

Old Testament Survey
Lesson 17 – Esther
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School
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Historical Setting

After years rebellion, 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.

Exile Stage #1 (605 BC) – Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and took some of the leading nobles and young men (including Daniel) hostages and carried them back to Babylon.

Exile Stage #2 (597 BC) – Jehoiakim rebels against Nebuchadnezzar (ca 602 BC) who finally comes and attacks Jerusalem (597 BC), carrying off 10,000 captives to Babylon

Exile Stage #3 (586 BC) – Nebuchadnezzar returns when Zedekiah rebels, lays siege to and sacks Jerusalem, strips and burns the temple, and deports the remaining masses of people.

Restoration Stage #1 (538 BC) – Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon in 539 BC. A small percentage (50,000) of Jews return with the decree of Cyrus under Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple and reestablish worship of the Lord (Ezra 1-6).

The events of the book of Esther take place between Ezra 6 and 7 (ca. 483-478 BC) in Persia, which highlights the fact that not all of the Jews returned to the land.

Restoration Stage #2 (458 BC) – Ezra the Scribe leads 2,000 Jews back to Jerusalem to refurbish the temple, which had deteriorated, and institute religious (Ezra 7-10).

Restoration Stage #3 (445BC) – Nehemiah returns to the land in order to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and enable the people to re-inhabit the city.

Introduction

One of the major events still celebrated by the Jewish people is the festival of 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 of 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 no mention of Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, the temple, or the Law of Moses. The question then becomes: if the 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 from the official Persian records and so all mention of God was censored. Or possibly, it is because the deported Jews had forgot the God of Jerusalem.

While absent in the written account, is God really absent? 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. 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." God is sovereign!

Author

No one knows for sure who wrote the book but the majority seem to vote for Mordecai. We do know he was a Jew – he wrote in Hebrew and knew Jewish 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 in ~331BC.

Cast of Characters

Ahasuerus: He took the throne in 486 BC when Darius, his father, 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. We know a lot about Xerxes because of a Greek historian named Herodotus. Herodotus 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 (no surprise there!).

- **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.
- **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:** He ordered a bridge built over the Hellesport 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 could not keep up with him. It seems he did that at the party in Esther 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 indicates 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 2:19, "sat at the king's gate." Some think this means he was a gate keeper or one who just liked to hang around the palace. In the stories of Ruth and Lot, sitting at the gate referred to being one of the city elders or judge who "sat in session" to do the cities 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 approximate 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."

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

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. The book is the documentation of a plot by Satan, just one of many in history, to eliminate the Jewish race to wipe out the line of David and eliminate the Messiah. Pharaoh tried it. Ahab and Jezabel tried it. Nero tried it. Hitler tried it. ***It will never happen.*** God has an eternal plan for His chosen people and a covenant to keep, and:

¹⁹"God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Num 23:19

The book of Esther's 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 Mordecai 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 Rise of Esther (Chapters 1-2)

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

A. The Might of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) (1:1-22)

King Ahasuerus was ambitious, egocentric, immoral, cruel, volatile,... and powerful.

1. Called His Leaders (1:1-8)

The book begins by telling us "he reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces" and he had visions of a great military campaign against Greece, the next step in a quest to rule the world. Ahasuerus called for a gathering 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 to raise the morale of his leaders and psychologically prepare them for his planned expedition against Greece. According to the historian Herodotus, he announced his plans to attack Greece at this event. It all culminated in a "banquet lasting seven days" in the palace gardens (v6).

2. Called His Queen (1:9-22)

In a drunken stupor, Ahasuerus 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 (v11). 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. 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)

Three or four years later "after these things" the king remembered his ex-wife Vashti. During those years Persia was soundly defeated by Greece.

In the spring of 480 BC, Ahasuerus sent more than 100,000 men and hundreds of ships against Greece. Four hundred ships were lost at sea in a severe spring storm at sea. When they landed on Greece, the troops were stopped for an entire day at the mountainous pass called Thermopylae. A Spartan captain named Leonidas and his 300 brave Spartan soldiers held back the entire invading army for 24 hours, inflicting great losses on them, and allowing the much smaller Greek army to carry out an orderly retreat to safety. Ahasuerus eventually broke through and burned Athens to the ground. But most of its citizens had escaped to the island of Salamis. The king then set sail for Salamis, confident of victory, for he outnumbered his enemy at least three to one. But the smaller and swifter Greek fighting boats had mastered the art of ramming. Soon, before his horrified eyes, he viewed the slaughter of his proud navy. He left for Persia a defeated man. The remaining troops were put under the command of General Mardonius. One year later in 479 BC, Mardonius was defeated and killed in a battle at Plataea.

After his defeat by Greece, King Ahasuerus was in a rotten mood and lonely for a queen. Some say he wanted Vashti back but could not 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.

Esther lived in Susa and was 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. Esther was "beautiful of form and face." 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" (v8). He immediately took her under his wing for special consideration, assigned the best maids to her, and personally guided in her yearlong "beautification" process that included skin care and cosmetics. His choice was right--the king chose Esther for his new Queen.

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

II. 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.

A. Haman was an Agagite

Haman was not a Persian, he was a descendant of Agag, King of Amalek (v1). In 1 Sam 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 would not bow down, and why Haman hated the Jews so intently.

B. Mordecai Would Not 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. Mordecai would not bow (v4) because he was a Jew, a sworn enemy of Amalek. Haman hates not only Mordecai, but the entire Jewish population.

C. Ahasuerus 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 (v15).

III. 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.

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

1. Mordecai's Leadership

When Mordecai heard of the decree, he 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 is traditionally a part of the ritual of mourning in sack-cloth and ashes. It included confession, repentance, and worship (1 Kings 21, Neh 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?" (4:14)

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

1. Esther Responds to the Challenge

Esther's response was nothing short of noble.

¹⁶"Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." Esther 4:16

2. Esther Approaches the King

Esther stood outside 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? The king invited her in and extended his golden scepter to Esther. 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." Obviously she was prepared, and she asked 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 the 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 (v12).*

2. Haman's Problem

"Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." (v13) 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.

IV. The Plot 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)

1. He was Publicly Humbled (6)

The king could not sleep so he had the chronicles read to him and they "just happened" to read the part where Mordecai saved his life. He asked, "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."* So Haman had to honor Mordecai with his very words. Haman was having a very bad day... how could it be worse? Even his wife and friends saw that he was falling before Mordecai, because he was a Jew!

2. He was Publicly Hanged (7)

Esther gave her banquet and the happy king asked again... "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done?" Her answer was to lay-out the whole genocidal plot against her, the hero Mordecai, and her people. No surprise, the king 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 (8-9:16)

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

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 could not 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 (9:17-10)

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 (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)

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.

Homework

- Read Job