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Being God's people in an indifferent or hostile world.

9 Studies on
Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah

A probing question - "Why is my life like this?"

"If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Reading the Law:

"Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who could understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon." (Nehemiah 8:2-3)

Responding to the Law:

"Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" (Nehemiah 8:10)

Living as God's people in an indifferent or hostile world.

The book of Esther is three things, at least:

- * it is a delightful and entertaining story;
- * it is a record of how the Jews were saved from disaster;
- * it is a looking glass on our own world: in certain key respects the ancient world of Esther is just like ours - God seems absent; the world is often indifferent to God and his people, and at other times directly opposes them. At the same time, and perhaps related, God's people demonstrate a mixture of valiant heroism and faithfulness to God, and foolish selfishness, pigheadedness, and an unfortunate willingness to adopt the values and ungodly behaviour patterns of the world.

Yet through this maze of imperfection, we see God at work even through apparently insignificant chance happenings. In all this God secures his purposes and glory.

A challenge that the book of Esther brings to us is that through faith, we might increasingly appreciate that God is indeed at work through every detail of life, whether this is visible to us or not.

Esther is set in Persia, with Jews in exile away from the Promised Land. In contrast, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah concern events back in the Promised Land. Here the Jews had more scope to restore Jerusalem and the nation, and to be public about their faithfulness to God. Yet the books deal with a series of issues where God's people crumpled before opposition, and failed to keep themselves holy for God.

A challenge here is for us to evaluate how we buckle under resistance to our faith and adopt the values of the world. Ezra and Nehemiah urged the Jews to reform and revitalise their commitment to God. What about us?

Max Gilbert, April 2006

Time Line of Esther, Ezra & Nehemiah.

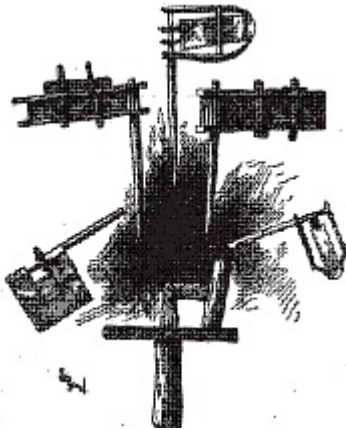
538 BC	Return to Judah of some Jews from Babylonian Exile
537 BC	Rebuilding of temple commences, but soon stops.
520-516 BC	Rebuilding resumed and temple completed.
486-465 BC	Xerxes, King of Persia) includes reign over Judah
464-423 BC	Artaxerxes I, King of Persia)
483- 460 BC	The events of the book of Esther, in Susa in Persia.
458 BC	Ezra leads a group of Jews back from Babylon to Jerusalem, and institutes revival. (Ezra 7-10)
445 BC	Nehemiah leads a group of Jews back from Susa in Persia to Jerusalem, and rebuilds the city wall. Ezra reads the Law. Leading to Confession and Revival. Resettlement of Jerusalem commences. (Nehemiah 1-12)
445-433 BC	Nehemiah governor of Judah (Nehemiah 5:14)
433-432 BC	Nehemiah recalled to Susa, then returns to Jerusalem, instituting further reforms/revival. (Nehemiah 13)

The Jewish Festival of Purim

Every year, Jews celebrate the Festival of Purim, one month before Passover. Purim is one of the most joyous and fun holidays on the Jewish calendar. It commemorates a time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extermination.

A key event is the public reading of the book of Esther, performed a bit like a melodrama - it is customary to boo, hiss, stamp feet and rattle gragers whenever the name of Haman is mentioned in the service. The purpose of this custom is to "blot out the name of Haman." There is also great merry-making and festive eating to rejoice in God's hidden work of delivering the Jews.

It is called Purim (which is Hebrew for "lots" as in drawing lots for a lottery) because of the lots used to choose the day on which the Jews were to be exterminated. Refer: <http://www.jewfaq.org/holiday9.htm>



at Purim

Gragers



Purim Players at Prague, Early
Eighteenth Century.
(From a contemporary drawing.)

used

(Illustrations from Jewish Encyclopedia 1909, Vol 10, p276)

Week 1

THEME: Introduction to Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther: Being God's People in a non-Christian World.

Day 1 Ezra 1:1-4. Return from Exile.

In the first year of Cyrus (538 C), the Jews in captivity in Babylon were allowed to return to Judah, and to rebuild the temple. Of what empire was Cyrus king? What does it say about the real status of the Jews, that they needed permission to return to Jerusalem?

Day 2 Ezra 3 - 6. Rebuilding the temple.

Upon return, a priority was to rebuild the temple (Ch3). But under opposition, this soon stopped (Ezra 4:24) Which Gentile king gave the support necessary to complete the temple? (Ezra 5:13-15) This was 516BC.

Day 3 Ezra 7:1-10 Ezra returns from exile.

During whose reign did Ezra come from Babylon back to Jerusalem? (Ezra 7:1) This was about 458BC, 60 years after ch 6.

Day 4 Neh 2:1-9 Nehemiah returns from exile.

When did Nehemiah come to Jerusalem (Neh 2:1)? (Refer time-line on p4) How long was this after Ezra's arrival?

Day 5 Neh 1:1-2; Esther 1:1-2 Meanwhile back in Susa.

Where was Nehemiah before he left for Jerusalem? Where does the action in Esther take place? (Esther 1:2)

STUDY PASSAGE Neh 6:1-14; Esther 4:12-17

To Discuss:

1. Discuss what it is like living as a Christian in a largely non-Christian world. Do you like to keep separate from the world as much as you can and associate with Christian things, or do you like to immerse yourself in the world, so as to enjoy all that God has made and contact the world for Christ?
2. The Jews had looked forward to the return from exile in Babylon (Jeremiah had prophesied that they would return after 70 years.) But on return, they were still under the rule of the Persians, and they constantly faced opposition from neighbouring countries. What schemes were Sanballat and Tobias using to oppose the Jews reconstructing the wall? (Neh 6:1-14)
3. What do you think of Nehemiah's responses to the opposition he faced? How do you deal with opposition to your faith?
4. Esther was faced with a situation in which the entire Jewish race faced extermination. She had the possibility of pleading to the king, but it might cost her life. Discuss Mordecai's advice and Esther's response (Esther 4:12-17) as a model of faithful living in a pagan world.

PRAY for wisdom, boldness, shrewdness, gentleness and resignation in the right measures as we live out Christians lives in a world which largely ignores or opposes God and his people.

Week 2

THEME: God & His People: Both Invisible in a Pagan World?

Day 1 Esther 1:1 The Persian Empire

King Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire from 486-475BC. V1 describes the extent of his empire. Have a look at a map and see what modern countries his Empire covered.

Day 2 Esther 1:3 Xerxes' Banquet

Xerxes gave a banquet. Who was invited?

Day 3 Esther 1:12 Money Can't buy you love.

For all his wealth and power, what was it that Xerxes could not get?

Day 4 Esther 2:5-7 Esther & Mordecai.

How did Esther & Mordecai come to be together and so far away from their homeland?

Day 5 Esther 2:15-18 Money can't buy you love. - or can it?

How did Esther come to be queen?

STUDY PASSAGE Esther 1:1-2:18

To Discuss:

1. Discuss the character of King Xerxes. What do you think about: his feast? his relationship with Vashti? his attitude to wives in general? the way he decided what to do about Vashti? how he related to his advisors? The way he decided to obtain a new queen? How would you sum up his character?

2. Can you find any evidence of God's presence in Esther 1:1 - 2:18?

3. It can be debated, but 2:8 probably implies that Esther 'was taken' *involuntarily* to the harem. Nonetheless, what do you think about what Esther did? (She hid her identity as a Jew; she accepted the king's special food (contrast Daniel's rejection of such food in Dan 1:8); she shared the bed of a promiscuous uncircumcised pagan.) Are there any extenuating circumstances? Is there anything good in what she did? What would you have done? If you hadn't read the rest of the book of Esther, how would you expect God to respond?

4. Discuss the ways in which a Christian's life in the modern world is like that of Esther's.

PRAY for wisdom and courage to live as Christians in a world where often both God and his people seem to have disappeared.

Week 3

THEME: God's People: Set for Destruction?

Day 1 Esther 2:19-23 Mordecai goes down in history.

What was written about Mordecai in the royal records? (Take note of this, because it will play a significant role in the narrative. Was this chance, or did God arrange these events?)

Day 2 Esther 3:1-11 Haman's Heritage.

That Haman was an *Agagite* is stressed (refer 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). This probably means his heritage was from the Amalakites (1 Sam 15:8; Nu 24:7). Look up these passages to see the long standing enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites: Deut 25:18; Ex 17:8-13, 1 Sam 15.

Day 3 Esther 3:12-15 The Jews to be annihilated.

Do you think the people of Susa as a whole supported Haman's plot to destroy the Jews?

Day 4 Esther 4:1- 8 Mordecai changes his tune.

Up to this point Mordecai had instructed Esther to hide her Jewishness (2:10, 20). Why does he change his mind (v8)?

Day 5 Esther 4:9-17 Esther's dilemma.

Could Esther save herself by keeping quiet about the plot against the Jews?

STUDY PASSAGE Esther 2:19-4:17

To Discuss:

1. Mordecai had insisted that Esther hide her Jewishness. Why then do you think he refused to kneel and give honour to Haman? Do you think he could have shown due respect to Haman without compromising himself ethnically and religiously? With the benefit of hindsight, should he have acted differently?

2. Remember or imagine a situation where you were torn between doing what was expected of you “by the world”, and sticking rigidly to your “Christian” habits. How did you decide whether your “Christian” habits needed change or whether it was a matter on which you could not compromise?

3. Can you give any explanation for Haman’s grossly “over-the-top” reaction to Mordecai? (Refer the references for Day 2.) Given the long standing enmity between the Amalakites and God’s people (Refer 1 Sam 15), how do you anticipate that God will react to Haman’s plot? Discuss whether it is likely that this plot against the Jews is a long delayed punishment for King Saul’s failure to fully obey God in 1 Sam 15?

4. What can be gleaned from 4:9-17 about how Esther and Mordecai thought about God and his involvement in the events of life? What parts of this do you see as good models for a modern day Christian?

PRAY. Continue to pray for wisdom as we seek to understand God’s activity in the modern world and how we should behave as God’s people.

Week 4

THEME: God's behind-the-scenes care for His People.

Day 1 Esther 5:1-8 Esther's entertains.

How did Esther go about preparing the king for the request she would make?

Day 2 Esther 5:9-14 Mordecai mocks.

Despite the plan to exterminate the Jews, despite what he knows Esther is currently doing, including presumably that she is inviting Haman, the King's most honoured noble, Mordecai continues to insult/show disrespect for Haman. Is Mordecai (i) foolhardy in the extreme; or (ii) totally faithful to God?

Day 3 Esther 6:1-11 Haman humiliated.

Did you enjoy God's sense of humour here?

Day 4 Esther 6:12-14 Advisors abandon.

How do Haman's wife and advisors rate his future prospects?

Day 5 Esther 7:1-10 Haman hanged.

Do you think that Xerxes had any idea before 7:3-6 that Esther was Jewish? If he did know previously, is there any way to explain his rage at Haman?

STUDY PASSAGE: Esther 5:1-7:10

To Discuss:

1. Looking at chapters 5-7, and also what we have previously read in chapters 1-4, make a list of remarkable coincidences, or chains of events which have led to Haman being hung on his own gallows, and his plot against the Jews coming to the point of backfire.
2. Looking at the main characters in the story (Esther, Mordecai, Xerxes, Haman, the advisors), what hints can you find about how they understood God's role in what was going on? (Was it all coincidence, or was it God's work in the background?)
3. If God is actively at work in all these events, to what extent are the people "fighting a lost (or won) cause" in vain?
4. Think of circumstances in life where an accumulation of coincidences has resulted in a good outcome. Discuss whether the book of Esther so far has encouraged you to see this as "God's work in the background".

PRAY that we might have eyes of faith to discern God's care for us as his people, even when there are no neon-light signs about it.

Week 5

THEME: God Preserves His People.

Day 1 Esther 8:1-10 A reversal of power.

How did the wealth and influence of Esther and Mordecai change following the execution of Haman?

Day 2 Esther 8:11-17 A reversal of the plot.

How is the plot of Haman against the Jews turned into a vehicle by which the Jews can defeat their enemies?

Day 3 Esther 9:1-17 Completion of Unfinished Business

The repeated description of Haman as ‘the Agagite’ (8:3,5) suggests that this destruction of Jewish enemies here is a completion of what Saul failed to complete in 1 Sam 15. This is further confirmed by the repeated words “they did not lay their hands on the plunder.” (9:10,15,16 - contrast 1 Sam 15:3, 13-16)

Day 4 Esther 9:18-32 The Festival of Purim

The Jewish Festival of Purim was instituted to celebrate the joyous reversal of fortunes in the account of Esther. When is it celebrated, and when does it occur relative to Passover/Easter? (Refer NIV Study Bible table linked to Exodus 12, and notes at the beginning of these studies).

Day 5 Esther 10:1-3 Mordecai replaces Haman

How does ch 10 emphasise the thoroughness of the defeat of Haman (and indirectly, the Amalakitites.)

STUDY PASSAGE Esther 8:1- 10:3

To Discuss:

1. Note and discuss the events in these chapters which show how thorough was the reversal of fortunes of the Jews.

2. Just as there are question marks over the character and actions of Esther and Mordecai in the early chapters, so there are question marks in the final chapters over the macabre violence/vindictiveness of the Jews, and likewise over their rejoicing (is there a negative tinge to 9:27?). On the other hand, there are signs that this is presented as carrying out the commands of God which Saul failed to do (Refer Day 3).

Discuss the following assessments of the book or Esther:

(a) In the book of Esther, God's love and care for his people are apparent to *readers*; but to the *characters* themselves, God's hiddenness is a form of judgement on their flawed lives;

(b) The book of Esther describes a world like our own: modern Christians are a powerless minority in an alien world - it is often wise to hide our faith; sometimes when we show our faith it leads to seriously bad consequences; often we cannot detect God's presence; sometimes we have no option but to act boldly and trust God; sometimes, after the events, we can look back and realise God was there, caring for us all along.

(c) The only truly admirable thing done or said by anyone (other than God) in the book is Mordecai's assessment of things in 4:14

(d) The book of Esther displays God's amazing grace, in that despite their flawed characters, he gave peace and power to Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people, rescuing them from despicable enemies, and bringing glory to himself.

3. How have your reflections on Esther impacted your Christian life?

PRAY. Praise God for the undeserved mercy he shows us.

Week 6

THEME: God's People: Set aside for God, and Distinctive.

Day 1 Ezra 7:1-10

Second Return from Exile.

When did Ezra lead this party of exiles back to Jerusalem? When was this in comparison to the first return of exiles (Ezra)? When was this compared to the time when Esther first went to King Zerxes? (Esther 2:16)? [Check the table in the NIV Study Bible at Ezra 2.]

Day 2 Ezra 7:1-28

Who was Ezra?

What does this chapter tell us about Ezra?

Day 3 Ezra 8:1-36

The Prayer for Safety.

Ezra and his party of 4,000 were concerned about their safety during the journey. Why was Ezra ashamed to ask the king for protection? What did they do instead?

Day 4 Ezra 9:1-15

The Jews unfaithful again.

What problem was brought to Ezra's attention soon after arriving in Jerusalem? Who were leading the way? (9:1-2)

Day 5 Ezra 10:1-44

Decisive action.

What did Ezra and the assembled Jews decide to do about the problem?

STUDY PASSAGE Ezra 7:1-10:44, especially 9:1-15

To Discuss:

1. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem before Ezra had intermarried with non-Jews (9:1-2). Why was this a problem? (Deut 7:1-6.)

2. For us as modern day Christians, some roughly equivalent issues are (i) marrying a non-Christian; (ii) entering into joint business and political arrangements with non-Christians. To what extent and why should we avoid or enter into such arrangements (2 Cor 6:14-18; John 15:19; 17:15-19 ; 1 Cor 5:9-11)?

3. Read Ezra's prayer of confession on behalf of the Jews (9:6-15). Discuss the ways that this prayer shows how serious the matter of intermarriage was.

4. In the multi-cultural world in which we live, how far should our church adopt the habits of our world: music styles? language? standards of sexual morality? inter-faith dialogue vs proclaiming the gospel? In respect of our church, what things distinguish us from the world around us? Which of these should we hold on to, and which should we relax?

PRAY. Pray prayers inspired by Ezra's prayer.

Week 7

THEME: God's People: Under Oppression.

Day 1 Nehemiah 1:1-11 Who is Nehemiah?

Where did Nehemiah live at the start of the book? (v1) What was his position?
(v11) Why did he weep? (v4)

Day 2 Nehemiah 2:1-20 Nehemiah's Assignment.

What did Nehemiah request from the King?
Describe Nehemiah's leadership style.

Day 3 Nehemiah 3:1-32 Rebuilding commences.

How was the work of rebuilding organised?

Day 4 Nehemiah 4:1-23; 6:1-14. Opposition.

Who were the main opponents of the rebuilding programme?

Day 5 Nehemiah 5:1-19 Economic Crisis.

How were the Jewish leaders exacerbating the poverty of the people of Judah?

STUDY PASSAGE Nehemiah 4:1-23, and generally ch 1-7.

To Discuss:

1. How did Sanballat and Tobiah react to the arrival of Nehemiah and the rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem? (Neh 2:10; 19-20; 4:1-3, 11; 6:1-19)? How had they infiltrated the Jewish people? (6:17-19)

2. Describe the various ways that Nehemiah and the Jewish people responded to the opposition that confronted them. What was commendable and not so commendable?

3. Discuss how God helped Nehemiah and the Jews to deal with the opposition.

4. What sort of opposition do you find in your Christian life? Discuss the opposition that we face as a church here. Discuss how we do or could react, and how you have been conscious of God in these situations.

PRAY. Prayer for wisdom and perseverance, when we face opposition, and that through his mercy, God's name will be glorified.

Week 8

THEME: God's Word & His People's Response.

Day 1 Nehemiah 8:1-18 The Reading of the Law.

Note that the reading took place at the completion of the wall (Neh 6:15, Oct 445) and the dedication of the wall (Neh 12:27). Who read the Book of the Law? (Neh 8:2-3)

Day 2 Nehemiah 9:1-37 Prayer of Confession.

How would you summarise the main components of this prayer: (a) v5-15; (b) v16-31; (c) v32a; (d) v32b-37.

Day 3 Nehemiah 9:38-10:39 The People's Resolve.

In response to the reading of the Law (ch 8), and following the prayer of confession (ch 9), what did the people resolve to do?

Day 4 Nehemiah 11:1-36 Repopulating Jerusalem.

Jerusalem had presumably been largely deserted when the wall was down. How did the process of repopulating it commence?

Day 5 Nehemiah 12:1-47 Rededication of the Wall

Following reading the Law, prayer of confession, resolving on reform, and setting about the repopulation of Jerusalem, how did the Jews celebrate the completion of the wall.

STUDY PASSAGE Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39

To Discuss:

1. Ezra read to the people the “Book of the Law” (presumably a major part of the OT) from day break to noon (v3). The people listened attentively. Discuss how it might go if we tried something like that. Would it be inherently gripping, or what would we have to do to help it to hold our interest?
2. What things preceded the reading and accompanied it? What things have you found really helpful as aids to understanding the Bible?
3. The reading of the Law made the people weep (v9). Why do you think this happened? Why do you think Nehemiah urged them to rejoice? What strong reactions have you experienced as you have read or heard the Bible?
4. Reflect on the prayer in ch 9 which is presumably a response to reading the Law. If you were recounting the blessings which God has showered on the people of God, what would you include? If you were confessing the great sins of the church in recent decades/centuries what would you include?
5. Read the promised reforms in Neh 10:29-39. What sorts of commitments does this inspire you to think would be appropriate for us in the 21st century?

PRAY. Pray concerning our often less than serious intent to understand and follow God’s word, and for the wisdom and boldness to revitalise our commitment to God.

Week 9

THEME: God's People: Failure, Reform and Renewal.

Day 1 Nehemiah 13:1-3 The Book of Moses.

Read Deut 23:3-6 and compare it with these verses.

Day 2 Nehemiah 13:4-14 Nehemiah recalled and returns.

Where did Nehemiah go after about 12 years as Governor in Jerusalem? What did he find on his return to Jerusalem, some time later?

Day 3 Nehemiah 13:15-22 Neglect of the Sabbath.

What activities on the Sabbath did Nehemiah object to?

Day 4 Nehemiah 13:23-28 Intermarriage recurs.

Reread Ezra 10, to see how only a generation earlier (457BC) Ezra confronted a similar problem amongst the Jews.

Day 5 Nehemiah 13:29-30 Nehemiah initiates reform.

What did Nehemiah do to attempt to rectify the problems he found?

STUDY PASSAGE Nehemiah 13:1-31

To Discuss:

1. The idea of racial separation is of course politically incorrect in our multicultural world, and has been a tool of terrible suppression of weaker people groups. Discuss why God commanded this sort of separation. How would we apply the same principle today?
2. Notice how the foreign leaders, Tobiah and Sanballat had close connections with the Jewish priesthood (v4, 28). How does the book of Nehemiah show that they weren't real friends of the Jews?
3. Nehemiah has been described as a model of leadership. Go back over the book and see to what extent you agree with these descriptions of Nehemiah:
 - * a person of power and prestige in the Gentile world;
 - * a person of vision, who was confident about what God wanted, and then set about careful planning to bring it about;
 - * a person of prayer;
 - * a person of action;
 - * a person who explained his actions and sought co-operation;
 - * a person of compassion and generosity;
 - * a person who acted with bravery and boldness against God's opponents.

How would you sum up Nehemiah's character?

4. Looking back over Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah, what have you learned about God? What have been the highlights for you, and the things that have had most impact on your Christian walk?

PRAY. Pray for wisdom and boldness as we seek to praise our great God, as we seek, through faith, to see him at work in the world, and as we seek to live as his people in a world which largely ignores him.

HOW TO USE THESE NOTES

1. Starting one week before your group meets, read the daily Bible readings on the left hand side of the double page, and think about the question for the day. These are for private reflection, before your group discussion.
2. The questions on the right hand side of the double page are designed for group discussion. Think about these questions before you go to your discussion group.
3. The study passages follow the morning and evening sermon series. You may find it helpful to take notes of the sermons.
4. Please don't be frustrated if you can't understand or answer the questions: the important thing is that you read God's word.
5. Use this guide for family or personal Bible reading, and if you would like to join a home group, please see one of the ministers.

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