

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

For Such A Time As This

January 29th, 2012

Esther

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Esther chapter 1. This is why we are doing this Walk Through The Bible journey because unless you are required to, a preacher will likely never preach on the Book of Esther. This discipline forces us out of our narrow zones of Biblical preferences and it forces us to deal with the whole counsel of God. I have been in ministry for 18 years and I don't believe I have ever preached or even led a Bible study on the Book of Esther. I have been going to church for almost 40 years and I don't remember ever hearing a sermon from the Book of Esther. This little slip of your Bible is quite possibly the most neglected bit of Holy Scripture. Now why is that? Well it isn't because it is unhistorical, I can tell you that. Actually the history is excellent. I studied Persian history in University and we read the Histories of Herodotus in third year Greek and about 1/3 of that work is dedicated to Persian history and specifically the reign of Xerxes which is the focus of this story and I can tell you that the Book of Esther reeks of historical accuracies. Now, because most of what we know about Persian history at this time comes from Greek authors, obviously we don't know everything we want to know. The Greeks wrote about the Persians because they were warring with them and then under Alexander conquered them so they tend to write mostly about Persian history as it intersects with Greek

history. As a result of this there is no mention of Esther the person, though we do believe we have references to Mordecai the Counsellor of the King. But we don't expect to find references to internal politics regarding ethnic minorities in Greek histories of Persia, so we're not greatly disturbed about that. The real reason I think we don't preach on this very often is because it is pure narrative. It is story. In the WESTERN CHURCH we love laws, we love letters, like the letters of Paul, we love the sermon on the mount, the Golden Rule and the Great Commission. Those are bite size precepts that you can read in very short order and then EXTRAPOLATE for 45 minutes which is how we like to do it. Stories take a long time to read and then you have to THINK in order to identify the principles that need to be applied. Western brains don't like that. They like sermon points that can fit on a coffee cup or be pasted onto a T-shirt. "Love your enemies", "Repent and believe the Gospel", "Go forth and multiply" – those are the sermons we like. Eastern cultures like stories. So, strap in, get Eastern because we are going to read big chunks of this story, then we are going to think about the principles and how they should be applied in our lives today. Are you ready?

Reading The Story:

Let's begin at the beginning and read verse 1:

¹Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus^f (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia), (Esther 1:1. NKJV)

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew spelling of Xerxes which most of your Bibles will have in a footnote or margin note. You will notice as you read the stories from this time period that all the main characters are referred to by their Hebrew names and their Babylonian or Persian names; this can be confusing. Let me fit this together for you with the stories we've been talking about for the last several weeks. We remember that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586/7 BC and sent the people into exile. Then in 539 BC the Persians took over the Babylonian Empire and released many Jews to go back to Israel and begin rebuilding the temple. The temple was dedicated in 516 BC, 70 years after it was destroyed. That all happened under Zerubbabel and Joshua and that story is told in the first few chapters of Ezra. Then in Ezra 7 we have the story of Ezra the Scribe which begins in 458 BC, about 60 years after the end of the first chapter if you will of this extended story of reformation. Then 15 years after Ezra comes Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was a politician under the king that came after Xerxes. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 BC. All of that to say, this story, the story of Esther takes places AFTER the time of Zerubbabel and BEFORE the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is a time when a few Jews had gone back to build the temple but most Jews were still living in the major cities of the Persian Empire. That's the setting.

Now, let me summarise for you the background events that lead us to the main character of this story. King Xerxes throws a huge pagan festival. We know about these major wing dings from Herodotus. They were serious affairs. People got six kinds of drunk and it was hard core silliness. So the king and his cronies are getting serious drunk and the Queen is throwing a party for all the ladies and they are getting serious drunk and then, lo and behold in their drunken states, the King and the Queen have a major falling out. This isn't one of the principles we will draw out, but let it be said: alcohol and marriage do not mix. Amen? Amen. So the King either divorces or demotes the Queen and then when he sobers up he realises that now he's a lonely old man surrounded by ugly old men and he remembers that marriage is a good idea. So his stewards suggest that they sponsor an Empire wide beauty pageant to select new wives for the king from among the most beautiful young virgins in the kingdom. And then if you look at chapter 2:4 we have probably the most unnecessary verse in all of Scripture.

This thing pleased the king, and he did so. (Esther 2:4. NKJV)

Really?! There's a shocker. He didn't pray about it, he didn't cast lots, he didn't read the entrails of a chicken, he just went with the Beauty Pageant idea, surprise, surprise. Human nature is what it is. So they set up the beauty pageant and they selected the most beautiful girls in all the kingdom and one of the girls that got swept up in the net was the beautiful young Jewish girl who becomes the main character in our story. Look at 2:5ff:

⁵In Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name *was* Mordecai⁷And *Mordecai* had brought up Hadassah, that *is*, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. **The young woman was lovely and beautiful.** When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

⁸So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, *under* the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women. (Esther 2:5-8. NKJV)

The details of the beauty pageant aren't clear but the King appears to marry the most beautiful of the girls and then they each spend their marital night, as it were, with the King and the one he likes best becomes the Queen. So we read in 2:16ff:

¹⁶So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which *is* the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. ¹⁷The king loved Esther more than all the *other* women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (Esther 2:16-17. NKJV)

So now Esther, a beautiful young Jewish girl is the top woman in Persia and has the ear of the king. Meanwhile, her cousin/father Mordecai is some sort of minor official in the king's court and he proves himself valuable by uncovering a plot against the life of the king and he also begins to rise in position. But. All of this good fortune for the Jewish people is about to turn. Next we meet a character who despises the Jews. Look at chapter 3:1ff.

¹After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman ²And all the king's servants who *were* within the king's gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage. ³Then the king's servants who *were* within the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" ⁴Now it happened, when they spoke to him daily and he would not listen to them, that they told *it* to Haman, to see whether Mordecai's words would stand; for *Mordecai* had told them that he *was* a Jew. ⁵When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. ⁶But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, **Haman sought to destroy all the Jews** who *were* throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai. (Esther 3:1-6. NKJV)

This Haman character hates Mordecai because Mordecai has other allegiances! He will not bow down and treat his superiors like little gods. This, by the way, has been getting Jews and Christians in trouble for a very long time. In ancient history it was very common for kings and Caesars and Emperors to be viewed as invested with the spirit of the gods. So a Pharaoh was thought to be a sort of incarnation, as though the spirit of the gods had entered into this person to direct history. All the Pharaoh's were worshipped as gods, Alexander the Great was thought of as a minor god, or at least as half god, half man. His mother claimed that Zeus himself had impregnated her making Alexander a sort of demi-god. The Roman Caesar's were declared as gods – Caligula who was mad as a hatter actually had the senate declare his horse to be a god – and Jews and Christians were always getting in trouble for not playing along. Jews and Christians recognise only God as God. Christians were crucified under Nero and Domitian for failing to worship the Emperor as a god. So the point is, the fact that our primary allegiance is

not to the government, but rather to the Creator has always really irritated the people in power. It is why Hitler hated the Jews and it is why Haman hated the Jews.

Anyway, Haman wants to discover if fate will offer him an opportunity to annihilate the Jews so on New Year's days he casts lots to consult the fates, we see that in 3:7:

⁷In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that *is*, the lot), before Haman to determine the day and the ^fmonth, ^funtil *it fell on the twelfth month*, which *is* the month of Adar. (Esther 3:7. NKJV)

Now this verse is incredibly important but because it makes no sense in our culture we skip over it and move on with the story but if you don't understand what is going on here than you will struggle to understand why this book is in the Bible. In those days books were often commissioned to tell the story behind a particular religious festival. So for example, the Histories of Herodotus written around the same time were commissioned so that the stories could be read at important Greek religious festivals. So too with the Book of Esther. It was commissioned to be read at the Jewish Feast of Purim. I'm not guessing at this, the book says this. Look at the end of the book at chapter 9:26:

²⁶So they called these days Purim, after the name Pur. (Esther 9:26. NKJV)

Why in the world would you have a festival of the lots? The ancient pagans, be they Greeks or Persians believed in something called "fatalism". Meaning that they believed that the future was as set as the past and you could therefore read the future in the stars or in the entrails of animals or in the lots. According to this world view, human beings were just minor characters in the outworking of these great fates and so you might try and learn the future so that you could profit from it, but you could not CHANGE it, the fates were sealed. The Greek story of Oedipus is the classic Greek example of this. And so in Ancient history you will often find people reading the stars, reading the entrails and casting lots to see the future in order to profit from it, and find little cracks of opportunity for personal advancement. This story is a radical challenge to that worldview. It presents the Biblical position which is that God is Sovereign over history BUT our choices do matter and we do reap what we sow and we are held accountable for what we do and we are NOT insignificant to the outworking of God's purpose.

Let's carry on with the story. Haman now believes that the future will provide him an opportunity to slaughter the Jews and so he begins to act. He tricks the king into signing a letter authorising on a certain day the full scale slaughter of the Jewish people, man, woman and child and for their property to be seized. He sends out the letter so that the slaughter can be coordinated and executed. He is planning a Holocaust. When the Jews find out what is planned there is wide spread panic, as you can well imagine. They mourn and fast and they weep and pray. Mordecai springs into action. He mourns and fasts in the court area where he is employed and it becomes known to Esther and he sends her a message. He tells her what is going on and he sends her a copy of the written order. He tells her that if she doesn't go and speak to the king, every Jew in Persia will be slaughtered. Esther sends a message back. We have that in 4:10ff:

¹⁰Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai:

¹¹“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, *he has* but one law: put *all* to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days.” (Esther 4:10-11. NKJV)

Esther tells Mordecai that she is just one of many wives and they sleep with the king on rotation and she hasn't even seen the king in a month and has no idea when she will see him again. Furthermore, if she goes into his audience chamber without being invited she could be killed on the spot. Mordecai writes back in 4:13:

“Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews.

¹⁴For 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?” (Esther 4:13-14. NKJV)

“We don't have any other options woman! If you don't speak to the king immediately the whole Jewish nation will be wiped out. You must take the risk, you must do this thing because God has put you in that position for such a time as this. Why do you think you were born beautiful? Why do you think you found favour in the king's eyes? It was FOR THIS DAY! You must partner with God's will or be crushed by it. You will stand with God's people or be counted as God's enemy”. So she does it. She takes her life into her hands and she marches uninvited into the King's audience chamber and lo and behold the King extends his scepter to her and invites her to speak. Now, just for fun, I'll tell you that this reeks of historical authenticity. One of the things I learned about Xerxes is that he was strangely liberated in terms of his respect for the counsel of women. Xerxes is known to have had a female officer in his army from whom he took counsel

when planning his war against the Greeks. The Greeks themselves mention this odd interest in the counsel of women. And here we see it. Fascinating. Anyway, Esther wants to put him in a good mood before she pops the question so she invites him to a banquet and she invites his right hand man Haman to come along. This is a smart woman. Before you ask your husband for a favour it is always good to feed him. Hungry men are not pleasant men, amen? Amen. That's free.

Anyway, she makes this great feast and she tells the king that she will ask her request at the feast. So the king and his prime minister make ready to attend the feast. Haman runs into Mordecai in the court area on his way to get ready and it reminds him afresh of how personally irritating this guy is so even while he is getting ready for the feast he plots the personal destruction of Mordecai. He orders a giant gallows to be constructed so that he can personally enjoy the murder of this one particularly irritating Jew. Meanwhile, King Xerxes just happens to be reading some legal notes and he runs across a story about how a certain low level legal clerk provided information that thwarted an assassination attempt against the king and he realises from reading the notes that the clerk was never honoured and he thinks it a good idea to honour this man as an example to the other court stewards. So in bursts Haman, dressed for business and secretly plotting the murder of Mordecai, the very person the king wishes to honour. Look at chapter 6:6ff.

⁶So Haman came in, and the king asked him, "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought in his heart, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?"

⁷And Haman answered the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor,

⁸let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head.

⁹Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!'"

¹⁰Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken." (Esther 6:6-10. NKJV)

So before the banquet, Haman has to personally dress Mordecai in royal robes and lead him on a pony ride through the city! He's not happy; things are starting to turn on him and he is uber grouchy. He is still pretty jazzed about the banquet though because he doesn't know that Esther is a Jew and he thinks he has been invited as a special honour. The banquet though, goes horribly wrong. Look at chapter 7:3. The king and his prime minister eat this great meal and then finally Esther makes her request:

³Then Queen Esther answered and said, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. ⁴For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king’s loss.” ⁵So King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?” ⁶And Esther said, “The adversary and enemy *is* this wicked Haman!” So Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

The king is so angry he goes out into the garden to cool off and Haman actually lays hands on the Queen to beg for his life. The king comes back in and he sees this and says:

“Will he also assault the queen while I *am* in the house?” As the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹Now Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, “Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king’s behalf, is standing at the house of Haman.” Then the king said, “Hang him on it!” ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king’s wrath subsided. (Esther 7:3-10. NKJV)

God is Sovereign over history! The enemy wanted to destroy the people of God but God is in charge, not the devil, not the fates, not the stars, not the entrails of chickens and not the lot cast into the lap. God rules over history and God’s will is done. The story goes on to say that Esther was able to get the King to send out a letter rescinding the extermination order and the Jews are given permission to round up the conspirators and hang them. The ten sons of Haman are all hung and many others beside. Mordecai becomes a chief counsellor and initiates a feast for the Jews to commemorate the deliverance of God. In the same way that the Exodus story is read every year at Passover, now this story is to be read every year at Purim. That’s the story.

Now in the few minutes we have remaining, let’s highlight the principles and apply the point.

Identifying The Principles:

The first and main principle is simply this:

1. God is Sovereign over history.

The Greeks and the Persians thought that history was set, that you could read it in the stars and find it in the entrails; they thought you could read the lots in order to personally profit but the Bible says NO. The future is known only to God, God controls the future and you do not seek to profit from it, you seek to partner with it. The Bible says, the job of a man or woman is not to

make money or exact revenge in the cracks of fate, rather your job is to partner with Providence and to work on the right side of what God is doing. That is a very different world view and it is all over the Bible. Proverbs 16:33 says:

³³ The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision *is* from the LORD. (Proverbs 16:33. NKJV)

The future is in the hands of God, he moves things forward towards his purpose and he reveals what he wants to whom he will. God is Sovereign.

2. Your place is therefore your purpose.

You see if God is Sovereign over all history, if there are not accidents of fate, then you are where you are for a reason and you need to figure out what is so that you can be on the right side of that. You see too many Christians have actually bought into the modern western view of the world which is that the future is open and is determined by our choices. And so we always feel like we are on the way to something better. If we just make good choices now we will get somewhere better one day soon. So our eyes are always on the future. The Bible says, you are where God wants you right now. The question is will you serve God's purpose right now, right here where God put you? Mordecai threw that truth in Esther's face and she responded. See we all think we are where we are as a reward for something in the past and as an opportunity to move somewhere in the future. Right? North Americans think we are rich and blessed because God loves us, he is rewarding us for some merit of ours or perhaps some merit of our great grandparents. We also think that if we make choices, the future will be even brighter. But think about that! Do you think God had you born here, gave you all this money, put you in this position because he loves you more than the black children who were born in Haiti or Chad or Sierra Leone? What good future will come from their choices? What wrong did they do to be born into that place? Maybe God put you where you are, not because of your past and not because of the future you think you will make out of your choices. Maybe he put you here right now so that you could save and bless and serve others according to his purpose. You are where you are right now for a reason. What is it? What purpose of God could be in your place? Find it and get on the right side of it. Because God's will will be done. By you, through you or as they say, over your dead body. That is what Mordecai says to Esther and that is what this story says to us. We do not thwart God's purpose by our selfishness and fear. We merely end up on the wrong side of it.

3. Ultimate success comes only to those who partner with Providence

Haman sought to profit from the fates, Esther sought to partner with Providence. Haman was hung, Esther became a hero and a name in history and a soul in eternity. That is the point. Ultimate success comes only to those who partner with Providence. That was the point of that Henry Blackaby book back in the 90's, do you remember that? Experiencing God. The point he made was that the job of the Christian is to figure out what God is doing in his/her day and get on the right side of it. That is Christianity in a nutshell isn't it? What do we pray? Thy will be done. Who do we follow? Jesus. What did he do? Only what he saw the Father doing. Jesus says I only do and say what I see the Father doing and saying, now come follow me. That means that following Jesus is the fine art of seeing what God is doing, hearing what God is saying and PARTNERING ACTIVELY WITH THOSE THINGS.

Now before we go, we have to ask the final question that these great stories bid us ask:

How Then Shall We Live?

If we don't ask that question we've wasted our time. If this story is true, if it's in the Bible for a reason, how then shall we live? Well first of all you've got to know the Bible and you've got to know the times. I get worried when Christians tell me that they don't know what's going on in the world. You have to watch or read the news, you have to know the times, you have to develop the ability to spot the hand of God or you will make horrible misjudgements that will cost you more than you can imagine.

This was drilled home to me and many others in this church when we visited Masada in Southern Israel. You see, this Esther story was not neglected by the Jews, they read it publicly and they read it often, unfortunately, they were not as good at reading history. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem a bunch of Jews took refuge in the mountain top fortress at Masada. They comforted themselves with the story of Esther. Just like in those days a nasty Empire wanted to destroy the Jewish people. Surely God would intervene. But he didn't. They were starved out and before the Romans could enter the fort and slaughter them the remaining 960 people all

committed suicide. Do you know what one of their priests wrote just before they killed themselves? He said, we should have:

“conjectured at the purpose of God much sooner”. (Eleazar)

“We read the Bible but we didn’t read history and so we ended up on the wrong side of God’s purpose”. This was AD 73! They missed the Messiah, they rejected Jesus and they ended up assuming God would deliver them again like he had under Esther but they failed to understand that in rejecting Jesus they were no longer God’s people! They had missed a turn in the history of redemption and they found themselves stranded in no man’s land facing an angry dragon and too late they realised that they faced him alone. We have to read our Bibles and we have to read our days.

We also need to own our place, our present and our opportunities. You are where you are for a reason. Stop dreaming about the future and stop living in the past. Start thinking: why I am here? What is God’s purpose in this place and for this season in my life? Why do I live where I live? Why do I work where I work? Why do I go to this church? Why am I part of this family? God has purpose in these things and you must know it and seize it rather than ignoring it or fighting against it.

When the Apostle Paul was in prison, he didn’t try very hard to get out, did he? We read this week in Acts 24 that he could have easily bribed his way out of prison early in his trial. Instead he stayed. Why? Because God had a purpose for him in prison. He got to preach the Gospel to the Roman elite. He got to write letters that we read today. Paul wasn’t in prison to pay for his past, nor was he in prison to make the best choices he could for a future he would forge. He was in prison to partner with the Providence of God, he didn’t ignore that, nor did he resist it. He believed that there was purpose in his life and he had the courage to actively partner with the Sovereign outworking of God’s perfect plan. This is the message of Paul’s life; this is the message of The Book of Esther and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.