

SESSION #51

ESTHER

1. Context

There are two books in the Bible named after women. We saw the first, one, Ruth, back in Session 16. Here is the second one, the beautiful story of the beautiful Esther.

Her book is found in our Bibles way back just before Job and Psalms. But her story comes in that 60-year gap we noted earlier in the Book of Ezra, as you see on the timeline chart once again, so that's why we're dealing with her now. Esther lived during the Exile and between return #1 and return #2. However, since the 70 years of exile are now over, as we saw in the last session, none of God's people should still be living in the Euphrates Valley; all of them should have returned to the Promised Land by this time. We'll come back to this fact later.

2. Basic story

In a survey course of this nature, we can't examine all the details of the story. But here are the main highlights. The Persians are now in power and the current king is King Ahasueras, better known in history as King Xerxes.

His queen is a woman named Vashti whom he deposes very early in the story because of an act of disobedience. It is a sudden development but in keeping with what we know about him from secular history. He was a volatile, mean personality with a bad temper.

Now, having gotten rid of his queen on a whim, the king now institutes a beauty queen contest for find her successor. You may be familiar with this part of the story as Esther, a Jewess, wins the contest and becomes the new Queen of the Persian Empire but keeps her national identity secret.

A man named Mordecai is her guardian. Apparently, Esther's parents had died and her cousin Mordecai becomes her foster father, in a sense. He is a court official which places

him in a significant place as the story develops. He also takes up a role as mentor to Queen Esther, providing her with advice and support.

The prime minister is a man named Haman. He is a very proud individual who demands obeisance from everyone around him. As he heads into his office every morning, everyone in his path bows down low before him. But not Mordecai. He refuses to bow before Haman which brings Haman to hate him intensely. Haman is already pre-disposed to hate Mordecai along with all Jews because – interestingly enough – Haman is a descendant of Esau. As we saw in session 36 when we studied the book of Obadiah, the people of Esau were constant enemies of God and of God’s people, the Jews. And here’s another one, Haman.

Haman then plots against the Jewish people with a plan to exterminate the entire nation of Jewish people living throughout the vast Persian Empire. As you see on the map here, this Empire stretched all across the Middle East and as far away as India on the east and Africa on the west. So this threat was desperately serious for God’s people; virtually every Jewish person on earth lived within the borders of this Empire.

Haman persuaded the King to sign a decree that on such-and-such a day, about one year away, every Jew would be killed. Esther learns about this diabolical plot from Mordecai. As a result, she intercedes with the King on behalf of her endangered people. It’s the turning point of the entire story, as she walks unbidden into the King’s throne room, something which carries the death penalty unless the King extends his scepter. He extends his scepter to her, granting her permission to be in his presence. In a legal sense, it is as if she has been resurrected from the dead after three days and nights of fasting.

She invites the King and Haman, the prime minister, to a private banquet. At that meal, she invites both of them once again to attend a second banquet, adding to the drama and mystery. The outcome of that pair of banquets was that Haman was revealed to be a wicked man who has planned the extermination of the people of God, which would include Queen Esther because she is a Jewess.

Haman ends up being executed on a gallows which he himself had built intending to put Mordecai to death on it. It is a most ironic twist in the story.

The Jews are then saved from extermination and as a result they celebrate with a great feast, which they still do to this day, in memory of what happened in the time of Esther, called the Feast of Purim. This event extolled Jehovah God who had intervened to save His people.

Another outcome of the story is that Mordecai is raised up to become prime minister in Haman's place. It's a phenomenal story, full of all the drama, plot and unforgettable characters worthy of a blockbuster movie.

3. Purpose & Providence

The crisis that God sees coming is anticipated and you see it in the first five chapters. God moves in and replaces Vashti with Esther, putting her in a position where she can help save her people from extermination by giving her favor with the king. As the crisis works its way down, God overrules as all the coincidences work together to eventually produce physical salvation for the people of God.

The story itself is fascinating with its gripping plot, intrigue and twists and turns. But more than that, it shows us the wonderful nature of God's providential care. God's providence is seen over and over within the lines of the story of Esther. "Providence" means "*God sees ahead and He cares.*" What makes His providence even more striking is the fact that He exercises it on behalf of a people who are in the wrong country.

Only 50,000 Jews have gone back from exile to Jerusalem, in response to God's command and prophetic timing. The rest of the exiles are still living in Babylonia, or Persia. They are disobedient people of God. They shouldn't be living where they are.

To me, one of the most striking aspects of this story is that God still intervenes on behalf of His people who are still disobedient! He still cares for them. Not with miracles, as He did in the stories of Daniel, but now with the outworking of what we would call "circumstances" – the hidden hand of God. He is active but He is absolutely invisible. There is no mention of God at all in the entire book! He's behind the scenes on purpose.

It adds dramatic force to the story and provides a very significant lesson: God may be out of our sight, but we are never out of His sight. And the people of Esther's day would surely have begun to recognize, as the whole story came to its wonderful climax, that even though they couldn't see God they were still seen by Him.

His providence was at work: He sees ahead and He cares. It's a truth we may need to remember in those times when God seems invisible or absent in our situations. We may not see Him at work, but He is still there. Still at work and still caring.

The astonishing and memorable cast of individuals in Esther's story all exercise their own free will, working out their own characters and personalities exactly as you would expect them to do. They all behave naturally according to their own character. They all do exactly what they want to do. They are not robots; God doesn't overrule their individual wills. And yet, God still works out HIS own providential will through all the activities of this wide-ranging set of colorful characters.

And as they do, you begin to see that some characters recognize the invisible God at work and work hand-in-hand with Him. They begin to see God's providence and power, and it gives them courage and confidence. People like Mordecai and Esther.

On the other hand, people like Haman who refuse to recognize the invisible God at work, rebel against His providence. And that rebellion always brings panic and punishment, which happens a couple of times here in the story of Esther.

Her story is also a picture of Christian/godly commitment. When Esther was about to enter the King's throne room, without His advance permission, she made her most famous statement: *"If I perish, I perish."* She put her life in the hands of God, trusting Him and committing herself to Him, like the three men in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace had done.

Esther was ready to do whatever it took to rescue her people and God honored that commitment in an amazing way.

As 21st century people of God, we also ought to have this level of commitment, trusting our invisible God and His divine providence. *"He sees ahead, and He cares."*

In our next session we'll pick up our final book of history, Nehemiah.
