

## ESTHER SERMON SERIES & STUDY GUIDE

The book of Esther is nestled in at the end of the Old Testament books of history. Like the rest of the history books, this one too is a narrative that tells the story of the One True and Living God and His relationship with the covenant people we call Israel. Yet, unlike the others, this book is not situated in the Jewish homeland and capital of Jerusalem, nor is the focus on a series of kings and rulers and the arc of God's people. This story focuses in on two key Jewish characters living in the middle of the Persian Empire, around 750 miles from Jerusalem in the time after the Babylonian Empire. Mordecai is a simple servant of the king and his niece Esther, an orphan whom he raised. Through a random series of events, Esther becomes queen and Mordecai ends up exalted to the place of the second in command in Persia. There are also a few Persian characters of importance in the story, including the King Ahasuerus, who is also known in history as Xerxes I. This king is a significant world ruler, one you would study in a history class, and is best known for the attack on Greece that gave us the movie *300*. And there is Haman, a member of the king's cabinet who institutes a plot designed to annihilate the Jewish people. The potential end of these people both in Persia, and around the world, even in their homeland of Israel is the central question in the book. Yet, one character is conspicuously absent. As we read Esther what we will find is that this is the only book in Scripture with no reference to God or any interaction with Him.

So where is God? While He is not named, God is definitely not absent. In fact, He is the central character in this wonderful story, but He is always in the shadows. Yet, the story demonstrates the sovereign rule of God accomplishing His glorious purposes and the keeping of His promises. Esther is a story with two great, Gospel-rich themes. First, the providential sovereignty of God is on full display. The story told in the book seems to be a winding tale of random events. Yet, by the end of the book we realize that these random, coincidental events lead to the deliverance and rescue of God's people from this evil genocidal plot. This, then resulting in the exaltation of Esther to the place of queen and Mordecai as a high cabinet member of the king, giving these two Hebrews considerable influence in the reigning world superpower. Second, we see God using ordinary and flawed people to tell His redemptive story and accomplish His purpose. With no Mordecai and no Esther a mass killing of the Jews would mean that there is no Jesus, and God would have proven to be unfaithful in His promises and unable to defend the Jews from this king. Instead we see God who both orchestrates these events, moves even through the dreams of the king, and uses even flawed people who honor Him for His glory.

Ultimately, this book is in the Hebrew Bible (and therefore ours) to tell this great story and give the Jewish people an understanding of this rescue and a significant holiday celebration that is still remembered to this day. Purim is a Spring time festival among the Jews, occurring in the last month of their calendar, the month of Adar. For those who celebrate, Purim is a joy-filled remembrance of the story in Esther. The celebration includes dressing up in costumes, giving gifts to each other, sharing a meal and taking a meal to the poor, and even parades and parties. In the midst, people read the book of Esther, often reading it dramatically, even using children to act the book out, remembering their deliverance from wicked Haman and the Persians. As the story is told, children will use noisemakers called groggers each time Haman's name is mentioned, while everyone in the crown will boo and hiss to drown out his name. And of course, they cheer for Mordecai and Esther. Interestingly, the first month of the Jewish year

has the celebration of the Passover remembering God's deliverance from Egypt and Pharaoh, and the last month has the celebration of Purim remembering God's deliverance from Persia and the wicked Haman.

But there is a greater purpose in this book, as it gives us important history leading up to the time of Jesus. The Jews were scattered around the world in the Babylonian exile. Some returned home, while the majority stay in places like Babylon and Susa in what is called the Diaspora. The Jews who return to Israel rebuild the homeland and begin Temple worship again. It is into this place, Israel a few hundred years later that Jesus will be born. But in other places Jews are influencers, involved in commerce and even governance (like Mordecai and Esther). As they live faithfully to their God in these places, God will use them to till the dirt preparing for the coming message of the Gospel. By the time of the book of Acts what we find is that there are faithful Jewish communities in almost every Roman city who have been reading and even translating the Scriptures, celebrating their holy days, building synagogues for worship, and longing for the day that the Messiah will come. It is into these places that the Gospel goes in the book of Acts. The story of Esther not only shows us how God delivered His people, but also sets the stage for the benevolent place of influence for Haman and Esther which gives the Jews favor in this and other following empires. In the end, this very event sets the stage for the missionary efforts of Paul and the other Apostles as they, as Jews take the Gospel to the whole world.

### **Author**

Like most of the historical books, Esther is actually anonymous. Based on some language and historical clues, it seems as if the book was written shortly after the events told in the story. It is possible that Mordecai might have penned the book, but there is no way to be certain of the author. Yet, God is the Divine Author who inspired all of Scripture, and as such, this book sits in the Canon of Scripture as part of God's revelation of Himself.

### **Setting, Time & Events**

The book gives us specific information about the events tying the story to a very specific and known moment in history. The story of Esther takes place during the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus, A.K.A. Xerxes (see above) who ruled from 485-464 BC. This takes place during the period of both Biblical and World history known as the Persian Empire. To understand this and how it affected the Jews, we have to start a few generations before and learn about the Diaspora.

The Old Testament story is about God and His chosen people, whom we know as the Hebrews, Israelites, or Jews. Their key ancestor was Abraham, whom God called and made a myriad of promises which included that he would be the father of a great nation, that this nation would be given a land or promise, and that God would bless and even fight for these people as long as they lived in a right covenant relationship with Him. God then rescued the descendants of Abraham who were slaves in Egypt under the leadership of Moses and delivered them to this Promised Land which He gave them. The story then follows the hundreds of years history of these people, including a series of ruling kings living in what is modern day Israel. Central to understanding their story though, is that they are never faithful to the covenant with God, yet God is faithful to them. Eventually, after millennia of prophetic warnings, God brings the discipline of judgment to His people in the form of the Babylonian Exile. Between 605-535 BC the Hebrew people are torn from their homes and this land given by God and forced to live in Babylon, close to 1,000 miles away in what is modern day Iraq. The story in the book of Daniel

is tied to this period of time known as the Babylonian Exile. Yet, during this period God sent His prophets who promised the eventual downfall of Babylon and the return of His people to the Promised Land. In fact, Jeremiah predicted that the full time in Babylon would be 70 years (take note of the years listed above for the dates of this time period). The rise of the Persian Empire and its first ruler, Cyrus the Great shifted both world and Jewish history, as Babylon was overthrown. Cyrus, and the other following Persian kings gave peoples who had been in exile, including the Jews the freedom and resources to return to their homelands, rebuild their cities, and rebuild their Temples. Scholars call this era in Hebrew history the period of Restoration and Return, as three waves of Jews pack up from Babylon and Persia and head back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, the Temple, and the protective walls around Jerusalem. These stories are told in Ezra and Nehemiah as well as the prophetic books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

At the same time, the majority of Jews in exile did not return to Jerusalem and Israel. They remained dispersed all over the middle east, eventually spreading all over the world. This phenomena is called the *Diaspora*, a term referring to the spread of the Jews to places all over the world after the Babylonian captivity. On one level, the failure to return to Israel was an act of unfaithfulness as they chose to remain living as exiles and aliens in foreign cultures rather than heading back to their homeland. Yet, by this time they are second, third, and fourth generation Jewish people living in these contexts and cultures. And while they may not have fully faithful to God's Law and covenant, God is faithful to them in accomplishing His purpose for and through them. There are two amazing truths that reveal God's faithfulness to His promises and purposes through the Diaspora. First, even though they live in these foreign contexts, these people never lose their distinctiveness as a people. In fact, this is a truth that is an amazing apologetic for the God of the Bible even to our time, the fact that these people who are descendants of Abraham have maintained their identity and heritage, not just into the Persian Empire but through today. What other culture has spread all over the world and yet has never lost their identity to the melting pots of the world. Heidi and I know a woman who did an Ancestry.com DNA test finding out she is of 100% Jewish descent. That is crazy. You can't find a Hittite or Philistine that still exists. But God has maintained the distinctiveness of His people. The second reality though, is that these people suffer persecution and hatred around the world. God seem silent when this happens. Yet, the story of the Jewish people throughout history continues to be a key marker to see the work of the One True Living God in the world, even through the worst circumstances. The same is true in the church of Christ. God may seem silent in persecution and threat, yet, He is always working silently for His people to display His glory so that the Gospel of His Son can be known. Esther, then, is a snapshot story about Jewish people living in the Diaspora. The characters in the story are Jews living simple lives in the Persian capitol of Susa when they get swept up into the events of world history, as this simple Jewish girl ends up being the Queen for the most powerful ruler in the world in her day, and her uncle who through a series of "random" events ends up being the King's Chief of Staff. Along the way they save the Jews from an awful, Hitler-esque attempt at genocide and give the Jewish people a reason to celebrate this deliverance, a celebration they continue to our current day!

### **Key theme**

As mentioned, this book is bizarre because it does not mention God, the Torah or the Covenant, Hebrew worship and practice, or anything else related to the worship of Jehovah. Some have gone as far as calling Esther a purely secular book and Purim a secular holiday. Yet, this

approach to Esther denies two things. First, the very structure of the book and what it is seeking to display, and second, its place in the storyline of Scripture. In both cases, the silence and perceived absence of God in the pages of Esther does not mean He is not present, nor that the author is seeking to avoid speaking of Him. Rather, this is a brilliant literary device pointing us to the great theological truth of God's providence. Providence refers to the unseen hand of God working in all things to accomplish His will for His glory and the good of His people. We live in a universe where the evidence of God is on display, but God Himself is unseen. In our most difficult and darkest seasons of suffering and threat it can be difficult to find God and see His hand. Yet, the Scriptures both teach and show God orchestrating all of history and our very own lives to intentionally accomplish His will, keeping His promises, working justices, and giving grace to His people. We need stories like Esther and the story of Joseph in Genesis that reveal the beauty of providence, God's work in the shadows.

So the book of Esther is written in such a way that the absence of God pushes us to look for the hand of God at work. At first, it seems as if evil will win, God's people will be destroyed, and hope is lost. But the story tells of a series of coincidences, random events, and ironic reversals that "just happen" to take place and "just happen" to line up in a certain order and certain way. The whole point of the book is that these random events and coincidences are the finger prints of God left around the room to prove that he was there and is really the One acting to tell His story through the events. In fact, the inspired author writes in such a way that we are designed to see this through deeper study of the book. Upon first reading, the book itself seems random and coincidental. Yet, further review shows a structure scholars call a chiasm, which is ordering events of a story around a mirror, with the key moment being a mirror-hinge. The first part of the story builds toward the climax in a series of steps, and the rest of the story reversing the steps. The Bible Project website states it this way, "The book of Esther is designed in perfect symmetry. Right down to every scene, you'll find key-words and scenes that match the keywords in their partner scenes on the other side of the symmetry." This is their outline of the book based on this chiasm and symmetry.<sup>1</sup>

- A The splendor of the Persian king + Two banquets [1:1-8]
- B Esther becomes Queen + Mordecai saves the king [1:9-2:20 + 2:21-23]
- C Haman elevated to power [3:1-6]
- D Haman's decree to destroy the Jewish people [3:7-15]
- E Esther and Mordecai's plan to reverse the decree [4:1-17]
- F Esther's 1st banquet + Haman plans Mordecai's execution [5:1-8 + 5:9-14]
- X - PIVOT: Haman humiliated & Mordecai exalted [6:1-14]
- F' Esther's 2nd banquet + Haman executed instead of Mordecai [7:1-10]
- E' Esther and Mordecai plan to reverse the decree [8:1-8]
- D' Mordecai's counter-decree to save the Jewish people [8:9-14]
- C' Mordecai elevated to power [8:15-17]
- B' Queen Esther and Mordecai save the Jewish people [9:1-19]
- A' Two feasts + The splendor of Mordecai [9:20-32 + 10:1-3]

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<sup>1</sup>From <https://bibleproject.com/blog/esther-secular-sacred/>

The very structure of the book is designed to point us to God's providence in keeping His promises to preserve for Himself a people, and His very purposeful use of Esther and Haman to accomplish His will.

Furthermore, Esther sits in the Old Testament Canon as a part of God's unfolding story of His saving purpose through the descendants of Abraham. We cannot read this or any Old Testament story by itself, it is part of God's unfolding revelation that is tied to Creation, the Fall, God's covenant with Abraham, His rescue of Israel, and His promises to them as a nation about a future Messianic King who would usher in God's Kingdom in the very city of Jerusalem. The reader has to know of these promises and the future hope for this Messiah. While the book itself does not mention the coming of Jesus nor these promises, the author of the book is aware as is Mordecai that deliverance of the Jews has to come (Esther 4:14). Why this assurance? This is not wishful thinking by Mordecai, it is the moment where this book is clearly ties the narrative of Esther to the grander narrative of the Bible. If deliverance does not come, then the Jews will be exterminated, Jerusalem will be uninhabited, and the promise of a future Messianic King will ring untrue. This moment in history revolving around the wicked man Haman and the drunk king Ahasuerus puts the very faithfulness of God and His ability to keep His promises in plain view. If Haman is successful, then the God of the Bible is nothing more than a little territorial God who is not able to thwart wicked men who serve other gods. So there is a promise, deliverance will come, even if Esther does not stand up and go in to the King. So, even though the name of God is not mentioned, the story is a grand narrative of God defending the glory of His Name while keeping His promises and delivering His people.

### **Sermon schedule, texts, titles, themes**

#### **Sermon 1 (August 15) - Esther 9:20-10:3 - *Providence over Rolling Dice***

We are going to begin our study of Esther at the end, with the celebration of Purim and the ascension of Esther and Mordecai to lofty positions. By doing so we can lay out the purpose of the book, grand story, key characters, and major themes. The purpose of the book in part is to explain the celebration of Purim to the Jewish people and remind them of deliverance. The themes then are God's providence, or His often unseen yet sovereign control over all things, and His gracious inclusion of flawed people to accomplish His eternal purpose.

#### **Sermon 2 (August 22) - Esther 1:1-22 - *Providence over Kingdoms and Thrones***

The Esther story begins with an introduction of King Ahasuerus and the Persian Kingdom seated in Susa, and his Queen Vashti. This king believes in his own greatness, so much so that without much thought he banishes his queen for failure to parade herself in front of his drunk friends at his party. Yet, this king is nothing more than a pawn in the greater story of God, history, and redemption. So, to understand this moment we have to look at this amazing book in light of the story of the world empires of Babylon and Persia and see that God used both of these kingdoms for His greater purpose in advancing His Kingdom. What we will see is that all kingdoms believe in their own greatness, yet they are in place because of God's sovereignty and are nothing more than blips on the radar in God's eternal purpose.

#### **Sermon 3 (August 29) - Nehemiah 4:15-18 - *A Sword and a Trowel***

We take a one week break in our Esther series to look at a book telling the story of God's people back in their homeland at roughly the same time. The story of Nehemiah is about a building

project, specifically the building of the walls around Jerusalem. These walls would make Jerusalem a safe place for worship, raising of families, and commerce. More importantly, this city is the center of God's mission at the time. As we jump in to Fall as a church, we too are facing a potential building project. The purpose of this sermon is to cast vision for our church for the coming year. Like the builders in Nehemiah's time, we want to be people working on the wall with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. The trowel for building, the sword to fight for the Kingdom and advance the mission.

#### **Sermon 4 (September 5) - Esther 2:1-18- *Providence over Life's Details***

The two main characters enter the story. First is Mordecai, a Jew who is a direct descendent of exiles who were deported from Israel to Babylon around 114 years before the events of this book. He is a normal Jew working at the King's Gate in Susa, the capitol city. He is also the guardian of little orphan Esther, a young and beautiful Jewish woman living in the same city at the same time. The chapter is filled with a crazy declaration by the King and his henchmen leading to the awful use and abuse of women by this king. Esther is caught up in that, but ends up finding favor with her caretaker and eventually the king himself. Mordecai and Esther represent the most unlikely of rescuers for the Jews, and their lives seem random and out of control. Yet every detail has been orchestrated for the deliverance of the Jews. And at the same time this is a reminder that the random and even broken aspects of our own lives are under the sovereign care of our Redeemer and God.

#### **Sermon 5 (September 12) - Esther 2:19-3:15 - *Providence over Plans and Plots***

The story takes us to two back room meetings where two sets of plans were devised resulting in two murderous plots. The first, an assassination plan against the king just happened to be overheard by Mordecai as he went about his business at the gate. The second, a wicked and jealous plan to exterminate the Jews, on the other hand, is caused by Mordecai's unwillingness to treat Haman as a god and leads to a sinister plan to exterminate the Jews. Evil plans have always existed, and many get carried out. But in the end, no back room discussion is outside of ear shot of our God. God laughs at the planned attempts to thwart His purpose and destroy His people (Psalm 37:12-13), and in the end it is only the purpose of God that will stand and not our plans. (Proverbs 19:21)

#### **Sermon 6 (September 19) - Esther 4:1-17 - *Providence and Prayerful Courage***

The story comes to a key moment for Esther. She is the queen, and has privileges, but stepping before the king could cost her life. On the other hand, evil Haman secured the king's decree setting a day for a genocide of the Jews by the Persians. In this text we see how God accomplishes His purposes from the shadows, by raising up people for such a time as this and strategically placing them as representatives of His Kingdom within the other kingdoms of the world. He will deliver the Jews, but Esther is the queen for this very moment.

#### **Sermon 7 (September 26) - Esther 5:1-14 - *Providence in Humility and Pride***

This chapter sets the two key characters in deep contrast. Esther puts her life on the line as she in faith comes to the king with the goal of making Haman's plot known. She is humbly obedient to God's plan and enters the king's presence humbly. Haman on the other hand is the epitome of arrogance and self-exalting pride. God is sovereign, His plan will be accomplished. Yet, our

relationship to His Kingdom is determined by whether we submit to Christ as King in humble faith, or oppose this Kingdom through self-centered pride.

**Sermon 8 - (October 3) - Esther 6:1-13 - *Providence in Glory and Honor***

This chapter is one of the great plot twists in all literature and in all history, and is the moment that begins the great reversal in the Esther story. We are not given the reasons Esther waited another day to throw another banquet, but what we do know is that in this break in time God, turned the tables. A random sleepless night and random bedtime reading reminded the king that he had never honored Mordecai. This is the beginning of Mordecai's honor and Haman's downfall. But more than this, the story reminds us that God is always at work bringing glory to Himself in the story of history, and He does this by lifting the lowly.

**Sermon 9 - (October 10) - Esther 6:14-7:10 - *Providence in the Defeat of His Enemies***

The story comes to a climax, as Haman's plot is exposed, the king sides with Esther, and even as Haman begs for his life he just happens to trip and fall on Esther making the king believe Haman was trying to assault the queen. Haman's demise is one of a number of stories in the Biblical narrative reminding us that the enemies of God and His people will eventually fall, and that God will vindicate His glory. Furthermore, all of these point to the cross where Christ defeated our ultimate enemies and the Second Coming of Jesus where the final victory will be sure and all enemies of the Gospel will meet God's justice.

**Sermon 10 - (October 17) - Esther 8:1-17 - *Providence in Salvation***

The Old Testament contains the story of God's salvation through the covenant with Israel. While they were not faithful, God was, and the story of Esther continues this narrative. God saved His people through two unlikely heroes, one who put her life on the line, and the other had a wooden stake prepared for him and was on his way to execution. While God's name is not mentioned in the book, God delivered His people from this horrible genocide, keeping His promises to them. But more importantly, these people were the vehicle for the Promised Messiah. We like Mordecai face a gallows, and we too had someone die in our place there. But in our case it was not the wicked Haman, rather the righteous Jesus who gave His life freely for us. In this way, Esther is an echo of the salvation we have in Christ. And interesting enough, the story here points us to the missionary purpose of all salvation, as the nations are included in God's plan for salvation.

**Sermon 11 (October 24) - Esther 9:1-19 - *Providence in V'Nahafoch Hu***

"The reverse occurred." This Hebrew phrase comes from Esther 9:1 and is translated in the ESV this way. It literally means "it was turned upside down" or "the opposite happened". When Jews celebrate Purim this phrase is at the center of the party. The kingdoms of this world seek to control and rule with power, influence, oppression, and fear. Yet, in the end, they all come and go. Persia is long gone, as is Greece and Rome who replaced it. But in Persia lived the people of a different Kingdom whose King is always at work, even if in the shadows. There is always an upside down world, a Kingdom who works through weakness rather than power, love rather than fear, humility and grace rather than oppression and abuse. It is an upside down, inside out, forward back Kingdom that always stands against human kingdoms and powers. And this Kingdom will not fall, and will have the final say.