

Week of November 14 - 20

Overview of Esther

The events of the book of Esther took place when the Temple was almost completed. These events have nothing to do with the people who returned from exile but deal with those who remained behind in Babylon and the Persian Empire.

This book is unique because the writer did not mention God's name once. But the finger of God is, directing minute events to bring about His people's deliverance." There are also no references to the Law of Moses, the Temple, or Jewish worship. There is also no reference to Jerusalem, except where it says Mordecai's great-grandfather went into exile from Jerusalem. The value of Esther is its revelation of God acting in providence for His people's well-being and protection.

There are several other unique features of Esther. No New Testament writer quoted or referred to it. It never mentions prayer. It mentions nothing supernatural. It is the only Old Testament book that records a history of the Jews outside their land which began with Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Jerusalem.

The Book of Esther demonstrates God's providence as He both possesses and exercises absolute power over all the works of His hands. It shows that God does exist and that God acts through history to accomplish His purposes—regardless of whether humans acknowledge Him or not.

Esther 1 The King's Great Feast and the Queen's dismissal

The first scene is a great feast in the winter palace of the king at Susa, the Persian capital 200 miles east of Babylon. It was characterized by all the elegance and pageantry displayed in the East and ended in drunken revelry. During the party, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to appear before him and the assembled guests. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name for Xerxes, which is his Greek name.

The only redeeming feature at the court of Ahasuerus was Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king. She paid the price of her loyalty by choosing to protect her dignity as a queen and a wife before her husband's inebriated guests. At the advice of his advisors, the king divorced her, and she disappears from the pages of history. Incidentally, the story reveals the place woman occupied outside God's Covenant. She was a plaything and slave of man.

The important point to the writer of Esther is that she did not appear as commanded, not why she did not.

Esther 2 Esther Selected and Becomes Queen

Now Mordecai appears on the scene. Living with him was his cousin Esther whose parents were dead, whom he had adopted as his daughter. To carry out the decree of the king, she was taken to the royal palace in the company of the maidens. Her beauty captured the king, and she was made queen in place of Vashti. In their writings, the Rabbis held that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in history along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail. Josephus said Esther 'surpassed all women in beauty' in the entire habitable world.

Esther became queen in the winter of 478 B.C., four years after Vashti was deposed. Note that Esther's circumstances changed from being a poor Jewish orphan girl, apparently friendless, to the throne of Persia. God, in His providence, can be seen with His divine hand in every event.

It's possible Mordecai received an appointment to a government position as a magistrate or judge because of Esther's influence. The "king's gate" was where people settled legal matters. His position probably enabled Mordecai to overhear the plot to assassinate the king.

Esther 3 Haman's Promotion and Proposal

Four years later, Ahasuerus advanced Haman to the highest government position in the empire—under the king. Haman was the portrait of a man who was haughty and imperious, proud, and cruel. Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him and revere him stirred up Haman's malice, not only against Mordecai, but against all his people, and he made use of his influence with the king to obtain authority to exterminate them. Haman's pride having been wounded and he wanted revenge. Ahasuerus permitted Haman to confiscate the Jews' wealth and to put them to death.

The delay of months in carrying out his annihilation was prompted by his desire to ensure the extermination was thorough. Yet, it gave time for all the events that led to the deliverance of the people of God. God controlled the lot-casting and gave the Jews almost a year to prepare for conflict with their enemies. They had time to prepare to defend themselves and hopefully not suffer as great a loss of life. The Jews later named their feast "Purim" in honor of the lots that Haman cast, but which the Lord controlled, as a tribute to God's sovereign protection.

Haman might have been successful in getting Mordecai executed. However, when he decided to wipe out the Jewish race God chose to bless, he pursued a course of action that would inevitably fail.

Esther 4 Esther Intervenes as Haman Plans Mordecai's death

The news of the intended slaughter reached Esther in the royal palace, and she asked about it. The law of the court prohibited her from approaching the king without his asking her in. Still, the urgency of the case required her to act.

She asked the people to fast with her. "If I perish, I perish." She decided to go to the king after strong pressure from Mordecai. Mordecai's question in verse 14 is the basis for the understanding that the doctrine of providence is the key to understanding this book. Without spelling out the detail in how he came to his convictions, he reveals that he believes in God, in God's guidance of individual lives, and in God's ordering of the world's political events whether those who seem to have the power acknowledge him or not."

Again, we see the care of God for His people and of His use of a natural means to deliver them.

Esther 5 The Plot is Exposed

Esther entered the king's court with what seemed a simple request. She invited the king and Haman to a banquet. Haman's pride is now seen as He gathered his friends and boasted about his wealth and advancement and that that he alone was invited to Esther's banquet with the king. Haman admitted to his friends that nothing else satisfied him while Mordecai remained in his way, not bowing or worshiping him. Acting on the advice of his wife and friends, he first erected gallows to hang Mordecai before the banquet was to begin.

This is a fascinating example of a sinner, glorying himself and hating both God and His people, an example of pride and arrogance that fills a sinner's heart. But Haman's plans are about to run head-on into the providence of God.