

February 2023

What's the Point....of Esther? Mark Garner

The book of Esther takes place in Persia, before Ezra and Nehemiah come to Judah. Among the exiles in Persia, young Esther (or Hadassah) is caught in the middle of the scheming and plotting by some of Persia's powerful individuals, a situation that leads her to walk by faith and that can also help us in our own walk with God.

For Such A Time As This (Overview Of Esther)

The book of Esther is unusual in that it never uses the name of God, and it doesn't tell us what specifically God is thinking or doing. In this way, it can help us learn how to walk by faith in our own times. Like Esther, sometimes we have to make choices without having a clear-cut answer. As Esther lets God guide her and help her, we too can continually seek God's guidance and help.

Esther finds herself in strange days in Persia (Esther 1-3). King Xerxes (reigned 486-465 BC) is well-known in ancient history, a rash, impulsive ruler who was often generous yet who also made some disastrous decisions. As the book begins, Xerxes gives into a moment's rage and pride to depose his queen, and when the king's misguided advisers next persuade him into following a bizarre plan to find a new queen, the young Esther is caught in this net.

Esther receives the very mixed blessing of becoming the queen of the unstable Xerxes, and God continues to watch over her. Her cousin and guardian Mordecai has been anxious for her, and he waits each day for news at the king's gate. When Mordecai uncovers an assassination attempt on Xerxes, he reports it, and later this act will come into play. Meanwhile, the cruel official Haman devises an appalling plan to eliminate Mordecai and the rest of the Israelites, as he easily persuades Xerxes by simply giving him a little flattery.

Though God's name isn't mentioned, we see his hand at work as he strengthens and guides those who seek him in truth (Esther 4-6). Esther is so secluded in the palace that she finds out about the plot only when she hears about Mordecai's distress, and she realizes that she has become queen "for such a time as this." God strengthens her heart; she risks seeing the king unasked and initiates a plan to expose Haman's malevolence, and she also asks Mordecai to have the Jews fast and pray. And at a key moment the king is reminded of Mordecai's faithful act that had gone unrecognized.

The book concludes with the series of events that leads to the Israelites being delivered from danger (Esther 7-10). As a result, the ensuing celebration is commemorated regularly as Purim, named after the 'pur' (the 'lot') that Haman used as part of his plot, as a reminder of God's faithful care for them, with one of its main features giving food to one another and giving to the impoverished.

Overall Thoughts

The calmness and faithfulness of Esther and Mordecai during these difficult times can help us through the things we too deal with. (And Xerxes and Haman show us some of the unfortunate aspects of human nature that we face in this world.) Then, in explaining the reasons behind the holiday of Purim, the events in Esther also remind us to take the time to appreciate how God has saved us and redeemed us through Jesus, as well as the many other ways he takes care of us.

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What's the Point....of Esther? Caleb Dillinger

Esther is a rather well known story, at least vaguely, but the themes, which ironically are the most important parts, tend to be less remembered. You may know the story, but you may not recall these major themes: sexism, racism, egotism, and identity.

The whole story takes place because King Xerxes, while drunk, was urged to show off the sexual features of his wife. When she refused, she was exiled. But how did you find a new queen for the king? They rounded up young, beautiful women, and prepped them for a year before they each got to spend personal one on one time with the king. Esther had no choice. This was not an audition. And it's not logical to assume she impressed the king by singing an opera song. This is not a great time to be a woman, let alone a Jewish woman.

Here enters the next major theme. The Jews are under the reign of Persia, and the assistant to the king, Haman, has serious grievances with a man named Mordecai, a Jew who had saved the king's life. Haman's grievance? Mordecai would not bow down to him. Talk about the third major theme now at work: Egotism. But it goes further. King Xerxes couldn't sleep one night, so he has someone read his greatest works and memories to him before he sleeps. Egotism, anyone? One of those memories: how Mordecai saved his life. This leads the king to honor Mordecai, which so enrages Haman he can stop at nothing to fulfill his mission of killing the Jews. He gets the king to sign a paper allowing anyone to kill Jews on a specific day.

Mordecai takes the news to Esther and urges her to confront the king. But there's a problem: no one is allowed before the king unless he calls for them. She would have to risk death in order to avoid death. Talk about a dilemma! But she gathers her courage, assumes not just her identity as a Jew but her identity as queen and wife to the king and tricks Haman to attend a banquet with her and the king where she reveals his plot. The king leaves in distress, and when he returns, Haman has thrown himself at Esther's, pleading for mercy, but all the king can see is another man physically too close to his wife. He kills Haman and counteracts the order by allowing Jews to defend themselves. They survive, and a feast, called Purim, is declared, that remains active to this day!

Beyond the narrative intrigue, why bother reading Esther? God's name isn't even in the book! But Christians ought to read this story for two main reasons. First, it shows what a kingdom should NOT look like. God's kingdom is not sexist, racist, egotistical, or violent. This is a good contrasting reminder of the world compared to God. But the second reason, the more well known reason, is that you cannot possibly read this story from a Christian (or Jewish) perspective, and not see God at work in the world. Esther just happens to be chosen out of thousands of women? Mordecai just happens to discover a plot to harm the king? Xerxes just happens to hear about an event years in the past and decides that night to honor Mordecai? Haman just happens to go to the king that very night? So many coincidences, it's too much to imagine it's coincidence! It must be God. Faithful readers will see God at work and marvel at the way God saves his people in need. That's the point of reading Esther.