

Bible Survey - Esther

by Peter Hammond

The sermon explores the Book of Esther, highlighting God's providence and the courage of Esther and Mordecai in the face of adversity.

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:1, Esther 2:17, Esther 4:14, Esther 7:9, Esther 9:32, Proverbs 20:1, Daniel 1:8, Matthew 10:32, 1 Corinthians 16:13, James 1:22

Topics: "Biblical Leadership", "Divine Providence"

Description

Peter Hammond preaches on the powerful drama and historical significance of the book of Esther, highlighting the colossal conflict between continents during Xerxes' reign and the capriciousness of his character. The sermon delves into the courage of Esther and the consequences of choices made by individuals like Mordecai and Haman, emphasizing the importance of seeking Divine guidance, understanding human nature, and being ready to take decisive action in times of difficulty. The narrative culminates in the catastrophic consequences of evil character and the establishment of the feast of Purim as a thanksgiving day for God's chosen people.

Transcript

"...who knows whether you have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14

The book of Esther is a dramatic and romantic historical novel. The powerful drama portrayed in Esther includes: intrigue, suspense, love, hatred, pride, conceit, malice, conspiracy, revenge, murder, duty, honour and courage.

A Colossal Conflict Between Continents

The historical backdrop to the book of Esther is one of the most famous and dramatic chapters in world history. Xerxes, the King of Persia, was about to launch his famous invasion of Europe. His father, Darius I, had been defeated by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon. The historian Herodotus informs us that the occasion for the great feast described in Esther 1 was for planning the campaign against Greece in the third year of Xerxes' reign.

Xerxes (king Ahasuerus) accumulated a massive army of reportedly 5 million men. Only 10% of these were Persians, the rest conscripted from the 127 provinces ruled by the Persian Empire. Xerxes' engineers used over 670 boats lashed together to form two bridges across the Hellespont, enabling his

huge army to march from Asia into Europe.

The Capriciousness of Xerxes

Indicating what a volatile individual Xerxes was, when a storm wrecked the first attempts of his engineers to complete the bridge across the channel, he ordered the Hellespont flogged and chained as punishment for its tempestuousness!

The War with the Greeks

Xerxes' mighty Persian army was held up most famously by the 300 courageous Spartans under King Leonidas at the pass of Thermoplae. Wave after wave of Persian troops were thrown against the heroic Spartans, but they had chosen their battleground well. The Persian weight of numbers counted for little in the narrow pass of Thermoplae. The skill, courage and strength of the Spartans frustrated every attempt to force the pass. Only the assistance of a Greek traitor, who guided Xerxes' soldiers through a precipitous mountain pass to outflank Leonidas' Spartans, enabled the Persian army to finally continue their southward march. Xerxes burned Athens, but then was decisively defeated by the Athenian navy at the battle of Salamis in 480BC.

With his naval re-supply ships destroyed, Xerxes had no option but to withdraw from Europe, Athens was rebuilt, and a century and a half later, Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire and burned Darius III's capital at Persepolis in 331BC. (The great palace of Xerxes at Persepolis where Esther spent much of her time, was excavated in 1930 by the Oriental Institute of Chicago. The grandeur of Xerxes' palaces can still be perceived in the vast halls and giant columns that archaeologists have uncovered both in Persepolis and Susa.)

Understanding the Times

Although the book of Esther occurs after Nehemiah in its order in the Bible, the events recorded in Nehemiah actually happened 30 years after Esther was crowned queen. The events in the book of Esther occur between chapter 6 and chapter 7 of Ezra. Perhaps because of the book being written in Persia, the no doubt sensitive issues of its catastrophic defeats in Greece are not directly mentioned in this book. However, that was the historical backdrop. Xerxes' father Darius I had been defeated at Marathon. When Xerxes attempted to complete what his father had begun in seeking to subjugate Greece, his aspirations were frustrated with the battles of Thermoplae and Salamis. The invasion of Greece occurred immediately after chapter 1 of Esther.

Chapter 2 begins with the word: "Later..." It was four years after Vashti was deposed and two years after Xerxes' army had been frustrated at the battles of Thermoplae and Salamis in Greece that he married Esther.

Esther was the Queen of Persia for thirteen years. Esther lived for many years into the reign of her stepson Artaxerxes, under whom Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. It was no doubt Esther and Mordecai's influence that created the situation in which Nehemiah received the support of Artaxerxes for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1-9).

The Finger of God

Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman. The great Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, notes that while the Name of God is not mentioned in the book of Esther, the finger of God is everywhere evident, "The Romance of Providence."

God and His People

While many in Israel may have felt that God was silent at the time of their captivity, it was evident that God was with them, even in exile in Babylon and Persia. When the prophets were silent and the temple was closed, God was still watching over His people. While the kings of the earth feasted and forgot, God remembered, and with His Hand He wrote their doom, or moved their hands to work according to His perfect Will.

The book of Esther begins with a feast of the world's prince - Xerxes. It closes with a feast of God's prince - Mordecai. For a while the enemy of God's people, Haman, is exalted, but at the end Mordecai is exalted. In Esther, we see that God always has His man, or His woman, at the best place, at the right time. God had positioned Joseph in slavery, and in prison, in Egypt in order to save His people from famine. God had ordered matters so that Moses was brought up, even in the household of Pharaoh, to set His people free from slavery in Egypt. God prepared David, even as a shepherd boy to lead His people Israel, and God prepared Daniel to be His witness in Babylon and Persia.

The Background of Esther

Esther is the original, real life inspiration for the Cinderella stories. Although Esther's family would have been of noble birth as Nebuchadnezzar led the nobles of Israel away into captivity in Babylon when he captured Jerusalem, Esther was brought up in poverty, and raised in obscurity. As her parents had died, she was raised by her elder cousin Mordecai, who was a keeper of the gate at the Persian palace at Susa.

It is important to study the book of Esther, because it gives us a link in God's plan of Redemption, an important chapter in the history of the people through whom the Messiah came. Secondly the characters in the book of Esther portray most vividly the consequences of both good actions and evil actions.

The Feast of Xerxes

The story begins in the third year of Xerxes reign, in his winter capital, Shushan (Susa), the citadel. For 180 days he has a conference with his officials and nobles, the princes of all the 127 provinces under him. Xerxes showed them "the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendour of his excellent majesty..." Esther 1:4. No doubt this was in preparation for their coming invasion of Europe.

The Capriciousness of Xerxes

Then he held a seven-day feast. "They served drinks... with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king... According to each man's pleasure... on the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine" Esther 1:7-10, Xerxes ordered Queen Vashti "to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold." Not surprisingly, Queen Vashti refused to be paraded before drunken men. She was hosting a feast of her own for the women in the royal palace (Esther 1:9).

Here we see the capriciousness of Xerxes as he allows his advisers to persuade him to summarily depose and exile the queen.

The Scripture warns us: "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise." Proverbs 20:1

"Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat." Proverbs 23:20

"It is better not to... drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall." Romans 14:21

"It is not for kings... not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer." Proverbs 31:4

How many rash and foolish decisions have been made by individuals while they are drunk, which they would never have made while sober? It is noteworthy that Daniel "resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine." Daniel 1:8

First Recorded Beauty Competition

After the disastrous defeat of Xerxes' forces in Europe, the king's servants proposed a national beauty competition. "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king; and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel,...and let beauty preparations be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." Esther 2:2-4

The Scripture tells us that Esther "was lovely and beautiful." (2:7). When the king's custodian, Hegai, met Esther "she obtained his favour... and he moved her and her maidservants to the best place..." (2:8-9).

After Esther had completed twelve months' beauty preparations "six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes in preparations for beautifying women" (2:12) she was ready to be brought before the king. "And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all who saw her." (2:15).

We read that: "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king made a great feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in all the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of the king." Esther 2:17-18

A Conspiracy Exposed

At about this time while Mordecai sat in the gates, he overheard two of the king's doorkeepers plotting to assassinate the king. Esther passed on Mordecai's warning to the king. An enquiry was made and the conspirators were executed (2:21-23).

The Arrogance of Haman

At about this time we're introduced to Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, and the king advanced him above all his princes. Haman expected everyone to bow and pay homage to him. However, Mordecai, being a Jew, would not bow or pay homage to any man. "When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the kingdom..." Esther 3:5-6

Mordecai's refusal to pay reverence to Haman dealt a blow to his pride. This wounded pride grew into hatred and an insatiable desire for revenge. Swelled with vanity, and bitterly humiliated, Haman plotted the

destruction of the entire Hebrew race. To determine the day his enemy should be destroyed he cast lots, which fell on the thirteenth day of Adar (March), just ten months away (Esther 3:7).

The Cruelty of Haman

Now Haman sought to misinform the king in order to obtain his consent. "Then Haman said to king Xerxes, 'There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; they are also different from all other peoples, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries.' So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you.'" (3:8-11).

Here we see how pride, rooted in selfishness, can lead to hatred, revenge and murder. Of course, what Haman could not have seen at the time, was that the final result of his vengeful pride would be his own destruction.

The Counsel of Mordecai

We have seen the capriciousness of Xerxes and the cruelty of Haman. In chapter 4 we see the counsel of Mordecai. When Mordecai heard of the decree to kill all the Jews in the kingdom, he put on sackcloth and ashes, which has always been associated with repentance and turning to God.

Mordecai informed the queen and counselled her: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet, who knows, whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther 4:13-14

The Courage of Esther

"Then Esther told him to reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Sushan and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night, or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king which is against the law; and if I perish I perish.'" Esther 4:15-16

In chapter 5 we see the courage of Esther. Esther accepted the challenge and counsel of Mordecai. Here we see her decisiveness, her resolution and courageous action. She mobilises the people to prayer. Prayer moves the hand that moves the world. She is willing to risk her life by going in, unsummoned, to Xerxes. Remembering how capricious Xerxes could be, and how he had deposed Vashti for not coming when he had called, she knew that the penalty for anyone to appear before the king unsummoned was instant death. Yet she determined that, even though it was against the law, she would go into the king "and if I perish, I perish!"

It is most impressive that Esther had not been spoiled by her great beauty being recognised, nor by her coronation as queen of the greatest empire of her day. She had not allowed the luxuries of her surroundings to turn her to selfishness. She was willing to risk it all, and her life itself, to do her duty for her people.

There is always something we must do. We need to do what is right, to do our duty and to leave the results to God. We are commanded to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves." To "rescue those being led away to death", to "care for widows and orphans in their distress", to "love our neighbour as ourselves." To "take up our cross, to deny ourselves, to forsake the world and to follow Christ." To "submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee" from us.

No one could tell what this fickle monarch would do, but Esther was determined to do her duty, no matter what the cost. The name "Esther" means star and she certainly plays a stellar role in the constellation of God's people. Esther is a magnificent example of humility, modesty, obedience, courage, loyalty and constancy.

We also see her wisdom. She had to move carefully, she was dealing with powerful and sinister forces. So, prudent as well as fearless, when queen Esther received the outstretched sceptre from Xerxes and his warm offer to give her whatever she asked for, she merely asked for Haman and the king to join her for dinner. "If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king had said." (5:8)

The Pettiness of Haman

"So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with indignation against Mordecai." (5:9)

At home Haman boasted of his great riches and of the favour he had received in the eyes of the king, and now even of the queen. "Yet, all of this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." (5:13)

It is an amazing thing how a person who has everything, in terms of the world's fame and fortune, prestige and power, can become so completely obsessed as to be blinded to everything else. (Have ever seen some birds in your back garden fighting over a crumb when there is an abundance of other crumbs, enough for all the birds? Yet three will fight over one single crumb and the other two will fly off after the one who finally gets the crumb, leaving, uneaten, so many other crumbs of bread on the grass! So it is with all too many people.) Blinded by jealousy, envy, malice and hatred, many people are blind to their own blessings because of the resentment they have for another person.

Haman's wife, Zeresh, and his friends, advised that he build a gallows 75 feet high in order to hang Mordecai on it.

The Consequences of Choices

Now in chapter 6 we see the consequences of choices. That night the king could not sleep, so he commanded one of his attendants to read The Chronicles of the kingdom. When he was reminded of the action of Mordecai in alerting him to the conspiracy to assassinate him, Xerxes asked: "What honour or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's attendants told him "Nothing has been done for him."

A Reversal of Fortunes

Now at this crucial point Haman entered the outer court of the king's palace to suggest that the king hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. But before he could ask, the king asked Haman: "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honour?" Haman, supremely vain, thought in his heart "Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?" So Haman answered the king: "For the man whom the king delights to honour, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's noblest princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honour. Then parade him on horseback through the city square and proclaim before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!' Then the king said to Haman, 'Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king's gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken.'"

One can only imagine the shock, shame and confusion of Haman as the tables were turned and he found himself compelled to honour the Mordecai whom he hated and wanted to murder, to honour his enemy in a way that he had hoped to be honoured himself.

When Haman hurried back to his house, mourning and with his head covered, he bewailed what had happened to him to his wife and friends. They ominously responded: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him." (6:13). Pride comes before a fall.

While they were still talking the king's officials arrived and hastened to escort Haman to the banquet, which Esther had prepared.

The Catastrophic Consequences of Evil Character

So the king and Haman went to dine with queen Esther. The king asked: "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!"

Then Queen Esther answered and said: "'If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss.' King Xerxes demanded: 'Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?' And Esther said: 'The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!' So Haman was terrified before the king and queen. The king rose up in anger and went into the palace garden. Haman stood before the queen pleading for his life. As Haman fell across the couch where Esther was, the king returned and thundered 'Will he also assault the queen while I am in the house?' As the word left the king's mouth, the servants covered Haman's face. And Harbonah, one of the servants said to the king 'Look! the gallows, 50 cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king's behalf, is standing at the house of Haman.' Then the king said, 'Hang him on it!' So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai." Esther 7:9-10. What a mans sows, that shall he reap.

The Culmination of Strong Character

Esther is one of the greatest heroines in all of history, because she served with such wisdom and insight, with such intelligence and courage. One commentator writes: "As an historical character, Esther is the supreme heroine who delivers her nation from disaster; as a woman she is that rare individual, a mixture

of charm, strength and guile; a human being whose character is secure from the rot of wealth, prosperity and power."

We see the catastrophe of evil character and the culmination of strong character. The king promotes Mordecai to the position so recently occupied by Haman. Although a law of the Medes and the Persians cannot be rescinded, the king authorises Mordecai to issue a new edict, allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. What Haman had planned to be a great massacre of God's people is turned into a tremendous victory for God's people and a catastrophic defeat for the Agagites. What King Saul had failed to deal with hundreds of years before with the Agagites had almost destroyed God's people.

The Feast of Purim

There are 3 feasts in Esther: the feast of Xerxes, the feast of Esther and the feast of Purim. The book of Esther closes with the account of the establishment of the feast of Purim, a thanksgiving day for God's chosen people. Although they had forsaken God, He had spared them. To this day the Purim festival is celebrated on the 14th and 15th of March when the roll of Esther is read in synagogues all over the world.

"So the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim and it was recorded in the book." (9:32).

We Reap What We Sow

The book of Esther shows us that what we sow we shall reap.

The book of Esther shows us that transitory nature of earthly grandeur and the disastrous consequences of all ill-gotten power and possessions.

Esther teaches us to seek Divine guidance in times of difficulty; to learn to understand human nature so as to know how best to advance the cause; to be ready to renounce self and be decisive in speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves. To value and seek the co-operation of fellow believers.

It was in the reign of her stepson Artaxerxes that Nehemiah received permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus Christ is building His Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

God uses individuals. God preserves His people. God intervenes in history.

A Call to Decisive Action

We all need to heed the counsel of Mordecai. When the time comes to speak, we dare not remain silent. When the time comes to stand up, we must not remain seated. When the time comes to step out, we dare not hold back. We need to be ready to "contend for the Faith", to "fight the good fight of Faith", to stand up for Jesus and to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves".

May each one of us learn from the resolute faith and courageous example of Esther who decisively declared: "And I will go... and if I perish, I perish!"

"Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Why have you come into the Kingdom?

What is God calling you to do?

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