

God's Big Story: How God Works Behind the Scenes Esther 1-10

**A sermon by Dr. Calvin Warpula
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Today we are continuing our study God's Big Story from creation to eternity with him in the heavenly world. We are looking at a book of ten chapters and 167 verses in the Old Testament that is very unusual but applicable to us now. This is the book of Esther, one of the two books in the Bible named after a woman. The book of Esther is in the Bible, the word of God, and is the word of God, but it does not mention God at all. God is nowhere named in the book, nor or there any pronouns or oblique references to him. Yet, I hope you will see today that God is at work behind the scenes and that that even though his name is not there, he is on every page. Esther has no miracles, no prophecies, no sermons, no animal sacrifices, no prayers, no worship, no temple, and only one mention of Jerusalem and Judah, and that is in a historical reference referring to a man's ancestral family.

This book is applicable to you today and you should be interested in it very much because, while without external signs like miracles, God is at work in people's lives, in events, and in nations. You may wonder today, "Where is God?" I don't see him. I don't hear him." You may wonder if he is still present and working in our world and in your life. You also see and hear the evil of the world. The news is filled with stories of murder, deceit, lying, corruption, family disintegration, war, and thefts, so much so that you may wonder, "Where is God in all this mess?" I've got some answers for you today from the book of Esther in the Old Testament.

The book of Esther reads like a modern-day soap opera. It is an intriguing drama that has been portrayed in the movies.

The Historical Background of Esther

The book of Esther is set in the Persian Empire during the reign of King Xerxes, 486-465 B.C. You remember that in 539 B.C. Cyrus of the

Persians conquered the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus ruled an empire that stretched from India near the border of China all the way to Greece and from the Caspian Sea to Egypt and Ethiopia. The Persian Empire ruled most of the then-known civilized world. Cyrus released all the Jews from captivity and gave them freedom to go home back to Judah and Jerusalem if they chose. About 50,000 of them returned but many thousands of others stayed where they were. After all, they had been transported there seventy years before by Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians and had well established themselves in schools, homes, farms gardens, businesses, and government and community positions. Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren had been born there. They were 700 miles from their ancestral home and wanted to stay where they were.

Among those that stayed were an older Jew named Mordecai and his adopted, younger cousin, Esther. Esther's parents had died and Mordecai had taken her into his home. Mordecai was established in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. The year is now 481 B.C. Cyrus had died, had been succeeded by his son, and then succeeded by his son-in-law, Darius the Great. Darius died in 486 B.C. and now his son, Xerxes, is on the throne. The Greek historian, Herodotus, in writing about the Persians describes Xerxes as an egotistical, impatient, and hardnosed ruler who was known to kill his admirals and generals when they failed in military and naval campaigns.

Xerxes wanted to conquer the Greeks and further extend his empire westward. His father, Darius the Great, had tried this feat but had been defeated. Xerxes was now going to attempt what his father failed to do. He ruled over 127 satraps or districts that comprised the most powerful empire in the world. He gathered the largest army in the world, over a million soldiers. He equipped 1200 ships. In 481 B.C. he threw a six-month party of feasting and drinking for all his governors and military leaders. He did this to build up their morale and courage and to make his battle plans to wage war against Greece.

In the midst of this mass glutinous, drunken feast, Xerxes ordered his queen, Vashti, to appear before the lustful, leering eyes of these alcohol-soaked leaders so they could see her beauty. Vashti refused. She would not parade before this motley crowd of lustful men. She refused the king's orders. Xerxes rules a million men, 127 satraps, 1200 ships, and the most powerful empire in the world yet his own queen will not obey his orders. Afraid that this would set a precedent to liberate women throughout Persia, Xerxes deposes her and banishes her from his sight.

Xerxes goes ahead with his military campaign against Greece. He conquers and burns Athens. The Greeks fight to the death for their homeland. Xerxes' ships are gathered in the Bay of Salamis for the big naval battle against the outmanned, smaller ships of the Greeks. A storm blows up. The hurricane-like winds beat and destroy Xerxes' mighty navy. The Greeks rally and drive the Persians from their land. After two years of war, Xerxes goes home a defeated, dejected king.

Esther Selected as Queen of the Persians

Xerxes stays home and gives himself to building palaces and additions to his capitals at Susa and Persepolis. It is now 479 B.C. It's been three years since there was a Queen of Persia. The king and his counselors decide to hold a beauty contest. Beautiful women from all over Persia are invited to enter as contestants for the title, "Miss Persia."

Esther is a beautiful woman and so somehow she is entered into the contest, possibly by coercion of the king's army. Esther reveals to no one that she is a Jewish woman. Esther pleases the king's officials so she is given seven maids to help her prepare for the contest. All the contestants are given twelve months of beauty treatments and training in cosmetics and perfumes. Mordecai, her cousin and adoptive parent, walks by the courtyard every day to hear news of how Esther is doing.

When Esther is presented to the king, he immediately decides that she is the one. Esther then is crowned Queen of the Persians.

Later, Mordecai is sitting in the gates of the city where all the news is shared among the residents and travelers and he overhears two of the king's guards plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai informs Queen Esther who informs the king. The would-be assassins are killed and the event of Mordecai's saving the king's life is recorded in the royal annals.

The Wicked Haman Plots the Extermination of the Jews

Xerxes promotes a man named Haman, an Amalekite, a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites, to be his Prime Minister. As you remember, the Amalekites are descendants of Esau and when Israel came out of Egypt the Amalekites attacked them and were very inhospitable to them. Later, God commanded King Saul to destroy the Amalekites but Saul failed to do what God said to do and some of them survived. The Amalekites and the

Israelites have always been enemies. Now Haman, an Amalekite and a descendant of King Agag, is second in command of the greatest empire in the world.

When he walks by, everybody bows down to Haman. Everybody, that is except one man, Mordecai. Mordecai knows too much Jewish history and reverences God too much to bow before this egotistical, ill-tempered, pagan Haman. This infuriates Haman. He is second ruler of the world but this one man's act of defiance angers him so much that he cannot rest until he has dealt with Mordecai.

His hatred for one Jew burns within him so much that he hates all Jews. He decides with his power and cunning that he will get Xerxes to sign an order exterminating every Jew in the entire empire. This would be a terrible Holocaust that would destroy every Jewish man, woman and child throughout the entire civilized world ruled by the Persians. If Haman has his way, there would not be one Jew left on the earth. Haman is the original Adolph Hitler.

If Haman succeeds in his plans, then the world of Jewry would end in 479 B.C. and there would be no more prophets of God, no priests, no Levites, no temple in Jerusalem, and eventually no John the Baptist, and most importantly, no Jesus Christ. You can see how terrible this hateful, spiteful order of extinction really is. If Haman's order is carried out, there will be a complete failure and breakdown in God's plan to save the world.

Haman then casts lots. The Persian word for the stone cast is *pur*. This will decide when would be the best time to execute the Jews. The lot fell on a day in the month Adar, eleven months in the future.

Haman goes to Xerxes but tells him some half-truths and a lie. He says to the king [read 4:8-9]. Haman does not name the people he wants to exterminate. The king apparently trusts Haman so much that he just blindly signs the kill order. He even gives Haman his signet ring to sign all the orders as they are copied and distributed by riders on fast horses to all the empire. After they have signed the order, Haman and the King sit down to have a drink and enjoy life.

Esther Acts to Plead with the King

Everywhere people are bewildered. They ask, "Why kill all the Jews? They are our friends and neighbors. They are our teachers, our business partners, our doctors, our merchants, our clients, and our patrons." But especially, of course, among the Jews, there is great agony and distress. In

eleven months, all of them will die unless changes are made. However, the Persians have a rule that once a king makes a decree that no one can change it, not even the king himself. All that the Jews can do at this point is fast and mourn in sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai puts on sackcloth and ashes and wails loudly in the streets.

Esther, who lives in the sweet, peaceful quietness and luxury of the king's palace, knows nothing of this dreadful order. Her maids tell her that Mordecai is in great distress in the streets. Esther sends one of her servants to Mordecai to find out what is the problem. Mordecai informs the servant of the death order and requests that Esther go to the king and beg and plead for mercy and for the life of her people.

At first, Esther wonders what she can do. The king in his court cannot be approached except by invitation. If someone does appear without an invitation they will be immediately killed, unless the king lowers his scepter to save them and invites them to come near him. Esther says, "I have not seen the king in thirty days. If I go to him without an invitation, I could be killed immediately."

Mordecai pleads with her. Listen to these very important words: [read 4:13-14]. Mordecai says that (1) Esther, you, too, will be killed when it is found out that you are a Jew, (2) if you don't do anything, help will come from somewhere, somehow, but you will die, and (3) "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" That last statement is one of the most challenging, insightful statements of opportunity and responsibility in the Bible: "Who know but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Esther realizes that she is in a position to do something possibly to save her people. She asks Mordecai to have the Jews in Susa to fast while she fasts, too, for three days and nights. Then she says, "When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

Esther is a brave woman who is willing to take risks for God. She is willing to lay down her life in an effort to save her people.

On the third day, Esther approaches the king. The king lowered his scepter and invited Esther to come near. The king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." Esther doesn't tell the king all on her mind at this time. She merely says, "Oh, king, I want you and Haman to come to a special banquet I am preparing today for you." The king agrees and he and Haman come to the Queen's banquet that evening. At the banquet the king asks, "Esther, how is it now that I can help you?" Esther once more delays in telling the king

what's on her heart. She invites the king and Haman to come to another banquet the next day and she promises to tell the king her request. The king and Haman agree to return on the morrow.

Haman's Plots Mordecai's Death; A King is Sleepless in Susa

On the way home from this first banquet, Haman felt really great. I can see him now gloating over his success in being so favored by the King and the Queen. "Wow," he thinks, "I am really, really important. I bet every Persian would love to be in my shoes." But just then he sees Mordecai at the gate of the city. As usual, Mordecai does not do obeisance to him. Haman is filled with inner rage but goes on home. When he gets there, he tells his wife, family and friends how that the king and queen have entertained him and that he is someone special. "But," he says, "I am distressed because this Mordecai still will not pay me honor. I walk by and everyone else bows, but he ignores me. I've got to do something about him. I need to show him how powerful I am."

Haman's wife, Zeresh, says, "Well, quit worrying and do something about it. Build a gallows 75 feet tall and the first thing in the morning ask Xerxes to have Mordecai hanged on it." Haman loves that idea. He goes out and gathers the carpenters and has them working all night building that massive gallows. Haman can't wait until daylight when he will go to the king and get permission to do away with Mordecai.

That night, while the sound of the banging hammers fills the street, inside the palace the king is tossing and turning on his bed. He can't sleep. So what do you do when you can't sleep? You probably put on one of my sermons on CD and in ten minutes you're sound asleep, right? [smiling] No, you probably turn on television or pick up a book to read. Since there is no all-night cable TV in Susa, the king calls for his staff to go get one of the historical scrolls describing all the things that have happened to him and the kingdom. There's probably scores of scrolls to choose from but the attendant just happens to pick the one describing the event a few years back of Mordecai informing the king of the guards' assassination plans. Scrolls can be up to thirty feet long. Out of all the things written in the scroll, the attendant just happens to read the story of Mordecai saving the king. The king inquires, "What was ever done to honor this man Mordecai for saving my life?" The attendant says, "Nothing, sir." "Well," the king says, "I must do something about that oversight."

Haman Hangs on His Own Gallows

Just at that moment, Haman enters the court yard and is ushered into the king's presence. Haman is there to ask for the death of Mordecai. He wants the king to hang him on that freshly-built gallows. But the king wants to honor Mordecai for saving his life. So the king says, "Haman, what do you think I should do for the man the king wants to honor?" Haman thinks, "Now who would the king want to honor but me?" Haman says, "Let that man wear the king's royal robe, have him sit on the king's horse with the king's insignia on it, and have a trusted prince lead the horse through the city, saying to everyone, 'This is what is done to the man the king wants to honor.'" The King says, "Haman, that's a great idea. Now you do that. Go get Mordecai and honor him that way."

Haman is momentarily stunned. Disgust immediately floods Haman's mind. "What? Mordecai? Him? Oh no, not the guy that will not honor me. And now I have to honor him. I can't believe it. What a nauseating development this is!" Haman obeys the king's orders but inwardly he is seething mad. When the horse ride is over, Haman lowers his head in shame and goes home and tells his wife and friends everything that happened. Zeresh, his wife, says, "This is a bad omen. You cannot stand against Mordecai. You are coming to ruin."

At that moment, there's a knock at the door. It's the officials who have come to escort Haman to the banquet with the king and queen. As they are eating, the king asks, "Now, Esther, what is on your mind? What is your request?" Esther says, "Oh, king, please spare my life and the life of my people. I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation." The king is visibly aroused and disturbed. "Who is doing this? Where is the man that would dare do such a thing?" Esther says courageously, "The enemy is this man here, this vile Haman." The king is shaken. He can hardly believe that his best friend, the Prime Minister of the country, would do such a thing. The king stands up shaking his head. He leaves his food on the table and walks out into the garden to collect his thoughts. Haman realizes that he is in deep trouble. He goes over to Esther to beg for his life. He falls on the couch where Esther is reclining. The king walks in at that moment and thinks that Haman is molesting the queen. The king shouts and the guards immediately cover Haman's head and subdue him. One of the guard officials says, [read 4:9-10]. Haman is hanged on his own gallows. The Bible says, "He that digs a pit shall fall in it" (Proverbs 26:27).

Modecai Is Promoted to be Prime Minister; The Jews Defeat Their Enemies and Celebrate Purim

The king then elevates Mordecai to Haman's position and gives him the king's signet ring. Esther and Mordecai help the king reverse the effect of the destructive order Haman had written. They cannot change the law of the Persians—once written it cannot be changed, not even by the king—but a new law can be written. The king's new order gives the Jews everywhere the right to assemble and protect themselves, to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them, and to plunder the property of their enemies. This new order gives the Jews the right to fight against anyone that would try to harm them. The Jews rejoice with feasting and celebrating. Their nation will be saved. Their lives will be delivered.

When the day of the destruction ordered by Haman came, the Jews were ready to defend themselves. Because Mordecai was now the Prime Minister, the Persian government also helped defend the Jews against their attackers. The Jews killed eight hundred men in Susa, including the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in the rest of the empire killed 75, 000 of those that tried to kill them.

Mordecai ordered all the Jews to celebrate annually this great victory that they experienced. They celebrated by feasting, giving presents to each other, and by giving gifts to the needy. The feast became known as Purim from the plural of the Persian word *pur*. The Jews still celebrate this great victory today in the Feast of Purim in February or March every year. During the Jewish celebration today, the book of Esther is read. Every time the name "Haman" is read, everyone gives shouts and boos. Purim celebrates the faithfulness of God in the hardest of times.

God Works Providentially in Our Lives

Now, were all these events in the book of Esther just coincidence, or luck, or was there someone behind the scenes directing the outcome? Although God's name is not mentioned, I see his presence on every page. The Bible says that God is able to take bad things and work them together for a blessing to those that love him (Rom. 8:28). I see God's providential working in these events:

- The courage of Vashti to disobey the king and not parade before the lustful, leering eyes of drunken officials.
- The storm that wrecked Xerxes' 1200 ships so that Greece could defeat the Persians. Otherwise, Europe would be Asian and not influenced by the laws and democracies of Greece and Rome.
- The choosing of Esther to be the next Queen of Persia.
- The care and protection of Mordecai for his orphaned cousin, Esther.
- The overhearing of the assassination plot and the reporting of it by Mordecai.
- The recording of the foiling of this assassination plot and the credit given to Mordecai.
- The "sleepless in Susa" night of the king.
- The choosing of just the right scroll, the opening to just the right lines about Mordecai's saving the king.
- The king's extending the scepter to receive Esther.
- Haman's arriving at just the right time on the morning he went to get permission to hang Mordecai. If he had been ten minutes earlier, Haman would have succeeded and history would be totally different.
- The wisdom to know how to counteract the original edict that could not be revoked.

From the book of Esther we can learn not only that God is at work but how he is at work. Here are three ways that I see here:*

1. **God is at work in a quiet way.** There are no earthquakes, fire, thunder or miracles in Esther. God works quietly behind the scenes.
2. **God is at work in committed people.** Mordecai and Esther were committed to saving God's people. Who knows but what in your life you have come to such a time as this?
3. **God is at work to confound evil.** Haman did not win. The bible says, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23).

Esther is more than an old story. It is an intriguing drama that shows us how God works. It gives us hope and encouragement in our lives today.

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*These three ways were suggested by Dr. Harold Bryson, professor of preaching at New Orleans Baptist Seminary. They are reported by James Hightower, Jr., in his Voices from the Old Testament. Nashville: Broadman, 1983, pp. 62-63.