

Small Group Guide – Week 39

The Providence of God in the Deliverance of His People

The Church at Brook Hills

September 27-October 3, 2010

Esther, Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

Esther, Ezra 7-10 & Nehemiah

The three historical books that we will consider this week recount three instances of God's deliverance of His people. However, with each successive deliverance we find that the people still do not receive final rest from their enemies. They are still oppressed by foreign powers and the glorious presence of the LORD is still not dwelling in their midst. They are left longing for a final Deliverer who will give them rest from their enemies and bring the very presence of God to them.

Esther delivers the Jews from an insidious enemy, but more enemies continue to oppress them. Ezra leads the rebuilding of the temple, but the visible presence of the LORD does not return nor does the temple attain to its former glory. Nehemiah builds a wall around Jerusalem, but it will not ultimately keep invaders out, as the subsequent history of Israel will demonstrate.

All of these deliverances are incomplete. They point us to the great Deliverance that is yet to come. God's people need a final Deliverer to deliver them from all of their enemies. They need the true Temple (Jn. 2:21) who brings the very presence of God to earth (Jn. 1:14). They need a new Jerusalem, a city coming down out of heaven with an impenetrable wall where nothing unclean will ever enter, a city that has no need of a temple, for God Himself and the Lamb are its Temple (Rev. 21:9-27).

The events recorded in the book of Esther take place during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) king of Persia, after the return of the first group of Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel ca. 538 B.C (Ezra 1-6) and before the second return led by Ezra ca. 458 B.C (Ezra 7-10). Nehemiah's journey occurred later (ca. 445 B.C.). Historically, the book of Ezra provides the background for the Jewish feast of Purim (Esther 9:20ff.). Theologically, the book displays God's faithfulness to His promises and His meticulous providence over historical events.

Study the Text . . .

The book of Esther never mentions the name of God, and yet to the eyes of faith it is strikingly evident that God is providentially writing the plot of this story.

Haman the Agagite (3:1) sought to destroy Mordecai the Benjamite (2:5) and all the Jews (3:6). This conflict goes back a thousand years to the battle that Israel fought with the Amalekites immediately after the Exodus. The LORD even swore that He would make war against Amalek "from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:16). In First Samuel,

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God commanded Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15). However, Saul disobeyed and preserved the life of Agag the king of the Amalekites. Because of this disobedience, God took the kingdom from Saul and gave it to David (1 Sam. 15:28). Here in the book of Esther we see Agag again seeking to oppress the people of God, but once again God shows Himself faithful to His covenant promises.

Neither Esther nor Mordecai seem to be particularly godly people. In fact, they engage in some rather questionable practices (see for example 2:13-16). Yet God uses them to fulfill His purposes and preserve His people.

Note Mordecai's confidence in God's faithfulness to His people (4:14). Therefore, he implores Esther to use her providential position for the preservation of the people.

Ahasuerus (Xerxes) was a pagan king. Yet Esther "found favor in his sight" at pivotal points throughout the book.

Ahasuerus' decree allowed the Jews to plunder their enemies (8:11). Yet the author emphasizes that they did not touch the plunder (9:8, 15). This stands in stark contrast to the first time Israel defeated Agag (1 Sam. 15). This victory is a reversal of Saul's disobedience.

Mordecai escaped a sinister plot and became second in command of a great empire, like Joseph and Daniel before him (Gen. 41:40ff; Dan. 6).

Esther 9:1 states that what appeared to be a day of impending doom for God's people turned out to be a day of great victory. This is the pattern by which God works to bring salvation to His people. How do we see this played out in the Cross of Christ and the history of the church (see for examples Acts. 4:27-28; 8:4)? How have you seen this in your own life and the lives of other?

Group Discussion . . .

- What are some ways that you see God working "behind the scenes" in the story of Esther? What does this tell you about how God works in our lives and in the world? Are His actions always overt or are they sometimes covert? Can you look back on times in your life and see how God was working like that?
- In light of the observation that neither Mordecai nor Esther seem to be "super-believers," who is the true hero of the story?
- What do Mordecai's instructions to Esther in chapter 4 tell you about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Where has God providentially placed you to fulfill His purposes?
- What does the book of Esther teach you about how government rulers, even ungodly government rulers, fit into God's plan (cf. Prov. 21:1). How does this reflect the way that you view and respond to political events?

- How does the book of Esther point us to the final great deliverance of God's people in Christ?

Ezra 7-10

Although the book never mentions Ezra himself as the human author, it is probable that he wrote this record that bears his name. Ezra was a scribe who had access to a myriad of administrative documents, hence the detailed recording of the royal decrees contained in this book. The first six chapters of Ezra, which we read last week, recount the first return under Zerubbabel in 538 B.C. Chapters 7-10 give the account of the second return, led by Ezra in 458 B.C. The Jews' return from exile in Babylon is presented as a second Exodus and the primary theological message of the book is that God is faithful to His covenant promises. God orchestrated the exile into Babylon and God has orchestrated the return from exile. God displays His sovereignty by using a pagan king (Cyrus) to deliver His people and return them to the Promised Land. Amazingly, God had foretold this deliverance over a hundred years earlier through the prophet Isaiah when He declared that Cyrus should command the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple (Is. 44:28). As Pastor David often says, "God has this thing rigged!"

Study the Text . . .

The key to Ezra's effectiveness in ministry is found in Ezra 7:10. He set his heart to study and to practice and to teach the law of the LORD.

As in the books of Esther and Nehemiah, we see the LORD directing the hearts of pagan kings in order to accomplish His perfect purposes. Ezra's benediction in Ezra 7:27 demonstrates that God is sovereign even over hearts that do not recognize His sovereignty (cf. Prov. 21:1).

Note how seriously Ezra takes sin (Ezra 9:3ff.!) He is ashamed and embarrassed to lift his face to God (9:6). Contrast that with how flippantly we often waltz into the presence of God while living in sin.

Note also that Ezra does not separate himself from the rest of the people. He does not say, "They have sinned." He says, "We have sinned (see for example 9:7)." As fellow members of the covenant community, we share in one another's iniquity. Sin in one part of the body affects the whole body.

Note the response of the people (10:9). They tremble when they are confronted with their sin and this fear leads them to separate themselves from their pagan wives.

The revival under Ezra was short-lived. When we get to the book of Malachi, we will see that the people are still in rebellion against the LORD. They still need Him to remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh (Ezk. 36:26).

The second Temple never attains to the glory of the first Temple and the glory of the Lord never again fills the Temple...at least not until nearly 500 years later when a twelve year old boy from Galilee enters it and amazes the teachers of the Law (Lk. 2:47). The Jews were left waiting for a greater Temple, the True Temple, which would be torn down and rebuilt in 3 days (Jn. 2:21).

Group Discussion . . .

- How do you respond to your own sin and the sins of others in your faith family? Do you grieve over it or do you take it lightly? Have you ever felt embarrassed to enter the presence of God? What is the solution to this problem?
- How did the reality of God's sovereignty affect Ezra and Nehemiah? Did it produce negligence or obedience in them?
- How does the book of Ezra point us to Christ?

Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah begins in 446 B.C. and details the return from exile that Nehemiah led in 445 B.C. Historically, the book gives an account of the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem and Nehemiah's reign as governor.

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) and the Latin Vulgate refer to the book of Nehemiah as "Second Ezra" and both Jewish and Christian tradition recognize Ezra as the author of the book. Although Ezra the scribe likely recorded the account, Nehemiah himself likely dictated it to him (1:1).

The phrase "the hand of the Lord" is prevalent in both Ezra and Nehemiah. This phrase underscores the fact that God is sovereignly working to rebuild Jerusalem and to restore His people. God uses faithful servants like Nehemiah, pagan kings like Artaxerxes, and even enemies like Sanballat to accomplish His perfect purposes.

Study the Text . . .

Nehemiah, like Ezra, is moved to fast, pray, and confess the sins of his people (1:4-11). He is not merely grieved because of the troubles in Jerusalem (1:3). Rather, the troubles in Jerusalem lead him to mourn for the way that his people have sinned against the LORD.

Note also that Nehemiah, like Ezra, identifies with the sins of his people. He does not separate himself from the people but acknowledges that he himself has been implicit in this rebellion (1:6).

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God had placed Nehemiah, like Ezra and Esther, in a strategic position in a pagan kingdom (1:11). These three, like Joseph and Daniel before them, used their positions of influence for the glory of God and the good of His people.

Nehemiah did not attribute his success to his strategic leadership or the kindness of the king but to the fact that “the good hand of my God was upon me.” (2:8)

Opposition from outside forces arises in chapter 4, but God frustrates their plans (4:1). God will not allow his enemies to thwart His purposes.

Nehemiah addresses the sin of oppression in chapter 5. It is instructive that Nehemiah does not merely concern himself with the enemy without, but also the enemy within. He takes sin seriously because he knows that sin in the covenant community is just as dangerous, if not more dangerous than oppression from outside the covenant community.

Note the attention that the people paid to the law of the LORD. They stood on their feet and listened to Ezra read it for hours (8:3). The reading of the law led them to weep over their sin (8:9) and yet Ezra commanded them to rejoice, for the LORD had restored them (8:10).

The people “confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers (9:2).” Throughout the history of God’s people, confession of sin has been a sign of true revival.

Nehemiah 9:28 summarizes the history of Israel (9:28). Over and over throughout the OT, we have seen the people sin against the Lord, fall under oppression, repent, and be restored, only to fall back into sin. It is obvious that the problem will not finally be solved until God changes His people from within, until He writes His law on their hearts (Jer. 31:33).

The people recognize that although they are living in the Promised Land, they are still slaves, just as they were in Egypt (9:36). Over the next 500 years the Jews will be oppressed by empire after empire, even though they are living in the Promised Land. The point is that the exile is not really over. They are still oppressed by foreign powers and they still await a final deliverance.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple can be seen as an initial fulfillment of God’s promise to rebuild Jerusalem after the exile (see Jer. 31:38-40). However, this was not the ultimate fulfillment. God had promised that after Jerusalem was rebuilt it would never again be uprooted or destroyed (Jer. 31:40). But in 167 B.C., the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and turning it into a temple to the Greek god Zeus. Jerusalem was later conquered by the Roman general Pompey and it remained under gentile control until it was razed to the ground in A.D. 70. All of this leaves us waiting for the final fulfillment of God’s promise to rebuild His holy city. It points us to a better city, whose

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builder and foundation is God (Heb. 11:10), the true Mount Zion that we enter through Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 12:22-24). The writer of Hebrews tells us that in Christ we **have come** to this city of the living God even while we anticipate its consummation, when the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her Husband (Rev. 21:22).

Group Discussion . . .

- Why do we offer so little attention to the Word of God? What are some of the things that distract you from reading and listening to the Word? How can we become a people who pay careful attention to the Word of God?
- What is the initial response that the people have to the Word of God (8:9)? Do you experience this kind of contrition when you see how your life does not line up with God's Word?
- What are some barriers that we put up against confession of sin? Are these barriers legitimate or are they excuses to ignore our sin?
- How does the book of Nehemiah point to the need for Christ?