

Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Livestream Adult Bible Class
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The Book of Esther

Esther is a story unlike any other Bible story; it has a charm all its own. In Esther, villains meet with brutal fates; good guys are vindicated; a lovely heroin retains the affection of all, and a dim-witted monarch is there to be used by all. As the last of the historical books of the Old Testament, Esther has captivated readers for nearly 2400 years.

Historical Context

The events of this book happen after the people of Judah have been released from captivity in Babylon. Here is a quick timeline:

- 587 BC – Temple destroyed in Jerusalem
- 538 BC – Cyrus decrees exiles may return to Judah
- 516 BC – Second temple built
- 478 BC – Ahasuerus/Xerxes marries Esther, who was descended from Jews who chose not to return to Judah 60 years before.

Cast of Characters

Here are the main characters in the book:

- Xerxes/Ahasuerus – King of Medo-Persian Empire, born 518 BC, Son of Darius, Grandson of Cyrus, ruled from 486-465 BC. Attempted to invade Greece in 480 but failed.
- Queen Vashti – First wife of King Xerxes, banished for refusal to show off her beauty at the king's banquet.
- Mordecai – a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, who lives in Susa. Son of one of those exiled from Judah. Foils a plot on the king's life.
- Esther/Hadassah – Mordecai's much younger cousin who was as a daughter to him.
- Haman the Agagite (Amalekite) – the bad guy in the story. The Amalekites were sworn enemies of the Jewish people, going back to the time of king David and further to the Exodus itself.

Challenges for Readers

As great as the story is, Esther is a profoundly challenging book. Luther, for example, wasn't exactly sure of what to make of it and even questioned whether it really belonged in the Bible. Perhaps the greatest challenge for readers is that God is not once mentioned. Nor are there any miracles or other signs of divine intervention; there are no prayers, no sacrifices, no dietary laws, and no acknowledgement that the marriage of Esther and the King is completely contrary to God's law.

On one hand it seems to be a purely secular story, that somehow found its way into the Bible. However, the very thing that makes it a challenge is perhaps the thing that makes the book more relevant now that at almost any other time in the history of Christianity. We live in an increasingly secular world. During the current COVID pandemic, for example, the church has often been an afterthought in the

minds of government leaders. It is not that they are against the church *per se*, but don't know much about it and make decisions based purely on secular considerations. It is easy for Christians to fall into this sort of thinking, especially when we don't see obvious divine interventions in our lives. We wonder, where is God in all of this? Why does it seem as if he is absent? If he is real and present, then why is he so inconspicuous?

The Hiddenness of God

God promises to be near his people, but he also promises to hide himself. In Deuteronomy 31, for example, God promises to be with Joshua as he succeeds Moses (v. 7-8), but ten verses later God promises to hide his face from the people when they turn to other Gods (v. 17-18)

In the Psalms the hiddenness of God is a common theme:

- Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1)
- How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1)
- My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? (Ps. 22:1)
- Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? (Ps. 44:24)
- But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. (Ps. 88:13–15)

As the Old Testament unfolds there is a gradual transition in God's obvious presence with his people. In the Garden of Eden, he is intimately accessible to Adam and Eve even after sin enters the story. God promises to be with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua and demonstrates that over and over again. But once the people reach the promised land, God begins to speak through judges and prophets. By the time of Samuel, the word of the Lord is rare, and there are few miracles. By the time of Isaiah (700 AD) there are no more miracles, and the prophet is left to confess, "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him." (Isa. 8:17)

But as we will see as we study Esther, God is active even if it isn't obvious at first sight and God can be trusted even if he remains unseen. The author uses several writing techniques to show that the events recorded are not just random happenings. Coincidences aren't simply coincidental, there are dramatic shifts of fortune and perhaps most intriguingly "Esther" (which is her Persian name) means in Hebrew, "I am hidden."

The story also has many parallels with the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. In both cases Israelites who rise to prominence in a foreign land and in so doing provide a means for their people to be saved.

But there is a far deeper connection between Esther and the Bible's bigger story! In Jesus Christ, the tension between God's presence and God's absence is finally resolved. On one hand miracles reappear, angels descend to earth and he is the Word made flesh, Immanuel, God with us.

Yet, despite this his identity remains hidden to many people. His family thinks he's crazy, others think him to be the "prince of demons" and very few people will see him for who he really is. On top of that he will experience the absence of God. He will cry out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

But there is more. In the book of Esther, a royal figure takes upon herself the plight of her people, faces a life-threatening peril on their behalf, and because of her faithfulness brings about the salvation of her people. As a result, the people are filled with joy and celebrate their victory over evil and death with great feasting. The very same pattern is seen in Jesus. He is a royal figure who takes upon himself the plight of his people. He too faces a life-threatening (indeed, a life-ending) peril on their behalf. He too brings about the salvation of his people through his faithfulness. And, as a result, his people are also filled with joy and celebrate their victory over evil and death with great feasting.

In Esther we see a "type" (pattern) of Christ. Just as all the Jews in the Empire faced death because of the act of one man, so in a similar way all humanity faces death because of the act of one man, Adam. (Rom. 5:12, 15, 19). But, just as all God's people were saved through the faithful act of Esther, so all God's people are saved through the faithful act of Christ (Rom. 5:15, 18-19).

With that as background let's dig into God's word!

Esther 1:1-22

Two Banquets (v. 1-9) -- The book opens with the story of banquets hosted by the king and the queen in 483 BC. The king's "banquet" is a frat-boy party lasting no less than 180 days. It may have during this party that the disastrous idea to invade Greece was hatched and planned. There are no details of Vashti's banquet except that it happened.

On the seventh day ... (v 10-12) Having shown off his wealth, the king decides to show off his wife. She is to be dressed up and paraded before the men at the king's party. She however has the sense not to allow herself to be turned into a piece of "eye-candy" for the drunken crowd.

"What must be done to Queen Vashti ..." (v. 13-22) What will happen to order in the kingdom if women don't obey their husbands? What is at first a disagreement between husband and wife suddenly takes on the aura of a national crisis. Advisors advise, an edit is drafted; women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest. Vashti is banished from the king's court.

Yet, in it all, God is at work. King Xerxes fancied himself as the one with all the power, but he is a buffoon. In the Old Testament there are only 2 gardens that are described in detail. Eden and the Garden in the palace at Susa. In the Old Testament there are only 2 buildings described in great detail. Xerxes' palace and the temple in Jerusalem. This is not an accident! The point main point of the book will be to show who really is in charge and who really does save his people.

The world often seems to be controlled by the powerful and the wealthy, by military might and political prowess. Just like the Jews in the Persian period, we often see the kings of the earth do as they wish.

Dictators and tyrants around the world live in opulent luxury, while many of their people live in squalor and poverty. Military powers exert themselves on the helpless, giving more credence to the frustrated complaints that in our world might seems to make right. Political machinery is always working, covering up scandals, making unethical deals, and disguising hidden agendas.

Meanwhile, many people look helplessly to the heavens, wondering why God will not intervene. They wonder if the world is governed simply by the wills of the world's rulers. After all, like the Jews in Susa, that is all they can see. In their hearts, though they might not say it, they privately wonder whether God is involved at all and whether there is any point in continuing to trust him in a world where a Xerxes or a Caesar sits on the throne. The temptation is to give up on the invisible kingdom of God, begun by Jesus and coming in glory at the end of history, and to give in to the forces that press down upon us.

The Book of Esther encourages us to see our world instead with the eyes of faith and to understand the powers of this world can never bring us life; like all imperial ideologies, they are doomed in the end. They are merely "banquets in the grave"—no less pathetic than the Persian banquet, when seen from an eternal perspective. With the eyes of faith, through the lens of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—we know by faith that God is always at work, positioning things in the world and in individual lives, even if we cannot see it. Behind the scenes, God is orchestrating all things to serve his greater purposes, even when it means that crosses must come before resurrections.