

52ND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE GOSPEL STANDARD TRUST

HELD AT UFFINGTON CHAPEL ON 19 MAY 2018

Address given by Mr G D Buss

When I was kindly asked to address this meeting, the subject that came quite readily to my mind was *The Overruling Hand of Almighty God*. The verse that first led me to it was the word of godly Nehemiah. Remember, Nehemiah was one of the captives down in Shushan, during the Babylonish captivity; he was the king's cupbearer. That was a very important position and one he no doubt held in the fear of God, though surrounded for the most part by very ungodly people with whom to work. While he served the king there, he heard of the low and diminished state of Jerusalem. The walls were broken down, and those who were dwelling there were in great distress. Though he himself was no doubt in a measure of luxury and opulence in Shushan with the senior position he held, the cause of God and of truth weighed so heavily upon him that it overshadowed his demeanor, so much so that the king noticed. There was a very foolish and unjust rule that the king had, that no one must be sad in his presence. I am very thankful the King of kings does not debar mourners from His court. What a mercy!

But nonetheless that was the rule and the king noticed. And we read that Nehemiah was very afraid; he suddenly realised the danger he was in, it being possibly a capital offence. Before he opened his mouth to explain why, he did what you and I should do first before we open our mouth. He prayed to the God of heaven. Now we are not told what the prayer was – it was one of those silent prayers which are heard just as much as the spoken ones. The Lord looks on the heart – and he says that the king granted his request “according to the good hand of his God upon him.” So, the hand of God was on Nehemiah in his request and also on the king, although the king was no doubt unwitting of this. Nonetheless it was a truth, that the hand of God was on the king in his answer. And it is, dear friends, this precious truth that the hand of God is over everything, great and small, that should be a comfort, especially in times of distress as in Nehemiah's day; in times of the churches' lean state. The good hand of God is just as much there as in those times of great prosperity. We must not think the Lord loves His church less when she is in a low place. He loves her with an everlasting love and He loves His people. Sometimes they feel the love of Christ in their heart, and perhaps on the mountain-top of experience can rejoice in it. Other times they may be in a very low spot – Satan's sieve – or other places God's people come into. But God has not changed.

“My soul through many changes goes;
His love no variation knows.”

[Gadsby's Hymns 339].

I want, with God's help, to examine this word. In particular I want to speak from the Book of Esther and how wonderfully it is illustrated there – *The Overruling Hand of God*.

There are one or two principles I would bring before you concerning this precious truth. And we should be thankful, friends, that God does extend His hand. Now it was a prayer, a complaint of the psalmist: “Why withholdest Thou Thine hand?” Sometimes, dear friends, we should examine the reason for that shouldn't we? Is there not a voice of divine discipline in that, when the Lord does not arise for our help when we feel we need it? There is a voice; He will arise, but how we need to examine the reason *why* He may have withheld His hand for the present. There may be a voice in it. Those of you that are waiting for the arm of the Lord to arise on your behalf – is there not a cause

why it is being withheld? Is something grieving the Spirit? Is there a withholding on that account? How we should examine ourselves.

Now there are two principles, whatever the circumstances in providence or grace, which undergird our subject this afternoon. The overruling hand of God is always, without any qualification, for His ultimate honour and glory. That is the first thing. Whatever the hand of God may give or withhold, the ultimate end God has in view is His own honour and glory. You have that in John 11, for example, when Lazarus was sick. The Lord sent a message: "This sickness is not unto death: but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." That was the end God had in view, and all of God's works and the extending of His hand are for that end.

The second thing which is closely and undeniably united to that, is this: what is for the ultimate honour and glory of God is always for the ultimate good of His people. The two are inseparably joined. We should not fear to plead God's sovereignty in that respect, because God's sovereignty will always work for the ultimate good of God's people.

"He gives, and He takes, and He makes no mistakes,
Whatever may be the amount;
Nor have we a right, however He smite,
To ask Him to give an account."

The end of God's dealings, the ultimate end, will always be for the good of His church. I think our minds would be much quieter in some of our tribulation, dear friends, if we remembered that there is that indissoluble connection between the honour and glory of God and the good the Lord determines to do to His church.

Now we are favoured with many examples in the Word of God how the Lord has overruled things for the honour and glory of His name. We have the Book of Job for example. The whole Book really is a wonderful example of it – of how the Lord overruled the sufferings, the disappointments and the discouragements into which Job came, of how the Lord overruled the attack of the enemy, the misunderstanding even of his friends, the loneliness of his path and the deep affliction. But right at the end of the Book what do we read? "The Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning." Why? Because of the overruling hand of God. You take the Book of Ruth. And yes, we could not really condone Elimelech going down with Naomi to Moab, could we? He was leaving the land of promise; he was taking his two sons away from the place where God was worshipped aright, down into an idolatrous country. All that, we would be wrong to condone. But on the other hand, how we see the Lord overruling even that seeming mistake for His own honour and glory, and bringing forth one of the links in the chain to the coming of the dear Saviour in the marriage of Ruth to Boaz, Boaz being the forerunner of David, and then David's greater Son.

It is a wonderful thing to be able to testify, dear friend, that even when God's people do make mistakes (and they do; O which of God's people among us here dare say you have never made a mistake?) that God has overruled them for their teaching and for His honour and glory. But what a mercy when we see it – and it is very humbling when we do see it. Again, the Book of Genesis is replete with this. Our good chairman read of Joseph's case and the terrible treatment he went through. He confesses concerning his brethren: "Ye meant it for evil" – they did. Hatred, bitterness, malice, spite was in their hearts – but "God meant it for good." Friends, it is what God means is the important thing. We may be so taken up with what this thing means and that thing. Friends, look higher than that – it is what God means. And "God meant it for good." And the mercy of it is that it was very necessary for Joseph to walk that path to prepare him for what the Lord had ordained him for at the right hand of Pharaoh, when God's time came.

You may think of the strange way in which the Jewish nation rejected our Lord Jesus Christ. How that made way for the ingathering of the Gentiles. And then we are told by prophecy in the Epistle

of Romans, how that greater glory to God will be gained when the Jewish nation has their eyes opened and Christ is acknowledged amongst His own nation of which He was a part here below. God's ways are mysterious aren't they? If we were managing the world, dear friends, how very differently we would manage it! But O friend, what a failure it would be! What a failure it would be!

Then of course the pre-eminent example is the Fall. Whoever thought, when Satan made what he thought was a master-stroke in deceiving Eve and then Adam and injecting sin into the being of man, that any good could come out of it? And yet, my dear friends, strangely enough more glory has come to God out of that permissive will of God – and we would speak very carefully there – than if Adam had never fallen. It is a great mystery; heaven is being peopled from a number that no man can number, redeemed out of every nation, tribe and tongue, that are singing, even this very afternoon hour, to the glory of God in sending His dear Son. They are singing too, the glory of the dear Son in so willingly coming and the glory of the Holy Ghost in opening their eyes to see their fallen state and bringing them to a precious Christ. Friend, the anthems in heaven are a wonderful vindication of our subject this afternoon – *the overruling hand of God*.

The events we read of in Acts chapter 4 were called the “determinate counsel of God”. They did not excuse Judas from betraying; they did not excuse the Roman soldiers who nailed Him to the tree, but nonetheless we read that it was according to the foreknowledge of God. It is a great mystery isn't it? A great mystery. But nonetheless the truth stands. O who will tell the honour and glory that has been got and is being got to Almighty God in the sending of His Son and the laying down of His precious life, in the redeeming blood which He shed, that sinners might have anthems to sing to all eternity – to praise God from whom all blessings flow! Friend, the devil always overreaches himself and the Lord always has the last word. In that particular matter – O blessed be His holy name! – He has had the last word in it.

Now after that brief introduction, I want to bring before you the well-known account of the Book of Esther, because if ever there was an example of the overruling hand of God, it is seen in that Book. Strangely enough, the name of God is not mentioned once from beginning to end. And yet the hand of God is seen in every chapter. We see the hand of Satan as well, and that is also something which is very active in our day.

There were three ready agents of Satan.

The first was King Ahasuerus who was an erratic, hasty, ill-tempered, easily-manipulated man – we might say not even fit to be on a throne. His behaviour was, according to godly scholars, often that of a man who was not of a sound mind, probably because he was given over to wine more than he ought to have been. Leave that to one side. But here he was on a throne. And there he was ruling over the captives who were down in Shushan and in the Babylonish provinces. What was he doing on a throne, we might say? Why did God permit that man to be there?

Secondly, we have another man – a man called Haman. Haman was of an evil, vindictive nature and had an inveterate hatred (we might call it anti-Semitism in our day) to the Jews. And just remember that Satan again and again and again throughout the Old Testament sought to hinder the coming of our Saviour by trying to annihilate the seed of Abraham and trying to undo what God had promised in the Garden of Eden: that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head. Satan always failed. He always will fail. But friends, he has not given up trying even in our day, for even though the dear Saviour Himself is at the right hand of His Father, yet His church on earth is increasingly being persecuted by men such as Haman who have no love for God or godliness. And we know what Haman strove to do. He was not satisfied in just getting Mordecai out of the way, but he thought that he would have the whole nation to be annihilated. That was what he wanted to do.

The third one was Haman's wife, a woman called Zeresh. She was the one who advised him to erect the gallows upon which to hang Mordecai. Little did she realise she was advising him to erect the

very gallows on which he would hang. Friends, God always has the last word, doesn't He? And I would pause just for the moment. It is very interesting in the Word of God to notice how one or two wives have had an influence. I think you know Zeresh's influence was a bad one – although she later recognized that Haman was on a downward track when he led Mordecai round the streets according to Ahasuerus' command – but have you thought of Pilate's wife? While the trial of our Lord was proceeding, she sent a message to her husband, Pilate saying: "Have thou nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him." We do not hear any more about her, but I wonder, was that the beginning of a stirring in her heart that perhaps became a work of grace? We are not told. But nonetheless the Holy Scriptures have reminded of her warning. Of course, Pilate did not listen. Then what about Abigail? A very different woman. She had that churlish man, Nabal, as her husband and what she suffered through him we are not really told, but I think it must have been a very difficult path for her. But O what blessed advice she gave to David, who was going to put his own hand to the matter. She says, "No David, the Lord is over all this. He knows what my husband is like. He knows what He has ordained for you, and though for the moment you are an exile and a fugitive, the Lord will bring you to your throne." Blessed advice! And David thanked her for it. O that there were more Abigails around, friends, who can give such advice in the fear of the Lord. Blessed be their advice.

So we have three agents of Satan: Ahasuerus, Haman and Zeresh, each of whom who had a prominent place in the devil's service.

But then there were three honourable people.

Vashti – have you ever thought about Vashti? You say, she disobeyed her husband. Yes, but under what circumstances? King Ahasuerus and his guests had been drinking for several days, and no doubt hardly any of them were really sober. He wanted her to be presented to this group of men, but I think her modesty prevented her from so doing. Friends, I believe that she was a woman of a modest character. But you see what happened. We find her dethroned because of this hasty man Ahasuerus who lost his temper. He did not seek to understand the reason why she felt like that, and there she is dethroned, deposed. Whatever good could come of that? What a strange event. And yet, dear friends, we know that this opened the door for Esther. God's ways are strange aren't they? Mysterious. How we should stand back sometimes and be not so quick to comment as we otherwise might be.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;"

(Gadsby's Hymns 320)

Yes

... "He exalts neglected worms
To sceptres and a crown;
And there the following page He turns,
And treads the monarch down."

(Gadsby's Hymns 4)

Divine sovereignty! And so it was that Esther is now on the throne – our second honourable person. Why could this be? "For such a time as this." For such a time as this which the Lord knew would come to pass. He had perfect foreknowledge of all these events; He knew that Haman's scheme would gain the ear of Ahasuerus. He knew that Ahasuerus would be one ready to listen, because he was easily manipulated. He knew all about that. But my dear friends, though Satan's agenda was very apparent, at first God's purposes were kept very much in secret. And good William Cowper says, and you may be there in your path this afternoon,

"Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,

He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will."

(Gadsby's Hymns 320)

Now if something is in a mine, it is hidden. It is hidden, but it is not out of God's sight. Remember that.

The third honourable person we have is Mordecai, a godly man. You may wonder why did he not bow to Haman like everybody else. Shouldn't he have given him respect? The respect that Haman wanted was that of a semi-deity. Haman was demanding respect that was not proper for any man to demand, and Mordecai knew the Word of God said, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." He also knew that Haman was a man who was an inveterate hater of the truth, and thus he would not give him that honour that Haman demanded of him. That brought great reproach, as we know. Is the overruling hand of God in this? Can we see it? Well at first, dear friends, it brought great, great trouble. It brought the sentence of death upon the whole nation. In more than 127 provinces the decree went forth that the Jews were to be slain. O what must the people of God have thought? We get a little hint of it: "The city of Shushan was perplexed." God was not. God is never perplexed. We often are. Paul says, "Perplexed but not in despair." Are you perplexed this afternoon? Is there something that is perplexing your poor mind? Remember God is not perplexed, and that's why Paul says, "Perplexed but not in despair" – because God's overruling hand is there. So it is with all your and all my perplexities.

God used five seemingly inconsequential things to overturn Satan's devices.

The first was when Haman cast the lot as to when the annihilation should take place. Now the lot fell out to be seven months later. Had it been next week, for example, it would have been catastrophic. But friends, God was even over that casting of the lot that Haman did, so that the month that was appointed was seven months down the line, and that gave time, God's time, for the overthrowing of Haman's purpose. God is in control. The Lord is on the throne – even over Haman's lot. Remember that.

Secondly, Esther's caution. You remember that after those days of prayer she went in with the very well-known expression, "So I will go in unto the king ... and if I perish, I perish." You see, the Lord was there. No one was supposed to go unbidden into the presence of the king. But she ventured after prayer. It was not presumption; it was after prayer that she went in. Have you wondered why she did not ask her request at the first banquet that she prepared for Haman and Ahasuerus? Friend, there was a caution on her spirit. And when there is a caution on our spirit, we should acknowledge it, because often it is the voice of God, a still, small voice to wait, to be still, to sit still. Friends, I do not know if there may be one here this afternoon and you are in a particular path in which you are about to embark. If there is a caution on your spirit, then my advice from the Book of Esther would be, Wait. Wait until the Lord removes the caution on your spirit. Then you will know the time will be right as well as the thing, we trust.

Now you see the caution on Esther's spirit when she says: "Come to the banquet tomorrow and then I will ask the king." Why? What happened in between? What some of us know a lot about – a sleepless night. Who suffered with a sleepless night? The king. Who kept him awake? The Lord God, and His overruling hand. And while that earthly king tossed on his bed and could not get rest, he wanted something to occupy his mind, so he sent one of his servants to the library to bring something out of the records. He did not tell him what to bring. The overruling hand of God ordained that the record he should bring concerned Mordecai. Mordecai? The very moment when Haman and his wife are deliberating to erect the gallows fifty cubits high, at that very moment

something was brought concerning Mordecai. What had happened? Well, years before Mordecai had revealed a treasonable plot. No one ever thanked him for it. He was not given an OBE or an MBE or anything of that nature, if anything was done like that. He was forgotten. The overruling hand of God. It was revealed just when God would have it be. God's timing is always perfect. As one good man put it, "He never is before His time, He never is behind." Just when that was needed. "Was there anything done, says the king, to honour this good man who saved my life?" "No. Nothing has been done." "Ah," says the king, "we must do something about that." So the fifth thing – there is Haman's lot, Esther's caution, a sleepless night, a scroll from the library – but then what happened next?

Haman comes in with one intent – to ask for the life of Mordecai. Before the man could open his mouth, the king says to Haman, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" The overruling hand of God in His perfect timing! Ah, thinks Haman, that must be me he means. Nothing less than the king's horse and the king's crown and the king's robe and people to go before me saying, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour." "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall," does it not? And so it was. "Take Mordecai," says Ahasuerus. Whatever must Haman have thought? "Give him the crown, put him on my horse, clothe him with my raiment, lead him through the streets of Shushan, saying 'This will be done to the man whom the king delights to honour.'" And Haman did as the king bade him and hurried home to his wife. And his wife says, "Haman, you've begun to fall before that man; you're going to go further down." And so it was ere the day was done. It was not Mordecai that hung on the gallows was it? It was Haman. Friends, God always has the last word. He vindicates in His own time and His own ways.

It is very encouraging to notice in the history of God's dear people how again and again this has happened. Many of you know about John Newton. John Newton, when he came back from some of his slave trips, was appointed as a customs officer at Liverpool. This meant he had to take a boat out to the ship's docks and see what duty had to be paid. He was always exceedingly precise in his time. He was never known to be late for the boat that would take him out. On one occasion he was ten minutes late, and the boat went without him. And the strange thing was that that boat sank in the River Mersey. The overruling hand of God. A good friend I knew in Coventry many years ago, the late Mr George Crowter – grandfather of some here – went to enlist for the army in the First World War. He went through all the usual examinations and was called in by the commanding officer and he wrote the word "useless" across his application. Useless. Of course, it was very humbling and very humiliating to have that written across anyone's application form. But the very battalion he would have joined was completely destroyed a few weeks later. The overruling hand of God.

Friends, we might not always understand God's dealings, but they are always right. Even in the history of our own nation, what a terrible time that was when Edward VIII got involved with Wallis Simpson; how the godly must have prayed if only the Lord would overrule, overturn this iniquitous suggestion. And He did. And what seemed a terrible tragedy to some made way for George VI to come the throne – and in the providence of God what a wonderful leader he was, a praying man as well, who did much to lead the nation in the right way – in the way that our leaders these days sadly know nothing of. The overruling hand of God.

Strangely enough this morning I picked up an old 1857 *Gospel Standard*, and there J C Philpot wrote a review of the account of John Warburton's last days. He made these comments: "When faith is in living exercise and can roll out and read the long, and it may be intricate, scroll of bygone years, sweet it is to see the providences of God in well-nigh every line. However long may be the chain, it is all linked together from beginning to end, nor can one link be severed without breaking asunder the connection of the whole. Why born of such and such parents? Why so in earliest infancy

brought up? Why so circumstanced in childhood? Why so situated in this or that locality? Why exposed to this or that, to such trials and difficulties? Why in such a spot as the years go on? Why in tender youth in this or that deep trouble and heart-breaking sorrow? Why these fair prospects blighted, these warm affections withered, these airy castles shattered when least expected and least able to bear the shock? Why this sudden, unexpected turn of events bringing on the hour when grace first visits their souls? All who have any living experience of the path of the just, have their individual life history in which they can at times trace the wonder-working hand of God. O the marvellous chain, winding out link by link all those varied circumstances." That is something very profoundly true.

And these things are confirmed in the Word of God. Just two or three quotes. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord." And then those words in the Book of Job which are not often quoted: "Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the LORD hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:9-10). Then the well-known words in 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God." Why? "That He may exalt you in due time." You say, But it is a heavy hand, it is a mighty hand. Yes, but the Word of God does not end there. "Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7). So, whatever the mighty hand of God brings by way of need, He says, "Cast it on Me."

And then finally, I think of those words in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans near the end of chapter 11, where the dear apostle had been discoursing on the mysterious ways of the Jew and the Gentile churches, and he says, "O the depths of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:33-36). Good Samuel Rutherford's words surely sum it up in a way we may understand:

"I'll bless the hand that guided,
I'll bless the heart that planned,
When 'throned where glory dwelleth,
In Immanuel's land."

Friends, you might not feel you can bless Him this afternoon as you would like to, but just stand still a moment and remember who is on the throne? It is not vacant, it is not empty. "The LORD God omnipotent reigneth." No wonder good John heard in the precincts of heaven in that wonderful revelation, "Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Revelation 19:6). Not the devil, not man, not you, not me, but God. And bless God for that. Amen.