

The Book of Esther

Survey of the Bible

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Bible Text: Esther

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Let's pray.

O Lord, I praise you for giving us one testimony after another in your holy word that teaches us of your power, your absolute mastery over every human being in the world, and how you do all things for your own glory and for the prosperity of your own church as we see in this book of Esther. Lord, I pray that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear what you have to say to us today. Thank you for your mercy that falls upon us as we contemplate your word. Amen.

Open up to the book of Esther. Esther is the story of how a beautiful Jewish orphan rises to wield significant power in a pagan king's court and God is going to use this orphan girl to save the Jews from genocide. It's hard to read Esther without thinking about the Holocaust and Adolph Hitler and the slaughter of six million Jews because Haman is the Hitler figure in this book. It reads like a novel. It's exciting. It's a real page turner.

What we find here in this book is that God raises up people to do his will and everything happens, everything happens for such a time as this. And while it's a very precious thing to read those words in the context of Esther, everything is like that. Not just the big times, but every time has been appointed by God for such a time as this in order to do his glory. So Esther makes it clear that God is in control of history, even when the rulers are unwise and evil decisions are being made on the basis of sinful attitudes. He works through the immaturity. He works through the self-serving impulses of people. And he orchestrates the smallest thoughts and impulses and motivations of men and women. He even uses men and women who have gone astray, which everybody has gone astray in the book of Esther. Everybody is a pagan in Esther and I think when we get to the end of this you'll see why I say that. But God is always skillfully and precisely moving everything for his own glory and I think that's the primary message of Esther because in Esther there is a chain of seemingly small and random events. They arise out of the hearts of pagan kings and his subjects and they're living in a city, a pagan city, but all of them are connected to God's plan to preserve his people. These events almost bring the characters to complete destruction but God orchestrates them for the blessing of his people.

Now, there is a book I'd like to recommend. It's written by Alexander Carson. You can get it from Chapel Library. It's free online. I ordered some hard copies. It's called "Confidence in God in Times of Danger," by Alexander Carson, and it's about Esther and he demonstrates how the events in Esther have all been brought about by God for his glory.

Time of the events

Let's talk about the time frame. The time frame is between Ezra 6 and 7. We were in Ezra recently. This is between the first return led by Zerubbabel and the second return led by Ezra. You have people that stayed in Persia. It is quite likely that they disobeyed the Lord. That could include Esther who did not return to the land according to God's instructions. Ahasuerus is a king; he's also known as Xerxes and he has a feast that is recorded in the first chapter that takes place in 483 BC. The historian Herodotus in his book "The Histories" tells us of Ahasuerus's invasion of Greece. He even tells us about this banquet that is recorded here in the book of Esther. He tells us that the long gathering, the six month summit that Ahasuerus held was for the purpose of planning a military invasion against Greece and he did engage in that military invasion. He attacked Greece after the time of consultation with his military leaders, and this final party on the last week of this summit and he engaged in battle and he is defeated by the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis and he retreats back to his homeland and Herodotus tells us that he seeks consolation in his harem and this would be the time when Queen Esther is on the throne. So this testimony of Esther is corroborated in a number of places in the history books that come out of the world.

Literary features

Now, I want to tell you about some of the literary features because there are so many interesting and really unusual features of this book. It is one of only three books in the Bible that are primarily about woman. Ruth is the other and Song of Solomon sort of passes the test for a book about a woman and Esther. So those are the three books in the Bible that feature women.

One of the most startling things about the book is that there is not a single mention of God. There is not a single mention of prayer. There is not a single mention of worship. The temple is not even on the radar screen. However, the name of the ruler appears 175 times and this gives you an idea of the worldview of all the characters who are involved in this story. In this story, while there are no explicit statements or connections with God, divine intervention is really the central thrust of this whole book. While God and his working is imperceptible and the people aren't talking about God because they don't have God in their minds, yet God is moving. God is the central character even though he's not even mentioned. He is always orchestrating everything for his own glory. He is the main character.

There are no miracles in the book. There are unsavory motivations. There are prideful uprisings in the heart. There is hatred and the things that hatred creates. And all of them have been orchestrated by God. Why? The saving of the Jews couldn't happen unless there was an impulse toward evil in the heart of somebody in this story.

Esther in the New Testament

How about the New Testament use of Esther? There is none. The New Testament does not refer to anything in the book of Esther. Jewish scholars after the writing added 107 verses to the inspired version and there have been questions about why it's even in the

Bible. Martin Luther expressed his displeasure at the book of Esther. He thought it should not have been included in the canon of Scripture. Contrary to Luther, the Jews have always loved the book of Esther. Why is it included in the canon of scripture? It is included because it is part of the canon of Scripture. If you go to Luke 24:44, you read these words, "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.'" Now, when the Lord Jesus Christ speaks of these categories of Scripture, we recognize that in the Hebrew Bible, Esther belonged in those categories of Scripture. We see the same thing in Matthew 5 where Jesus says, "I did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." So Esther is included in the canon of Scripture because it is part of these categories of Scripture that the Lord Jesus Christ has included.

Why is God not mentioned?

The more I read the book, I came to the conclusion that God is not mentioned because the Jews who were living in Babylon had lost their distinctiveness while they were living in Babylon. The lives of the Jews in Babylon were a direct fulfillment to Deuteronomy 31:15-18 in the song of Moses where the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you will rest with your fathers; and this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land, where they go to be among them, and they will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?' And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods." Then the Lord says to Moses, "Now, write down this song and teach it to the children of Israel and this song," he says, "will be a witness against the children of Israel." My perspective is that the reason that God is not mentioned in Esther is because God is not very much in the minds of the characters in Esther. If he was prominent in our heroes minds, He would have been spoken of. The reality is that God commanded the children of Israel to return to Jerusalem. Perhaps the book of Esther stands as a testimony to a disobedient people who did not return. There were many who did not return to the land despite the explicit appeals to get out of Babylon. They seemed to have no affection for the worship of God. So while the name of God is absent from the book of Esther, God is not absent from the story because he's controlling everything.

The Characters

The scenes in which the characters appear are very interesting. For example, Ahasuerus is drunk at his own party. God uses this feast that Ahasuerus designed to exalt himself to begin a chain of events that would lead to the protection of the Jewish people. In a drunken party, came the beginning of the rescue of the people of God. That's exactly what happened. Ahasuerus has been sleeping with a multitude of women in his concubine to test them. One night, he cannot sleep and he asks for the archives. This is the sovereignty of God. God doesn't allow man to sleep and, as a result, the people of God are saved. This is a king who is emotional, foolish, boisterous and given to extremes.

Then you have his wife, Vashti. Vashti seems to be a rebellious woman. However, God uses her rebellion to set in motion the conditions that protect the Jews. Women were not

know to act this way in Persian society. It was highly unusual for a woman to do what Vashti did, particularly in the king's court. It was so unusual that when she was invited to come to the party and to show herself to all of Ahasuerus's friends, she refused. The nobles rose up and said, "We need to get some formal legislation so that doesn't happen again." You will find the women in the book of Esther are very interesting. They're kind of spunky. They have a lot to say. They're going somewhere. And they seem to be a lot smarter and wiser than their husbands. And some have maintained that whoever recorded the things about Esther had a high view of women and a low view of men. Whether this is true or not, I do believe that you find a picture of self-indulgent men in the book of Esther.

Ahasuerus was the son of Darius. He was called Xerxes as well. You read about him in the history books by the name of Xerxes. Esther was unusually beautiful. Her name means "myrtle" or "hadassah" and the myrtle tree was a beautiful tree. Fairly small, fragrant, beautiful leaves, white flowers. Brides wore myrtle flowers on their wedding dresses and things like that. So that's her name, and she's born into the community of the captives in Babylon. She had never seen her homeland. She grew up in Persia and so by the time you meet her in the king's court, she looks like a Persian, she talks like a Persian, she acts like a Persian, she thinks like a Persian, and she does the things that Persians do. She just is falling right in with everything that Persian society embraces.

In God's providence, she was unusually beautiful. In chapter 1 we read that Ahasuerus thought that she was the most beautiful woman in 127 provinces. How did that happen? Her beauty was given to her as a gift from God.

As a Jew, she was possibly involved in violation of the explicit laws of God regarding sexuality and marriage. It was unlawful to be married to a pagan. The book of Ezra makes this very clear. Ezra is her contemporary. The events in the book of Ezra 6 are taking place right at the same time. What was it that caused such a great disturbance in the soul of Ezra? Marrying pagan wives! The marrying of pagan spouses was not something that was accepted by the godly in Israel. And yet Esther seems to have no problem with it at all. Ezra commands these kinds of marriages to be broken up.

Let me suggest that it is possible that Esther had lost her distinctiveness. Yet, at the same time, the impulses, the decisions and the situations that led to the saving of the Jews in Babylon were all governed by God. You can take great encouragement in the book of Esther. God uses everybody and everything. He is no respecter of persons. Every single person in Esther is being directed by God and every single person on the planet is being directed by Almighty God.

Then you have Haman. He casts lots to determine when to kill Mordecai. His character causes us to see remarkable providences. He casts lots to determine the day he's going to kill Mordecai and in God's providence, the lot falls on eleven months in the future, so he doesn't get to kill him right away. He doesn't get to move quickly making plenty of time for other critical things to be arranged. But, it all started with the throw of the dice. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap but the answer is from the Lord." And God uses this dice throwing for His own glory.

Esther is one of the vivid examples of how God uses all things for his glory and here's the message: God is your deliverer and everything that happens in your life happens for such a time as this. Every moment is just as special as another and God will use the impulses of all the people around you in order to glorify himself.

The storyline

The storyline begins in Ahasuerus's palace in Susa. He's just completed a long planning session. Then he pulls out all the stops and has a party for everybody from the highest to the lowest in the kingdom. At the conclusion of the banquet, he calls his wife, Vashti, to come. She says, "I'm not coming." She was having a party with the other women. She rebels against him. This causes the nobles to become worried that she's going to start a feminist rebellion. They fear that now, all the wives are going to treat their husbands the same way. In response, they want to pass a law that Vashti can't go near Ahasuerus again. In other words, they want to scare women away from ever saying "no" to their husbands like this again.

In chapter 2, king Ahasuerus gathers all the gorgeous women from 127 provinces. He engages them in a long, arduous screening process that involves breaking God's laws of morality. But, something very significant happens at this juncture. Mordecai hears a plot to kill the king, another providence. He just hears it. Do you remember in the book of Acts, when Paul's nephew was just standing around in a crowd and he hears a rumor. He hears some men entering into a pact not to eat until they killed the Apostle Paul. So this boy came and told Paul. In the same way, Mordecai hears a rumor... he is in the right place at the right time.

He hears it and goes to Esther saying, "You should tell the king there are some people who are going to kill him. So she does that and Mordecai is acknowledged as the one who saved the king's life. His name goes into the archival records of Persia. Fast forward... One night Ahasuerus can't sleep. For some reason he calls for the records and he finds the record of Mordecai saving his life. He turns to his servant and says, "Did we ever honor this man?" And the servant said, "No, we didn't do anything." And the king replied, "Oh, we must honor him." So the servant brings Mordecai in to honor him. Astonishingly, the moment Mordecai arrives, who's at the door? Haman. Haman is there in the process of executing his plan is to kill Mordecai the next day. Now Ahasuerus has made the connection that he doesn't want Mordecai to die.

Notice these timely – just in time - providences! Why did the king just suddenly one night find himself not able to sleep?

What should we conclude from this? Here it is: the tiniest motivations, the most insignificant things that happen in this world, are governed by God. Everything is governed by God for one purpose - to preserve the church of Jesus Christ. That's the purpose of history. You might look at what's gone on in your life and what people have done to you or things that have happened to you. Don't misunderstand, all these things have been designed to glorify God. Every single turn of your life, no matter how you've been hurt; No matter how you've been offended; No matter what you've lost; No matter

what you've gained. All of it figures in. But, you'll never know exactly how until that great day when all is revealed. You will look back and be amazed at how God arranged every single event of your life. You'll realize what he meant when he said the hairs on your head are numbered. You'll understand more deeply when he said, "I keep all your tears in a bottle. He governs everything.

Next, Haman is called in. He's already built a gallows for Mordecai. The gallows were probably a simple 75 foot long pole and Haman was going to impale Mordecai on the pole. This is how ancient near Eastern kings liked to display their power over their enemies after they killed an opponent. Picture a 75 foot long pole with a man hanging on the top of it after being skewered. I know it's kind of disturbing to think about that but, again, we're in a pagan land. We're in Persia. We're in a place where people get their heads cut off for the slightest infractions.

Haman builds this gallows but guess who ends up hanging on it? Haman himself. He did not know he was building his own gallows.

But... all is still not well. Because Haman had gone to Ahasuerus and told Ahasuerus that the Jews were against him and would destroy him, the impulsive Ahasuerus issued an edict that the Jews would be killed. So he issued an edict that he could not revoke. After Haman was exposed, then the king had to figure out what to do as a result of this problem. He had made a law that the Jews would be killed on a certain day. So he issues another edict. He can't take back that first edict, but he added something to it by saying that the Jews could defend themselves and they could take the spoil of anybody who attacked them. The day came because, remember, the dice was thrown. It had been eleven months from the time that Haman began to plot against Mordecai and to that day, the attack took place. 75,000 Persians died at the hands of Mordecai.

Christ in Esther

In Esther, Haman mounts an attempt to destroy the people of God through genocide. His intention is to completely wipe them out. If Haman had been successful, every Jew would have been wiped out in the 127 provinces of Persia. It probably would have been a near comprehensive genocide of the Jews and they would cease to exist. What Esther is declaring is that nothing can stop the work of the kingdom of God and specifically nothing can stop the birth of Christ. If Haman had been successful, the Lord Jesus Christ would not have been born in Bethlehem. King Herod tried the same trick in his genocidal hatred of the boy children during the time of Jesus. It's not a new trick that rulers try in order to wipe out the people of God.

In the book of Esther we see the display of the Lord Jesus Christ's power to destroy all of his enemies in spite of their worldly power. The devil's powers are always temporal. His days are numbered.

The purpose of the book of Esther is to display that there is nothing that can stand in the way of God in the preservation of his church - not Haman, not the greatest king in the ancient Near East, can get rid of the church. People, nations and institutions have

attempted to stamp out the knowledge of Jesus Christ. It never has and it never will work because Jesus Christ is going to glorify himself by the preservation of his people.

Outline

Okay, let's just walk through the book a little bit here. You see the outline in front of you. I have divided it up into four sections so in chapter 1, the king calls for this six month long military campaign, this summit. He concludes it with the king's great drunken feast. It's interesting to look into the window of what it was like to live in Persia and it might provide a tip as to why so many of the Jews refused to leave Babylon. Life was good in Babylon with all of its wealth, luxury and opulence.

Notice how this luxury is described. Look at 1:4, "when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all. And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace."

Then notice verses 6 and verse 7 where this remarkable abundance is described. The most expensive types of things you can imagine were available to the common people. Why did people not leave Babylon? Life was good in Babylon. But the prophet Isaiah cried out over and over again, "Get out of Babylon! Leave!" and many of them refused to leave.

Chapter 2. The king finds a new queen by sordid means and then also enters into the conflict between Mordecai and Haman. Haman hated Mordecai. His hatred went back many years. Haman was an Agagite and Agag was the king that Saul was commanded to kill. But Saul refused to do it, so the prophet Samuel obeyed God and hacked him to pieces. The bitterness went back to that time continued on for hundreds and hundreds of years. Since the people were living with insolence and hatred toward one another and that was really the source of this whole conflict that finds itself in this whole context of Esther. So this whole process of finding the beautiful virgins is described there and then toward the end of the chapter, Mordecai discovers this plot.

Moving to chapter 3, enter Haman. He wants to kill all the Jews. This was not out of his reach, for in verse 1 we see that Ahasuerus advanced him to the seat above all the princes. But, when he was elevated to a place of authority, something happened that changed the whole course of the story. Mordecai would not pay homage. Mordecai wouldn't bow down to him. In verse 5, we read, "When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath." That was really the motivation for it all. God is using all this wrath. He's using all this hatred for his own glory. In verse 8 in chapter 3, Haman makes the argument to Ahasuerus that the Jews are a stench. They are a danger, and he says, "It is not fitting for the king to let them remain." And he says, "If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed." You know, Haman is an evil man and he hates the people of God. Then in verse 13, there is this method for determining the day of the killing of the Jews and that's determined there.

Chapter 4.

When Mordecai learns all that happened, he tore his clothes. Then, he put on sackcloth and ashes and goes out in the midst of the city. He's crying with bitterness because he understands that the extermination of his people will probably happen. Then, Mordecai encourages Esther to go in and talk to the king. She finally does. In chapter 4 you find the most famous statement in the book of Esther and it's couched in the context of verse 14,

"For if you remain completely silent at this time," relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

When is such a time as this? When is it? Well, it actually started in a drunken party. It was "for such a time as this." It began there. It was fueled with the hatred of a man who hated the people of God. This hatred was nothing less than the time of deliverance in "such a time as this." Don't despise your times. Don't despise the things that are happening to you now. They may seem horrible to you at the moment, but the truth is there were many, many times such as this for her.

We tend to just think of our lives in terms of these big, shiny moments, but God is bigger than that. He is the one who has ordained all of our moments.

Notice also another famous statement is in the same chapter in verse 16. Esther says,

"So I will go to the king."

She agrees to finally go, which is against the law. She knew she was doing something contrary to the law. She ponders and then says,

"and if I perish, I perish!"

Chapter 5

Then in chapter 5:14, Haman's wife Zaresh becomes his counselor. Zaresh, like the other women in Esther are full of counsel. They're not wallflowers.

Chapter 6

The king couldn't sleep and he recalls Mordecai's kindness. Who was it that just picked up the right scroll? Who was it that picked up the right scroll in the middle of the night and brought it to a king and his eyes fell on those words? And who could have known that Haman would be entering into the room right after this realization took place? God orchestrates everything. He does everything for his own glory.

Chapter 7

The plot continues to work for the final elimination of Haman. Esther invites Haman to two different banquets and she has a purpose. She is very strategic. She is a smart girl and so she is setting things up because she understands who she's dealing with. She's dealing with the Adolph Hitler of the Jews.

Chapter 8

King Ahasuerus bequeaths the wealth of the house of Haman to Esther. Then Ahasuerus takes off his signet ring which he took off of Haman's hand and he gave it to Mordecai. Then Esther appointed Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Now we see Esther ruling and she sets up her uncle to be a significant leader in the state. She is crowned. There is great exultation in the hearts of both Mordecai and Esther.

Then Mordecai and Esther and Ahasuerus have to deal with this problem, because the king issued an edict that the Jews could be killed. He has to deal with it so he issues another edict that says the Jews can protect themselves if they want to. So he has this taken throughout all 127 provinces. Imagine how long that took. It may have taken a couple of months to do that because the distances were significant. Then fear falls upon the people. God puts fear in the heart of the Persians toward the Jews and so they were able to have a great victory. The Jews were glad at this edict that was issued and they were filled with confidence and God caused the people to fear. This was another act of providence.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 records the day of slaughter. When you get to chapter 9, you have arrived on March 7, 473 BC. On that day 75,000 Persians were slain as the Jews were defending themselves. Then there is the feast of Purim, the feast of the dice. That's what "purim" means. The feast of the dice. How about that? You know, we're going to go to the feast of the dice. Why? Well, that was how this whole arrangement to kill the Jews took place. So now the Jews celebrate Purim and it certainly was not a feast that God in his law called for. Let's recognize that. This was an extrabiblical feast that was concocted out of pragmatism, out of the self-flattering pagan world that Esther and Mordecai and Ahasuerus had become accustomed to and so they created the feast of the dice.

Chapter 10

Consider verse 3, "For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen." Isn't it interesting how God uses the impulse of a man's mind at a drunken party? Amazing! I pray you feel safe in your Father's world in His everlasting arms. He is governing everything.

Lessons learned

First, the salvation of the Jews began with the smallest of impulses in a pagan king exalting himself before his subjects. Thoughts came to his mind which ultimately led to the preservation of the Jews.

Second, one orphan who was regarded more beautiful than all the women in the ancient Near East was chosen. Where did she get her beauty? From God alone. It was God who gave her the look to appeal to this shallow, self-indulgent king.

Third, God worked in spite of the weaknesses of Esther. The reality is that she married a pagan king which was prohibited by the word of God. Deuteronomy 7 makes this clear.

Ezra 10 should clarify the entire matter. It was contrary to the will of God for the people of God to marry foreigners. And, yes, God even uses lawbreakers to save his own people. God is no respecter of persons. He will use anyone and everyone to glorify his name.

Fourth, what about rumors? God is the one who controls the rumor mill. He causes things to be heard and things not to be heard. Mordecai heard a rumor of an assassination plot. Why? Why was he at the right place at the right time? The most insignificant events are very clearly being orchestrated by God.

Fifth, how was it that the Jews were going to be killed? By the roll of the dice! Why is it that the dice rolled for an eleven month time frame? Why? It's because God controls even the rolling of the dice for his own glory, to protect his own people. Nothing happens in the world that is not designed for the purpose of the glory of God and the salvation of sinners.

Sixth, even a sleepless night is governed by God. In Esther, salvation comes to the Jews because a king can't sleep. It was God who caused the sleeplessness. God was orchestrating everything.

Seventh, a man randomly picks up a scroll. Why did that man walk into that vault of the scrolls and pick up that one scroll in the nick of time? It is because God is both good and sovereign at the same time.

Do you really believe that God is sovereign? Do you think he's that sovereign? Or do you just have this general idea about God's sovereignty in the big things? Do you think that in the big old things, God is sovereign? Well, the book of Esther is sitting before you here to convince you otherwise. The slightest impulse is nothing but the result of a majestic, sovereign God ruling everything.

Let me finish with a quote from Alexander Carson from this book that I referred to at the very beginning.

"The book of Esther teaches us to see the hand of God not only in the great events of the world, but in all the transactions of men. It calls on us to see him in every occurrence of every day in our lives and to trust him for provision, protection, health, comfort, peace, and all the blessings of life. Innumerable dangers are around us every moment. It is only the arm of God which can ward them off from us."

That's the book of Esther. God has provided it to us to show us the might of God and how the power of God is at work even in the most adverse circumstances. It shows how God even uses evil plots, fluttering thoughts, out of control emotions for His own glory in order to preserve His people. It should be clear to us that the book of Esther is not about Esther. It is about a sovereign God who is orchestrating everything.