

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 30: The Book of Esther, Part I

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Introduction:

I invited an orthodox Rabbi from a Jewish high school in Beverly Hills to speak to my Bible Doctrine class. He traced the history of his people using our NIV Bibles and spent time talking about the Patriarchs, sacrifices and holy days of celebration. He finished by discussing how those holy times are celebrated in their Synagogues today.

One of the major events still celebrated is Purim. It was instituted by Mordecai and established by command of Queen Esther of Persia to celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from the death edict from King Ahasuerus.

In late February or early March Jewish families gather to feast, exchange gifts, worship God, and listen to the reading aloud of the Book of Esther.

It is interesting that the Christian church has not shared their excitement. Martin Luther wrote, "I wish that it (Esther) did not exist at all; for it Judaizes too much and is filled with much heathen perverseness." Of course, Luther was an anti-Semite. Esther is also the only Old Testament book that is absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The main reason, however, is that while it mentions the Persian king 190 times, it never mentions God. The Persians and the exiled Jews are mentioned, but there is not a mention of Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law of Moses, of Jewish history or tradition. None of God's names are mentioned--not Elohim, Jehovah, Shaddai, Adonai--none.

The question then becomes: If the Book of Esther is the story of the Lord's deliverance of the Jews from Persian slaughter, why is there no mention of God in the book? Some believe it is because the account is largely copied verbatim from the official Persian records and so all mention of God was censored. I think it more likely that it is because the deported Jews had left the God of Jerusalem behind.

Half a century before, Cyrus had issued a proclamation permitting the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple. Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied this would happen and instructed that "not a hoof should be left behind." So, not a Jew should have remained in Persia.

But, as we saw, the majority (probably 90%) chose to remain in their comfortable Persian life style rather than brave the rigors and hardships of re-building the Temple and the dangers of facing their enemies. They made their choice to remain in Persia and, it is my guess, they also elected to be a non-vocal, perhaps even non-practicing in their religion.

Is God absent, then? I think not!

As we study the Book of Esther we will see the hand of God everywhere, not through blatant miracles, but in His control of human events. Or, as one writer put it, "the story of Esther shows God's hand as He reverses expected outcomes."

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Theologically this is called Providence. J. Vernon McGee describes it as, "the hand of God in the glove of history" or "God at the steering wheel of the universe." A more formal definition of God's Providence is: "The continued working of God by which He makes all events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design for which He created it."

Background

After years of cycles of rebellion, repentance and reconciliation in the time of the Judges and after years of warnings from Prophets . . . at last in 722 BC. God allowed the Assyrians to destroy the Northern kingdom of Israel and carry the people into captivity.

The Southern nation of Judah, because of a number of righteous kings, was spared for over 100 years. But, eventually, after intermarrying and allowing idolatry to flourish, they were defeated and enslaved by Babylon for 70 years.

As we have been studying, Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon in 539 BC. and, under the Persian system, they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple and reestablish worship of the Lord.

As we saw in Ezra and Nehemiah, only about ten percent went home. When Cyrus died, persecution of the Jews put an end to the Temple rebuilding. But, Darius, pressured by the Jews enemies, found Cyrus' original decree and ordered their enemies to pay for the construction with royal funds and the Temple was completed.

Cast of Characters

Ahasuerus: He took the throne in 486 BC. when his father, Darius died. His Persian name was Khshayarshan. His Greek name (used in most history books) was Xerxes. His Hebrew name (used in your Bibles) was Ahasuerus.

If you're an ancient history buff you may know a lot about Xerxes because of a Greek historian named Herodotus. He was born the year Xerxes became king and grew up to write the foremost history of the Greek/Persian wars.

A full third of his book is about the reign of Xerxes, and what we learn is that he was exactly as described in the Book of Esther.

He was ambitious: He ruled a kingdom that stretched from India all the way to Ethiopia with over 127 provinces. His dream was to conquer Greece and rule the world and he nearly succeeded.

He was handsome: Like most eastern kings of that day he had a large harem, but unlike most, many women were excited and pleased to be in his. He provided them with an opulent lifestyle and spread his attentions and favors among them even when he had a queen.

He was self-indulgent: He made Susa, the winter palace his father built on a hill 120 feet above the plains, his home and expanded it, adding gardens that rivaled the fabled gardens of Solomon. He was noted for throwing lavish parties and proclaiming national holidays.

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He was immoral: Not only did he have a harem, many of whom he slept with only once, but he wanted his brother's wife, and when she refused, seduced her daughter. Eventually he killed his brother and nephews for objecting.

He was cruel: If he called for his wife or a concubine she did not, by law have to come, but if she didn't she was generally killed. Individuals or groups of people meant nothing to him.

He was volatile: The Greeks had a proverb which they applied to Xerxes, "Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad." He ordered a bridge built over the Hellespont and, when it collapsed during a huge storm, he had his soldiers beat the sea with 300 lashes and beheaded all the bridge builders.

He was a heavy drinker: By Persian law, each time the king drank, each of his guests had to drink. He often had to waive this rule because they couldn't keep up with him. It seems he did that at the party in Esther (ch. 7 and 8).

Though some question the historical accuracy of Esther, its correlation with Herodotus' account of a celebration culminating in a great banquet at which Xerxes produced his plan to attack Greece by sea is much too close to deny.

Its description of the palace (now excavated) and the people attending the event, including high court officials and military leaders, also lend credibility. The author indicates the account is historically accurate when he invites the readers to verify his account in the Persian annals where these and other details can be found.

Mordecai (*little man*): He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and a list of his prominent ancestors indicate that he was from the line of King Saul. He was from a noble family since he was taken into exile with King Jehoiachin (2:5-6). Like Daniel and his three friends, he was given a Babylonian name linked to their idols, in his case Marduka (mentioned in Herodotus). Mordecai was probably his Hebrew name.

He, according to chapter 2, verse 19, "sat at the king's gate." Some think this means he was a gate keeper or one who just like to hang around the palace. Remember, in the stories of Ruth and Lot, sitting at the gate referred to being one of the city elders or judged who "sat in session" to do the city's business.

The king's officials held court outside the entrance to his palace in a court and in 3:2 it mentions "all the royal officials at the king's gate." This court has been excavated and is approximately 180 feet by 90 feet with a broad staircase flanked by two great lions and rising to the palace gates.

Haman: Haman was a foreigner who had done well in Persia. He had become extremely wealthy and worked his way into the circle of officials serving as advisors to the king.

He became the Prime Minister with authority second only to King Ahasuerus but was a very proud man. His life is an illustration of Proverb 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before stumbling."

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Esther: Esther was a Jewish girl who was born in exile and now an orphan. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (2:7) and means myrtle, a beautiful and sweet smelling plant used for medicinal purposes. It is after Esther that the largest and most prominent hospital in Palestine today is Hadassah Hospital, named in her honor.

Her Persian name was Esther, which means star and was probably related to the idol Ishtar.

Esther was Mordicai's cousin, the nephew of her father, who raised her as his own daughter. She was, according to the record, "beautiful of form and face." She was gorgeous, a babe, a dish, a knockout."

Author

No one knows for sure who wrote the book but the majority seems to vote for Mordecai. We do know he was a Jew--He wrote in Hebrew and knew Jews customs, idiom and vocabulary. He lived in Persia--his descriptions of places, customs and events were accurate and his use of Persian words was precise. He wrote after Xerxes' death--He never would have lived to tell the truth about the wild and crazy king, but since he used Persian words rather than Greek words in his text he probably lived before Alexander the Great conquered Persia.

The Book

The book is named after its heroine, Queen Esther of Persia. She used her important position and her favor with the king to save the Jewish people from total annihilation. The Book of Esther reads much like a historical novel. In our Bible, Esther is the last of the history books. In the Hebrew Old Testament it is one of five scrolls in the third and final part of the text. The account recorded here took place between the events of Ezra and Nehemiah.

In reality, this is just one more in the long list of attempts of Satan to wipe out the line of David and eliminate the Messiah. Pharaoh tried it. Ahab and Jezebel tried it. Nero tried it. Hitler tried it. Nassar tried it. ***It will never happen.*** God has an eternal plan for His chosen people and a covenant to keep, and "God is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man that He should repent. Has He said, and will he no do it? Or has He spoken and will He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19).

Theme

God is working in His providence, behind the scenes, to save His chosen ones by using people who are faithful and "in the right place at the right time," physically and spiritually.

Homework

Read: Read or re-read the Book of Esther

Think: Do I really believe God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary work?

Apply: Try to be filled with the Spirit all week so that God can speak to you and use you.

Bible Survey Lesson 31: The Book of Esther, Part II

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Introduction

The Book of Esther is the documentation of a plot, just one of many in history, to eliminate the Jewish race. Its primary lesson is that God is always working behind the scenes in His providence to save His people by using strategically placed, courageous, and faithful people.

Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the exiles that returned to Jerusalem were doing. Esther gives us a peak at what was happening to those who were left behind in Persia. This true story happened in the time between the major events in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It also explains the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim, which Prime Minister Modecai initiated and Queen Esther decreed and the orthodox Jews still celebrate.

There are many lessons to be learned from this book including: Being in the place God wants you, ready to serve; Loyalty to an oppressive king; Courage in the face of great danger; Putting others before yourselves; God's providence and care for His people, etc.

I. THE PLOT FORMULATED (Chapters 1-3)

The plot revolved around the arch villain Haman, but the environment and circumstances that made it possible were complex. First we have:

A. The Might of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) (1:1-8)

Last week we looked at the character of the king. He was ambitious, attractive, egocentric, immoral, cruel and volatile . . . but he was also powerful.

1. Called His Leaders

The book begins by telling us "he ruled from India to Ethiopia 127 provinces" and he had visions of a great military campaign against Greece, the next step in a quest to rule the world. (By the way, he got skunked in a sea battle when he tried, and it was probably after this defeat that he chose his new queen.)

Ahasuerus called for a parley of his personal advisors, provincial princes, and military leaders at his opulent palace in Susa to celebrate his greatness. It was called as a show of force, power and majesty that lasted for 180 days (6 months). According to the historian Herodotus, he announced his plans to attach Greece at this event.

It all culminated in a "banquet lasting seven days" in the palace gardens (v 6).

2. Called His Queen

In a drunken stupor, he called for his Queen, Vashti, to come from a banquet she was having for the wives of the dignitaries and "*display her beauty*" before his guests (v 11).

Why she refused has been widely debated and ranges from not wanting to be humiliated before the drunken men to being asked to appear wearing only her crown. The most reasonable answer can be found in the rules of etiquette for the Persian court. No women were allowed at a gathering of men.

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This would explain why she was not killed for disobeying the king. She was right. Either way, her refusal to come threatened the king's reputation as absolute boss.

His cohorts were especially worried that their wives would follow her example and not obey them in the future, so they recommended she be deposed. And she was.

B. The Marriage of Esther (2:1-20)

It was probable three or four years later, after his defeat by Greece, and King Ahasuerus was in a rotten mood and lonely for a queen. Some say he wanted Vasti back but couldn't rescind his order. His all wise advisors suggested he have a national beauty pageant to bring new blood into his harem from which he could chose a queen.

1. Esther Contesting (5-9)

Esther was a gorgeous young woman who lived in Susa under the care and protection of her cousin and adopted father, Mordecai. It seems he was a minor official in the king's court. He introduced her into the contest to choose a new queen for Ahasuerus.

2. Esther Chosen

Esther was "beautiful of form and face. " We can imagine just how gorgeous she was because when Hegai, the eunuch in charge of all the beautiful concubines, saw her he was impressed. And you can bet he wasn't easily impressed.

Of all the beautiful new young women brought to him from across the land this, ". . . young lady Esther) pleased him and found favor with him (v. 8). "He immediately took her under his wing for special consideration, assigned the best maids to her, and personally guided in her yearlong "purification" process that included skin care and cosmetics.

His choice was right--the king chose Esther for his new Queen.

C. The Ministry of Mordecai (2:21-23)

Mordecai was just hanging around doing his job "sitting at the gate," just another bureaucrat perhaps because of the new Queen's influence.

1. Overheard the Plot

Two officers of the temple guard, possible upset over their loss to Greece, were plotting to assassinate King Ahasuerus.

2. Warned the King

Mordecai told Esther, who passed the intelligence on to the king, being careful to give Him credit. The plot was investigated by the Secret Service, proven and the guilty hung. As with all events surrounding the king, this went into his official chronicles.

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D. The Malice of Haman (3)

Haman became the "Head Prince" or Prime Minister of Persia, second in power to the King himself. Out of respect for that office, the king commanded that all should bow down out of respect for that office. Haman was such a jerk, that order may have been necessary.

1. Haman was an Agagite

Here I was thinking that Haman was a Persian, giving him a leg up on Mordecai and the Jews. He wasn't a Persian at all. He was a descendant of Agag, King of Amalek (v. 1).

Remember in 1 Samuel 15 Israel was supposed to wipe out all evidence of the Amalekites from the face of the earth, people and property. Saul, however, let his army take spoil and he spared the life of the king, Agag. He lost his kingdom and here, 500 years later, Haman is a thorn in the Jews' side. This would explain why the personal feud between Haman and Mordecai was so hot, why Mordecai wouldn't bow down, and why Haman hated the Jews so intently.

2. Mordecai Wouldn't Bow

Some writers believe he could not bow down because he was a Jew and could not bow before any man. This cannot be the reason. Jews were not allowed to bow down in worship to anyone or anything, but were not kept from bowing in respect. There are many instances of righteous Jews bowing in respect, from Abraham to the Prophets. Just one is in 1 Samuel 24:8 when, *"Now after David arose and went out from the cave and called after Saul, saying, 'My Lord and my king!' And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground and prostrated himself"*

Mordecai wouldn't bow (v. 4) because he was a Jew, a sworn enemy of Amalek. And Haman hates more than just this man. He hates the entire Jewish population.

3. Ahazuerus Tricked to Decree

Showing his disregard for human life, the king accepted Haman's word that the Jews were planning an insurrection and sealed their fate with a decree allowing their mass murder. In eleven months, all Jews in Persia would die. Interestingly, the common people were shocked and confused by the order (v. 15.)

II. HOW THE PLOT WAS FOUGHT (Chapters 4-5)

Esther, because of her position and loyalty to the king, and his love for her, was able to save herself and her people. It took, however, a wise and daring plan and a willingness to lose everything, including her life, to carry it off.

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A. The Convictions of Mordecai (4:1-14)

1. Mordecai's Leadership

When he heard of the decree Mordecai immediately went into public mourning. The entire Jewish population joined him as soon as they heard the decree.

A lot is made of the fact that prayer is not mentioned in Esther, but prayer was traditionally, and still is, a part of the ritual of mourning in sack-cloth and ashes. In fact, it included confession, repentance and worship (1 Kings 21, Nehemiah 9).

2. Mordecai's Counsel

He sent a copy of the decree to Esther with a plea for help. Her response was, "What can I do? I can't go to the king uninvited or I may be killed." His response was, "You're a Jew, your dead anyway."

His appeal ended with the most famous phrase in the entire book, "Who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" "Haven't you ever wondered how you, a Jew, became the Queen of Persia? Wasn't that a miracle?"

B. The Courage of Esther (4:15-5:8)

1. Esther Responds to the Challenge

Esther's response was nothing short of noble: **Read Esther 4:16**

2. Esther Approaches the King

Esther stood our side the door to the throne room dressed in her finest royal attire, a regal Queen. Would Ahasuerus hold out his scepter to allow an audience or would he have her removed, perhaps even killed. He was a psycho, after all.

The king liked what he saw and brought he in. His feelings for her are evident in his choice of words. "What's troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request, even to half of the kingdom, it will be given to you." (Formal, never accepted)

Obviously she was prepared, and she ask only that he and Haman attend a "banquet," probable a luncheon which was waiting for them. At that meal she invited them to a formal dinner next day.

C. The Confidence of Haman (5:9-14)

Haman left the palace on cloud nine, a happy man. Then he saw Mordecai sitting at the gate and his happiness was shattered. It is said that you can tell the size of a man by what irritates him. What's the problem? He's on top of the world but this one little Jew drives him nuts.

1. Haman's Pride

He bragged to his wife, family, and friends of all his riches and position and power. *"Even Esther, the Queen, let no one but me come with the king to a private luncheon, and tomorrow only we two are invited again (v 12).*

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2. Haman's Problem

"yet . . . every time I see Mordecai sitting . . .

His wife said, "What's the problem. You've got the power, just hang him, hang him high." So he immediately, that same night, had a 75-foot gallows built, just for Mordecai.

III. HOW THE PLOT WAS FOILED (Chapters 6-10)

Classic literature is full of irony. Perhaps that is one of the reasons the story of Esther is considered by many to be a classic.

A. The Death of Haman (6-7)

There is a children's story we used to read to our kids titled, "Alexander and The Very, Bad, Horrible Day." Some days it doesn't pay to get out of bed.

1. He was Publicly Humbled

The king couldn't sleep so he had the Royal Annals read to him and they "just happened to read the part where Mordecai saved his life. He ask, "What did we do for the hero--nothing?"

Ahasuerus sent his servants out to see if any of his wise men had been unable to sleep also and they just happened to find Haman just itching to ask permission to hang Mordecai.

He asked Haman, "What should I do to honor a hero?" He answered quickly: *"Give him a royal robe, a royal horse, a royal crown, a royal attendant, and a royal parade."* **Read Esther 6:10**

Haman was having a very bad, terrible day . . . how could it be worse?

2. He was Publicly Hanged

Esther gave here banquet and the happy king asked again . . . "What do you want my Queen, etc. etc.?"

Her answer was to lay-out the whole genocidal plot against her, the hero Mordecai, and her people. No surprise, he got livid. "Who would do a thing like that?" He asked. "That wicked Haman" she replied. Haman, falling on Esther's couch while begging for mercy sealed his doom and he was hung on the gallows made for Mordecai.

B. The Decree of Ahasuerus (8-9:18)

Even though things worked out for Esther and Mordecai personally, they and all other Jews were still under the king's sentence of death.

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1. Law of the Medes and Persians

One unique feature in the law of the Medes and Persian was that once a law was sealed it could not be rescinded. This was to keep fickle kings from being arbitrary according to their moods.

So as much as Ahasuerus wanted to, he couldn't take back the death decree. Mordecai, who would become the next Prime Minister, wrote a new decree that gave the Jews the right to arm and defend themselves, and to plunder their enemies.

2. New Law of the Medes and Persians

The Jews rose up and killed 75,000 attacking enemies, but they did not take any spoil.

C. The Day of Purim (9:19-10)

A new two-day holiday was added to the Jewish religious calendar that orthodox and many reform Jews still celebrate.

1. Mordecai Promoted

Mordecai became the new Prime Minister of Persia and was a good and mighty ruler (chapter 10).

2. Mordecai Proclaims

His first official act was to write a decree, commanded by Queen Esther and sealed with the king's ring, establishing a memorial day to mark the days the Jews were saved from their enemies and calling it Purim. (a reference to "pur" or the casting of lots Haman had used to pick the day of destruction.)

Conclusion

The Book of Esther relates to our modern experience better than many Old Testament books. In Esther, God worked behind the scenes through people and ordinary daily events--no plagues, no fire from heaven, no parting seas, just a courageous little old man who refused to abandon his principles, and a brave young woman willing to lay her life on the line.

Lesson

1. If we want to know what God is doing to deliver His people, watch the committed people.
2. Any power or influence we have should be used for righteous purposes, not for self-indulgence.

Homework:

Read: The Book of Job

Think: What would I do if you lost everything?

Apply: Take your problems to God first, this week.