah had vision to see beyond the problems. It obviously would have been very depressing to go and visit Jerusalem and see how the walls were broken down and the gates had been burnt. He wept at the news when he first heard it but he didn't just wring his hands in despair, he had a vision to see that something could be done and I think it's important that Christian leaders particularly try and see beyond the problems.
- Second, Nehemiah was prepared to act. Nehemiah is very much a book of action and Nehemiah is a man of action who does not act haphazardly but he is prepared to actually work.
- Third, Nehemiah's commitment clearly inspired the people. They had not done anything about the situation until he came. That shows that leaders are very important and an inspirational leader can be a great asset to the church and inspire many others who perhaps on their own would have difficulty in starting the work. It's in one sense an awesome responsibility and yet also one of the most encouraging areas of ministry when you see other believers responding to that encouragement and really being willing to serve the Lord as was the case here.

## 3. Opposition to God's work

- First, there will always be opposition to God's work. This will be particularly so if we are beginning a new phase or a time of restoration or of reformation, restarting a work, or trying to build up a work.
- Second, opposition can come in various forms. For Nehemiah first of all there was ridicule, then apathy and even positive attack from outside.
- Third, rather than just being put off by the opposition we must work on in the face of it.
- Fourth, extra effort may be required to overcome unusual obstacles. Notice they built the wall in fifty-two days, which teaches us God will always honour diligence in his work. If we give up at the first hurdle or the first difficulty, nothing is going to be achieved.

NB. It is helpful when we are doing something we know is biblically based and are sure that it is commanded in Scripture or we can infer it from Scripture. This gives us confidence that we should carry on in spite of opposition and that can be a great help to us. Having said that, there are times when some of God's servants have to flee which was Paul's experience at times, but as a last resort.

#### 4. Nehemiah's concern for Social Justice

- First, wealthy believers should never exploit their poorer brethren.
- Second, leaders should set the example. Nehemiah was very generous and did not use all of his allocated expense accounts, but used the money for other people. This brings to mind an incident in the life of Spurgeon, who was a great preacher in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When an appeal had come to the church for finance for a particular work Spurgeon brought this to the diaconate and he said 'This is a good work, I'm putting something in' and he was the first one who actually make a contribution and the others followed on. So I think it's an area where leaders should give an example to the 'flock'.
- Third, the rich should be rich in good works. See the exhortation in 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

#### 5. The Word of God and Revival

- First, the Scriptures must be faithfully preached. Towards the end of the book, the way the Scriptures were read and preached resulted in a revival among the people.
- Second, obedience to God's Word is vitally important. We must not just preach the Scriptures, we should exhort our

congregations to obey them and not to be hearers only and we should be examples in that respect as well.

- Third, special days of prayer and fasting are appropriate for critical times.
- Fourth, when God gives success we should always respond with thanksgiving. The Lord's people did in Nehemiah's time when the wall had been dedicated. We should be quick to praise God when he adds his blessing.

#### 6. Nehemiah's Further Reforms

- First, spiritual blessings can be easily lost. This is really right at the end of the book when Nehemiah went away for a year and then came back and found things had begun to deteriorate.
- Second, there should be constant vigilance by church leaders. We need to bear that in mind at all times.
- Third, all of God's commandments are important, not just some of them. Nehemiah realised that the fourth commandment was important and it still is. No one is saved by the works of the law but by grace, but the standard that the Lord sets in the Ten Commandments is something which is binding on all believers. It is the standard

which reflects the very character of God and we therefore need to remind ourselves of that.

## 7. Nehemiah's Prayer life

- Another very useful sermon or probably better a series of sermons, could be preached on Nehemiah's prayer life because undoubtedly the extraordinary success he achieved in his work for the Lord was down to a large degree to his total dependence on the Lord. You will find his prayers in chapters 1 and 2, then in chapter 4, verses 4 and 9. When we come into chapter 5 he prays in the last verse and again in chapter 6, verses 9 and 14. Then in the final chapter, chapter 13 prayer is referred to in verses 14, 22, 29 and 31 where on each occasion he asks God to remember him.

---



---

## Part 3. BIBLE SURVEY - ESTHER

### 1. Author and Date of Writing

The main events of this remarkable book can be accurately dated from verses 1:3 and 3:7 to have occurred between 483 and 473 BC, during the reign of Xerxes the Persian Emperor. Xerxes (Hebrew - Ahasuerus) was the most powerful ruler of the known world at that time. His dominion extended from the Mediterranean in the west for about 1000 miles to the

east. There were 127 provinces under his jurisdiction. The story is set in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire. Although under the first Persian Emperor Cyrus, many of the Jews had returned to their own land, others had become at least partly integrated into the Persian society and chose to remain in their place of birth. Among such were Esther, a beautiful young Jewess and her cousin Mordecai who was from the tribe of Benjamin and could trace his descent back to Kish, Saul's father. The unnamed writer of the book, who was a Jew, would have obtained most of the detail of the events from either Mordecai or Esther. Esther was an orphan and Mordecai had taken care of her as his own daughter. As Mordecai was employed in the Persian court, both he and Esther lived in the capital Susa. The scene is thus set for the drama which is unfolded for us in this book.

### 2. An Evil Plan Thwarted by God's Unseen Hand

First of all, Xerxes deposes his queen Vashti for refusing to display her beauty before the king's guests after they had become somewhat the worse for drink. So a new queen is required as consort to this powerful monarch. From among all the likely candidates of the Empire, who should be chosen but Esther? At the same time Haman, who was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites during Saul's days, is rising to prominence in Xerxes' court and insists that all should bow the knee to him. Because of who Haman was, descended from the people who had been

declared as the Lord's enemies, Mordecai refuses to comply with Haman's demand for homage. Finding out that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman is not content with punishing him, but in true Amalekite fashion, sets in motion a plot to destroy all the Jews in the Persian Empire. This would have included those living back in Judah. Xerxes agrees with Haman's cleverly presented plan, unaware that he is signing the death warrant of his own queen! Mordecai informs Esther of Haman's scheme and the decree that has been issued against all the Jews. He strongly urges her to take action, reminding her that being a Jewess will not enable her to escape death in the planned holocaust. Esther takes her life in her hands and approaches the King without being summoned. Her request is that the king and Haman should come to a banquet. Her request is granted but she still delays to put the matter before the king and arranges a second banquet at which she uncovers Haman's plot against her and her people. Just prior to this, the king had been unable to sleep and had, on reading the archives, discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for his uncovering of a previous assassination plot against him. Haman, who happened to be in the vicinity that morning, is given the task of honouring Mordecai publicly.

When the king learns of Haman's plan to exterminate even the queen, his anger is aroused and Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Because Persian decrees could not be revoked, an additional edict is issued allowing the Jews to defend themselves from all assailants on two successive days. The great victory, which they achieved, was then kept as an annual festival called Purim. It marked the final phase of the conflict with the Amalekite people. For his part in the whole affair, Mordecai is promoted to the position of second-in-command to the king.

### **3. The Main Lessons**

This little book is a study in the providence of God in preserving his people, even when the odds seem to be against them. It is truly remarkable that the very person to silence Amalekite aggression against the Jews was a descendant from the same family as Saul, who had been reluctant to complete God's earlier decree for their destruction (1 Samuel 15:10). There are also striking parallels with the life of Joseph, who likewise rose to second position under a foreign monarch. One application of the events of this account for our day, is that however beleaguered his church may become, God will not allow the 'gates of hell' to prevail against her, even when she is faced with apparent extinction. The omission of any direct reference to God in this book does not negate its spiritual value.

### **4. Suggested Sermon Topics From Esther**

Preaching through a narrative section of Scripture will often involve us in some very careful thinking as we seek to analyse the lessons the Lord is teaching us through the details of the people involved. Having said that, our work will always be rewarded because as we preach on such Bible passages we will be helping our people to see the great doctrines of Scripture being worked out in every day life. This helps us to see how knowing God has profound implications and blessings for us in our lives today.

Because of its short length, the book of Esther lends itself to being preached through consecutively in a short series of sermons. The overall theme of the book could have as a title '**A study in the absolute sovereignty of God**'. This comes out so dramatically, all the way through in many different events. Rather than giving a number of separate sermons we will give paragraphs which illustrate the main theme of the book.

- The first series of events concerns Ahasuerus or Xerxes: the way he becomes unreasonable after drinking too much at a feast that he has given, the rather foolish thing that he did in asking his queen to parade herself in front of all these men, with her refusing and then him becoming angry. It creates a vacancy for a new queen and that is something in which

God is beginning to work even through the wrath of man.

- Then we have got the fact that Esther's beauty had been endowed upon her by God and so much so that she is the one chosen. She was also given favour with those who were conducting the choice.
- It is important to notice that Esther had been faithfully brought up by her older cousin, Mordecai. Clearly she was an orphan at quite a young age and Mordecai had taken her under his wing. Her good upbringing is a vital ingredient in the story. She is a faithful Jewess, she is faithful to God, she has not turned away from the God of her fathers, which is an important point to remember in this whole drama. I think we can see then that God puts Esther in place in this key position before Satan makes his first move through Haman. This is showing that God is never taken by surprise, a point which we will see below.
- We also need to learn from this story that the work of God and the people of God will always be opposed; there is always going to be opposition to the work of God and his people. Jesus said to the disciples that while we are in the world we will have trouble and part of that trouble certainly is opposition. Sometimes this opposition can seem to be

very cruel and severe, and I think this comes out in the way that Haman wants to punish Mordecai way beyond anything that he should have done. Haman's plan could have resulted in the total genocide of the Jews, understanding that the Persian Empire now encompassed any exiled Jews from previous times. There would not have been any living outside of that empire. They could have all been wiped out.

- If the Jews had been exterminated this would have threatened God's promises to bring the Messiah through not only the Jewish people but through the line of David and the tribe of Judah. This was an assault on the whole of God's work of redemption and we have to recognise that behind all opposition to the work of God is demonic activity. It is not just that evil men are evil but the devil goads them on and gets them going and perhaps gets them doing things which they would not normally do without his intervening. We also can learn that God's plans can never be thwarted; the devil may try and do his utmost but he never can thwart God's plans.
- The book of Esther helps us to see the absolute sovereignty of God and the absolute security of his people. The providence of God affects every area of our lives and this was something Esther experienced so

wonderfully, as did the rest of God's people living at that time.

- Another point that comes out is that when Esther is hesitant about going into the king, Mordecai tells her that if she will not act to help her people then God will raise up someone else to preserve them. He is saying that he thinks that she has been put in this place at this critical time for this very purpose (*"who knows but God has brought you to the kingdom for such a time as this"*). There is tremendous confidence in the Lord shown by Mordecai here. So even if we prove unfaithful, God will use others to do his work. Although we should not act irresponsibly and say that somebody else can do the work, we are not indispensable and if somebody is tragically lost in the Christian cause it is not the end. God can raise up others to carry on the work.
- We also can see that God gave Esther and Mordecai special wisdom. At critical points in this whole sequence of events, God was helping them to say the right things and act in the right way.
- It is noticeable that God's people are sometimes required to put their lives at risk; Esther definitely was putting her life on the line. She could well have been refused if the king had been in a bad mood; he was such a

powerful ruler with absolute sovereignty. Esther's courage was tremendous despite her initial hesitation.

- We can also learn that God is never surprised by the devil's ploys and the devil's actions. It does not take him by surprise at all. We might think that that would be the case but it is never that way at all.
- Also we can see that God's plans are never thwarted. God's plan to bring in salvation through his Messiah was not going to be stopped by this evil man or the devil's intent. This is really encouraging for us because sometimes we face opposition and we can feel quite discouraged by it and understandably so. But we need to have this vision that God will always be on the throne and he will bring his work to completion; the opposition will not stop that.
- Therefore we need to remember that even the most powerful rulers are always under God's control, even the most evil of men and the most powerful of men, they are all subservient to the sovereignty of God.
- God always acts for the overall good of his people. All things work together for good. They are not all good but they work together for good which is the case not only in the individual sense but also in the corporate sense.

- Finally there is a solemn irony in the way that Haman was punished. He was hanged on his own gallows. He thought he was going to get rid of this Jew, Mordecai, on this massive gallows but he himself was hanged on his own gallows. It brings us back to Psalm 2 where it says, "*He that sits in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn; the Lord shall have them in derision.*" This is a solemn truth that the enemies of God will come under the judgement of God if they do not repent. By contrast, how amazing is God's grace to us because we were once his enemies! The Lord has changed our hearts and so we can preach on this solemn subject and warn but also whilst we are doing that, preach of the grace of God in Christ that forgives even his enemies who are repentant.

### **Applications**

- This should lead us first to worship God, for he is infinitely greater than we are.
- And then it should encourage us to trust him for he has his hand on our lives even in the darkest and most painful moments.
- He will never forsake his people, but will work in every event for our good, making us more and more like Christ.

=====

**This book is supplied by Grace Baptist Mission  
and other titles are available in e-mail format at  
the address below:**

**Grace Baptist Mission  
12 Abbey Close  
Abingdon  
OXON  
OX14 3JD  
UK**

**e-mail: [radio@gbm.org.uk](mailto:radio@gbm.org.uk)**