

The Story (17) - Esther

By Ashby Camp

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I. Introduction

A. Meg and I will be out of town next week visiting the world's cutest grandchildren, so you won't have to put up with me. But, Lord willing, I'll be back to teach the class the following Sunday.

B. This morning we're looking at the Book of Esther, but before I get to that I wanted to give a footnote to my comments last week about the benefits of scholarship and the need to take advantage of scholarly labor.

1. A brother, who agrees with that general sentiment, thought it would be helpful to remind people that scholarly opinion is not to be confused with the word of God. Scholars and all human teachers are fallible human beings not inspired men and women and therefore can be, and often are, wrong. That certainly is true. No one should mistake scholars for prophets.

2. They need to be read with some discernment so one can separate the meat from the bones, the good from the bad. And I think the best advice I can give in that regard is that you consider the basis of their conclusions, the facts and reasoning behind the conclusions, instead of merely swallowing the conclusions themselves.

II. Background

A. You will recall that the united kingdom of Israel divided into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah after the death of King Solomon in 931 B.C. The northern kingdom of Israel was vanquished by the Assyrians, the final blow coming with the fall of Samaria in 722/721 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah was taken into Babylonian captivity during several military campaigns (605 – Daniel; 598/597 – Ezekiel), the last and most significant being in 587/586 B.C.

B. The Persians, in keeping with prophecy, displaced the Babylonians as the dominant world power in 539 B.C. when a Mede and Persian alliance headed by Cyrus conquered the capital city of Babylon. Sometime in 538 B.C. (probably) Cyrus issued a decree permitting the Jewish people to return to their homeland.

C. As we saw last week, many Jews returned to Judea at that time under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Joshua the high priest. They began to rebuild the temple in 536 B.C., but became discouraged and put off completing it until 516 B.C. A number of Jews, however, chose to stay where they were, content to be a minority group of foreigners in Persian-

ruled Mesopotamia. After so many decades in Babylonia, they had carved out a life in that land and were sufficiently content with it that they did not want tackle all the uncertainties of returning to Judea. The Book of Esther takes place more than 50 years after the initial return of exiles.

D. The events in Esther take place in the reign of the Persian king Xerxes, who ruled from 486-465 B.C. Xerxes is his more common identification, based on the Greek form of his Persian name, but the Hebrew form of his Persian name comes into English as Ahasuerus. So some English translations have "Ahasuerus" and others substitute the better known Greek name of "Xerxes," but it is the same person.

E. Esther is unusual for a Bible book in the sense God is never directly mentioned. On the surface, it reads like a secular story about Jews coping with a particular difficulty while living in Mesopotamia during the Persian Empire. And yet, without mentioning God, the inspired writer beautifully implies God's sovereignty and his guiding hand by showing the amazing "coincidences" that "just happened" to come together for the blessing of his people.

F. I think it's important for us to realize that God can be working in our lives to accomplish tremendous things in the future, can be setting the stage or doing "advance work," in ways we do not recognize. He often works quietly, unobtrusively, in situations and occurrences that have no apparent connection to anything larger. It's only when we look back on our lives that we can see how he has worked in the seemingly mundane, in what we took as the events of everyday life, to bring us to a certain point. Only then can we see the tapestry he was weaving in our lives.

III. The Danger - 3:1-15

A. The crisis on which the story of Esther hinges is given in chapter 3. We're told there that King Xerxes elevated one of his nobles, a man named Haman, above all the other officials. Now Haman just happens to be a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king against whom Israel's king Saul had fought (1 Samuel 15) some 540 years earlier.

B. From the time of the Exodus in middle of the 15th century B.C., there had been a history of conflict between Israel and the Amalekites.

1. In Exodus 17 the Amalekites attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. After the battle, Moses said (17:16), "The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."

2. Israel was charged with "blotting out the name of Amalek from under heaven" (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15:23), and intermittent conflict with the Amalekites dots the biblical record (Judg. 3:13, 6:3, 6:33, 7:12, 10:12; 1 Sam. 27:8, 30:13-18; 1 Chron. 4:43).

3. King Saul had been instructed to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15), but he disobeyed and ultimately was defeated and lost his dynasty as a result (1 Sam. 28:18). This is when Saul came to Samuel falsely claiming to have obeyed the Lord's command to eliminate the Amalekites, and Samuel uttered the great line "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" (1 Sam. 15:13-14).

4. Agag is named in a prophetic oracle given by Balaam in Num. 24:7. The text ("his [Israel's] king shall be higher than Agag") implies a conflict between Agag, who may represent the Amalekites generally, and Israel, one that will end in Israel's favor.

C. Mordecai, a Jew living in Susa and probably a member of the king's court, refused to kneel before Haman and pay him honor. As it happens, Mordecai is a Benjamite from the clan of Kish, the father of King Saul.

1. The longstanding hostility between Israel and the Amalekites is probably, at least from Mordecai's perspective, why he refused to honor Haman.

2. Note: Jews did not consider bowing down in honor of someone a violation of the first (no other gods) or second commandments (no idols). See, e.g., Gen. 33:3; 1 Sam. 20:41, 24:8; 2 Sam. 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16. This is different than worshiping an idol as in Daniel 3.

D. When Haman learns of Mordecai's snub and that he is a Jew, he is furious. He then convinces Xerxes to permit him to decree, in the king's name, that on a particular day the Jews in the kingdom are to be annihilated. It's like a law that says on November 15 all Chinese in America are to be killed.

IV. God's Advance Work - 1:1 - 2:23

A. Chapter 3 sets the crisis, but it is the coming of that crisis that reveals the significance of God's "advance work" that was reported in chapters 1 and 2. Long before Haman was exalted by King Xerxes, it just so happened that Mordecai had an incredibly attractive cousin whom he had raised as a daughter after her parents died. This young woman was named Hadassah, but she was also known as Esther.

B. It just so happened that Queen Vashti refused the command from King Xerxes to appear before him during a great banquet he was hosting for all his officials and servants. The text does not say this, but I suspect she was under the influence of alcohol since she was hosting a feast for the women at that time (1:9). The king did not take kindly to this humiliation, so Vashti was banished from his presence and a kingdom-wide search was begun for her replacement.

C. Now out of all the young women in Xerxes' kingdom, it just so happened that Esther was the one chosen to be queen in place of Vashti. She happened to have the qualities that set her apart from all the others in the eyes of Xerxes.

D. And it just so happened that Mordecai, who was probably in the king's court as a result of Esther having become the queen, learned that two of the king's eunuchs planned to assassinate him. He passed that information on to the king by way of Esther. The king was able to verify Mordecai's tip, and he had the conspirators executed. The last clause of 2:23 notes, "And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king."

E. All of these things were important parts of God's working on behalf of his people, his performing a tremendous rescue, but none would have been recognized as such until after the fact. We very often cannot see in the present the picture that God is painting with our lives. It's when we look back on life that we can see most clearly what God was up to.

V. Esther's Responsibility to Act - 4:1-17

A. Mordecai urges Esther to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

1. At this point the king does not know Esther is a Jew. She had kept that quiet at Mordecai's instruction.

2. Esther initially balks at the idea because she has not been summoned into the king's presence and anyone who approaches him uninvited is to be killed. The only exception is if the king chooses to spare the person's life.

B. In 4:13-14 Mordecai sends the following word back to Esther: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

1. One cannot ignore the will of God with impunity. It may appear to her that she can ignore her responsibility, that is clear under the circumstances, and escape unharmed, but Mordecai tells her that is an illusion.

2. Though God has "set the table" for deliverance, Esther still must choose to act. She must do what she can with what she has been given. If she doesn't, God will bring deliverance from somewhere else, but that is not the question before her. The question before her is will she act with courageous devotion.

3. As you and I face opportunities in our lives to influence people for God, we need to remember that we may have come to that position for such a time as that. God has given us that opportunity with friends, family members, and brothers and sisters in Christ to influence them in a God-glorifying way.

C. Esther asks Mordecai to have all the Jews in Susa join her and her maids in a three-day fast, during which time they would undoubtedly be praying, and says that when this is done she will go before the king.

1. This speaks volumes about humbling oneself before God and calling out for his strength and intercession in times of difficulty.

2. We face all kinds of crises in our lives, but how often do we devote ourselves to prayer regarding them? We'll complain, read every self-help book on the market, and take various pills before we'll pour our hearts out before God.

VI. Deliverance - 5:1 - 10:3

A. Esther approached the king, and it just so happened that he received her. Rather than make her request at that time, she asked that the king and Haman attend a banquet she had prepared for the king. At the banquet, she asked that they return the next day for another banquet, and she promised to present her request to the king at that time.

B. It just so happened that the king had insomnia that night, and he ordered that the record of his reign be brought in and read to him.

C. And it just so happened that the record of Mordecai's reporting the assassination plot was read. The king then learns that nothing had been done to honor Mordecai, and right at that moment Haman enters the palace to speak to Xerxes about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows he had built for that purpose. But Haman never gets the chance to ask permission to kill Mordecai because the king immediately asks Haman what he thinks the king should do to honor someone really special.

1. Haman thinks the king is speaking of him, so he says he should put his robe on the guy and have the noblest prince lead him through the city on the king's horse shouting, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor."

2. The king loves the idea, and he sends Haman out immediately to lead Mordecai through the city square on the king's horse, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

3. Haman is utterly depressed and mortified. When he tells his wife and friends, the same people who had earlier counseled him (5:14) to build the gallows and tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, they now tell him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him." They knew Mordecai was a Jew before (5:13), but they realize that Haman's dramatic reversal of fortune is the hand of God. This apparently has convinced them that God is indeed with the Jewish people and that Haman is therefore doomed.

D. At the second banquet, Esther asks the king to spare her people who had been targeted for destruction by Haman. Needless to say, the king is not pleased. Haman is hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for hanging Mordecai. Haman's estate is then given to Esther. The moral is "don't mess with God" (see, 6:13b).

E. Since no law of the Persians could be revoked, the king authorized issuance of a decree that, on the day set for their slaughter, the Jews could assemble as a military force and kill those seeking to kill them. On that day (and in Susa the decree was extended for another day) the Jews completely reversed their fortune and wound up slaughtering their enemies.

F. This is the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim (on 13-14 Adar, which month corresponds to Feb.-Mar.). The name of the festival derives from the Akkadian word *puru*, "lot" (3:7), and refers to the lots cast by Haman to pick the day of Jewish annihilation.