

## Lesson 6—Scene 3

Last time, we explored Scene 2 in the grand drama of what God is doing on this earth to glorify himself by redeeming his fallen creation, and in Scene 2 we saw some rather dark stuff happen. Solomon allowed his heart to be drawn away from God and to all these various idols, thus leading himself and the people of Israel into sin. Consequently, God promised to tear the kingdom from the hands of his son and give it to his servant. God, then, did just that: the nation of Israel split in two as the northern ten tribes followed Jeroboam, Solomon's servant, and the southern two tribes remained loyal to the house of David and followed Solomon's son, Rehoboam. The northern kingdom continued to go by the name of Israel while the southern kingdom was then known by Judah. Of the two new kingdoms, Israel proved to be the more sinful, even from the start, and so God promised to punish them by sending them into exile with the nation of Assyria, and he eventually did just that, leaving only the southern kingdom of Judah remaining. Unfortunately, though, Judah eventually fell into worse sin under king Manasseh and God promised to punish them, send them into exile in Babylon, and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple. Of course, God is always faithful to fulfill his promises, and so God eventually destroys the very nation that he had worked centuries to build and bring together, leaving the earth once again without an established channel of redemption.

It is from this dark, dark starting point that we open up into Scene 3, the period of history that runs from the Babylonian exile until the coming of Christ. \*Just a quick note: I wanted to show you all where these divisions are coming from so that you know that I'm not just making these up; **Matthew 1:17** sums up the genealogy of Christ with these words, "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations (Scene 1), and from David to the

deportation to Babylon fourteen generations (Scene 2), and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations (Scene 3).\*

So, to examine Scene 3, we will need to refer the historical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ester, and then we will find ourselves in the 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) to see this work of God brought to consummation, or completion. So, after the promised 70 years of exile during which the people of God found themselves scattered all over the world and the earth has no established place where people can meet God redemptively, we find ourselves in **Ezra 6:14**, which reads, “<sup>14</sup> And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” **Nehemiah 6:15-16** then tells us that “<sup>15</sup> So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.” Then, **Ezra 7:10** tells us that “<sup>10</sup> For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” **Nehemiah 8:1-3** then confirms this by giving us the actual recounting of Ezra teaching the law of God to the people.

So, we just read that the kings of Babylon, and eventually Persia, were used by God to send a small portion of the people of Judah back to the ruins of Jerusalem so that they might rebuild their city and their temple. Under the guidance, provision, and protection of God, this small portion of Jews was able to successfully rebuild both Jerusalem and the temple of God. Ezra served as both Scribe and priest and was instrumental in re-educating the people concerning the law of God. Nehemiah served as governor of Jerusalem and was instrumental in providing

leadership for the people during this time of great change and uncertainty. So, what we see, at the end of Ezra 8 and Nehemiah 8 is the re-establishment of the nation of Israel: they once again have a gathered people, though it is a much, much smaller group, they have a portion of their land back and have rebuilt their temple, they have the law of God and have again been taught it by Ezra, and they have some form of leadership through their governor, Nehemiah.

Ezra explains it this way in **Ezra 9:8-9**, “<sup>8</sup> But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. <sup>9</sup> For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.” Though God has re-established his nation of Israel, it is not the same as it once was: even though a small portion, or a remnant, of the Davidic Kingdom (God’s chosen people) was able to return to Judea and Jerusalem, the vast majority of Israelites were still scattered throughout Persia, and even though this remnant was able to rebuild both Jerusalem and the temple of God, they were still in bondage as slaves to the ruling powers of Persia, which is the first time they have been slaves since rescued out of Egypt.

\*I believe this shows us two things, and we must remember them both in order to maintain a balance in our thinking about this: 1) Sin is real, it is serious business, and its consequences are deeply damaging; 2) God is much greater than our sin and is capable of redeeming us out of even the worst messes we make of ourselves and our lives. Let me explain briefly why I believe we must balance these two thoughts: to only be mindful of #1 (the issue of sin) can blind you to the reality of the power of God to redeem and lead you into a state of

hopelessness and despair which will drive you to deeper and deeper sin, with greater and more damaging consequences; to only be mindful of #2 (the power of God to redeem) can cause us to take sin too lightly and not give it the proper concern its due, therefore belittling the actual work of redemption that God has provided for us and even dishonoring the sacrifice of Jesus that makes redemption possible.\*

But now back to the story: all the while that Ezra and Nehemiah are working by the power and guidance of God to restore Jerusalem and the temple, we turn to the book of Esther and find a historical record describing for us what happened outside of geographical Israel since God's people were mostly still scattered due to their rebellion. Esther presents us with an interesting and drama-filled account of how a Jewish woman, Esther, became queen of Persia with King Ahasuerus. During her reign as queen, a high ranking Persian official named Haman plotted to have the Jews eliminated from the kingdom of Persia. Fortunately, Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who raised her as his own daughter, discovered the plot and worked with Esther to foil Haman's plans and to save the Jews.

What is particularly interesting about the story of Esther, though, is not the plot against the Jews and their subsequent salvation through the work of Queen Esther and Mordecai. It is the fact that Esther is the only book in the bible that does not directly refer to God. No one knows for sure why this is the case, but many legitimate guesses have been put forth; here's mine: Could it be that God is never mentioned directly throughout the book of Esther in order to heighten the work of God's indirect providence in protecting his people throughout the world while simultaneously drawing out attention to where he is directly active in the world? Let me explain what I mean: perhaps God is showing us that he is indeed faithful and will sovereignly keep his people according to his promises and plans for them, despite their sinful rebellion and

current exile in a foreign land, and perhaps God wants us to focus on the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of his temple in Ezra and Nehemiah because that is where he is actively working in the world and that is where he will finally fulfill his promise to Abraham that he made so long ago.

It is with these events in mind that we continue in Scene 3 and see the same historical reality continue from the time of Esther all the way until the time of Matthew, which was at least 400 years: the majority of the Jews, or God's chosen people, were still scattered all over the world while the remnant that returned to and rebuilt Jerusalem was still under the control of a Gentile nation—in Esther, the ruling nation was Persia, but in Matthew, the ruling nation was Rome. Oddly enough, during this rather extensive period between Esther and Matthew, God was silent, indicating that nothing happened during this time period that God thinks we need to know in order to help us understand the story of what He is doing on this earth to glorify himself by redeeming his fallen creation.

But then we come to Matthew, and something so significant happens that God makes it abundantly clear to us that he is once again at work. **Galatians 4:4** tells us that, “<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.” Then, Peter, in his first sermon in **Acts 2, verses 22-24** in particular, says, “<sup>22</sup> “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. <sup>24</sup> God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.” Then, Paul, in **2 Corinthians 5:19**, says, “<sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ

God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

So, after 400 years of silence, God sends his Son, the long-promised Messiah, into the world at the “fullness of time” through the remnant that he brought out of exile so long ago. He then proves Jesus’ divine identity and mission by working many miracles and doing many great works and wonders through him in the midst of His people. Then, according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, Jesus was delivered up to be crucified and killed at the hands of lawless men, a death which Paul tells us God used to reconcile the world to himself by no longer counting our trespasses against us. Then, this same Jesus, was raised from the dead because, as Peter says, it was not possible for death to hold him.

This coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (same word for Messiah and stands as his title, not his last name), is by far the greatest thing that God has yet done in history. God himself became flesh in the person of Jesus and dwelt amongst us; this means that God left the glory and splendor of heaven to be born in a feeding trough in an insignificant town (Bethlehem) in an insignificant region (Judea) at the far corners of the vast Roman empire. Not only that, but he came to serve us and to give his life as a ransom for many, thereby reconciling the world to God by effectively and permanently dealing with our sin on the Cross.

This great work of God through the coming of the Messiah is actually what the story has been leading up to the whole time, and it is what the rest of the story will be based upon. Meaning, without the coming of Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection, there is no redemption for mankind; the entire story centers on this one character and this one series of events found in the gospels. Do you remember the promise to Abraham way back in Genesis 12 that started us on this journey? **Genesis 12:1-3** reads, “Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from

your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” **Galatians 3:16** then tells us that “<sup>16</sup> Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.” So, all that God has been doing since he started acting to bring about the redemption of mankind for his glory has led to the coming of Christ Jesus; Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, for it was through Jesus that God blessed the whole world. And it is this same Jesus spoken of in **Revelation 5:9** which reads, “<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,” indicating that the first coming of Jesus almost 2,000 years ago makes him worthy to judge and rule the earth when he comes the second time, filling it with the glory of God.

And it is this great work of God in the coming of the Messiah that ends Scene 3 and, consequently, Act I. **Hebrews 9:24-26** tells us that “<sup>24</sup> For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. <sup>25</sup> Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, <sup>26</sup> for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And **Hebrews 1:1-2** also tells us that “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through

whom also he created the world.” And **1 Peter 1:18-20** tells us that “<sup>18</sup> knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. <sup>20</sup> He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.”

We see, in these verses, that God intended the work of Christ to consummate, or bring to completion, a period of time and a series of events: this is what we call Act I, and it spans from Genesis 12 all the way through John 21 (the end of the four gospels). On the cross, Jesus even spoke these famous words in **John 19:30** right before he died: “It is finished.” The utterance of these words by Christ on the cross indicated that at that moment, not the full work of God on the earth was completed, but the main work of God through his Messiah, or Christ, had been completed. God, through the nation of Israel, had provided salvation, or redemption, for the whole world; this, indeed, was the blessing of Abraham through the line of David, just as God had promised.

*Draw diagram for review.*