

Our Invisible God

- Esther 1:1-9
- Courage. Faith. Politics. Betrayal. Genocidal plots. Gallows. Even irony and humor. The story of Esther has it all. It's more important than Jurassic World because it's true. It's more intriguing because though it happened 2500 years ago in what is now the nation of Iran, not much has changed. The leaders of Iran are still plotting to destroy the Jews.
- The setting is Susa, which was the capital of the Persian Empire. The Persians ruled the known world for about 200 years, from 539 B.C. to 331 B.C. and this was the largest empire the world had seen up until that point. The story opens with a description of the reign of Ahasuerus stretching from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces, and that was the known world at that time. This story happened in the years 483-473 B.C. This was after the seventy year captivity in Babylon. And it was in between the first and second wave of people returning to Jerusalem. The first wave was led by Zerubbabel in 538 B.C, which you can read about in Ezra 1-6. That happens before this story. Then there was a second return to Jerusalem led by Ezra in 458 B.C . You can read about that in Ezra 7-10. That happened after Esther. Then later, there was a third return led by Nehemiah.
- There are four main characters in the story, and many who played smaller roles. We are introduced to the King, Ahasuerus, in chapter one. He is the central figure in the kingdom, but is not the central figure in the story. In fact, though he reigns over the known world, he is the weakest of the four main characters. More about him later. We are introduced to Mordecai in chapter 2, verse 5, "Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel named Mordecai." I love this guy, and he plays the part of the voice of truth and the man of God in the story. Mordecai had been forced from his home in Jerusalem and was living in this foreign land, where he had raised his much younger cousin, Esther. She is the heroine of the story, and I am reminded of the quote, "Some men (or women) aspire to greatness, while others have greatness thrust upon them." As we will see, Esther would have never dreamed she could be the queen of the Persian empire. She was a Jew! That brings us to the last character, the evil Haman. Haman is promoted above all the other officials and essentially becomes the King's right hand man. He hates Mordecai because Mordecai will not bow and scrape before Haman like the rest of Susa does. Haman finds out that Mordecai is a Jew and now he hates him even more, because Haman already hated the Jews with a passion. He hatches a plot, with the king's help, to destroy the entire Jewish race. The King signs it into law, and the law of the Persians cannot be revoked. What Haman doesn't know, and what the king doesn't know, is that Esther is a Jew, so the king has signed his wife's death warrant. What will happen? Will Mordecai be able to escape the gallows Haman has built for him? Will Esther keep silent about her heritage and faith, even while her cousin and all the rest of the Jews perish? Or will she come up with a plan to not only save herself but save her people as well? Read ahead and see for yourself. I have no fear that that will spoil the rest of the sermon series for you. This is a story that captures my attention every time I read it.
- The book of Esther almost didn't make it into the canon, the 66 books chosen according to the strictest of standards to be part of Holy Scripture. Do you know why Esther almost didn't make it, and why if Martin Luther had his way, it wouldn't have been in? It's because it is the only book in the 66 books of the Bible that doesn't mention God. No mention of the law or the covenant. No mention of the temple or the sacrifices, though one important Jewish feast finds its beginnings in this story. The question has often been asked, "Why is the king mentioned in this book 190 times in 167 verses, and God is not mentioned even once?" There are a lot of answers suggested by biblical scholars, but I like this one the best: God is not mentioned because God chose not to be. That's true, isn't it? If we believe in divine inspiration, that "all Scripture is breathed out by God" then it's true. God chose to be in the shadows in this book. But even though God is never mentioned, His fingerprints are all over this story. He is the unseen God, the One who, even when you cannot see his hand, you can trust His heart, as the saying goes. One huge lesson for all of us

from this little book is that even when we think God is absent, He isn't! He is Who we sang about today: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible hid from our eyes, Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious—Thy great name we praise. Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might; Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above, Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love." And that leads me to my two main points as far as an introduction to this book goes, before we actually start getting into the text next week. They are, Providence and Provision, which have the same root, etymologically, as words, and theologically, as truths!

- **Providence**

- The word comes from the Latin word, "providential." Pro= before, ahead of time; videncia from videre = to see. (root of our word, video). Put them together: "seeing ahead of time."
- We will see the providence of God on display all through this story, even though none of the characters talk about it or about Him. We see it in how God put Esther, a young Jewish girl, in Persia, even in the capital city of Susa, to be raised by her older cousin, Mordecai. And in her being chosen over all the other young maidens in the land to be the Queen. We see it in the plot to overthrow the king which Mordecai "just happened" to overhear and then told it to Queen Esther. That saved the King's life and the story was recorded in the king's chronicles and tucked away for a later time when the king would just happen to have insomnia on the same night the gallows are built and readied for Mordecai to be hanged on. As the chronicles are read to the king to help him go to sleep, much like my sermons help you do the same, he heard the story of how Mordecai uncovered a plot that saved his neck. And he put into motion a plan that would save Mordecai's neck as well! We see the providence of God, and His tremendous sense of humor, in what happens when the king asks Haman, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" and Haman presumes the king is talking about HIM! We call that the presumption of Haman, and it is priceless.
- The providence of God is a theme throughout this book and throughout all of Scripture. What did Joseph say to his brothers when they were falling all over themselves trying to keep him from killing them after Jacob, their father died: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."
- We see it in Nebuchadnezzar's prayer after he had spent seven years grazing like a cow in the fields because he dared to exalt himself and his power. When he finally came to his senses, the former king lifted his eyes to the true King and praised and honored him who lives forever, and said, "all the inhabitants of earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among he inhabitants of earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"
- James Hasting wrote, "This book of Esther does not say much about God, but His presence broods over it all, and is the real spring that moves the movers that are seen." Amen! "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will." (Prov. 21:1)

- **Provision**

- God's providence includes God's provision. We saw that God moved Joseph into place in Egypt and allowed the young slave to go from the pit to the prison to the palace. And God did that as a way of providing food for His people during a time of worldwide famine.
- We will see in this story that God provided a queen for the King of Persia by making sure Esther was in the right place at the right time. And God did that as a way of providing protection for His people during an attempted genocide.
- But I want you to see something else this morning as a way of understanding this story. We will see in chapter two that the officials of the king go into every one of the 127 provinces of his kingdom and hand-pick the most beautiful young virgins in all the land. Josephus estimates that there were 400 young, beautiful women involved in this competition. And at the end of it all,

Esther was chosen. We are told this about Esther's appearance is in chapter 2, verse 7: "The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at." God made Esther beautiful, in the same way that He had made Samson strong. Her beauty opened a door for her that would not have opened without it. But as we will see in chapter 2 as we get to know Esther better, that the first door, into the competition, was opened by her physical beauty, but the second and most important door, into the King's arms as his wife, was opened by the beauty of her character. What set Esther apart from the other 399 young, beautiful women who were all eager to get the king's heart was Esther's heart. Listen, young ladies. Beauty is a gift from God. He made it, and Zechariah 9:17 says, "For how great is His goodness, and how great is His beauty!" External, physical beauty is a good gift that has the ability to delight. Solomon said of his bride, "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you." We know that Rebecca was beautiful; the Bible tells us that she was "very attractive in appearance." Sarah was also a beauty, so much so that Abraham asked her to lie and say she was his sister, which was half-true. He said to her, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance." He was afraid she would be stolen from him by the Egyptians. Beauty didn't hurt Abigail any in helping her talk David out of killing her husband, Nabal, when he acted like a jerk. The Bible says, "The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved." (1 Samuel 25:3) Beauty is a gift from God and it gets noticed. But if physical beauty is all there is, then it can get really ugly. That's why Solomon wrote, "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." (Prov. 31:30) Candice Watters writes that from the time her daughter Zoe was little, they practiced a catechism of beauty with her. She would ask Zoe, "Who made you beautiful?" Zoe would say, "God." The Candice would say, "Why did He make you beautiful?" And Zoe replied, "For His own glory."

- Here's the point. God give good gifts to His people. And every good gift is given for that same Gospel truth: for His own glory. Do you have physical attractiveness? God gave it to you for His own glory? Do you have a sharp mind? God gave it you for His own glory. God gave it to you for His own glory. Do you have musical talent? God gave it to you for His own glory.
- All of these good gifts from God eventually fade. Wrinkles and sags and bags happen, and there's nothing you can do to stop it, plastic surgery notwithstanding. The outer man wastes away. Minds grow duller with age, and memory fades. Musical ability decreases, and somebody should please tell the aging rockers from the 1970s that. But what lasts until the day you die and increases with age is godly character.