

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS: ESTHER AND HER GOD

Catalog No. 7141
The Book of Esther
Todd V. Cleek
January 25, 1998

One of the remarkable things about the book of Esther is that the name of God is never used and God's voice is never directly heard. As believers, we, like Esther, don't often "see" God either, but at times we can feel him and sense his working for us, with us and through us. We long to see him in a burning bush, as Moses did, or wrestle with him in a dream, like Jacob. For the most part, however, the reality is that we, like Esther, have to listen carefully and read between the lines to see God working to fulfill his covenant promises that he made with us through the cross of Christ.

Esther's story is also appropriate for us because, like Esther, we, too, are in exile. We live in a secular world which, generally speaking, is not supportive of our beliefs, a world which strives to replace God with whatever "feels right." So let us turn our attention to this marvelous story about God using a young woman who struggled to find the appropriate relationship between the world she lived in and the God she believed in.

The story of Esther actually took place about five hundred years before the time of Christ. This was a very troublesome period for Israel; the nation was in exile at the hands of the Persians. It might come as a shock to us to learn that about fifty years before the events of the book of Esther took place, Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed the Israelites to return to Israel, but most of them did not return.

Why didn't they go back? What kept them in Persia? The answer has to do with the reason that Israel was in exile to begin with. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah had made it clear to Israel that they were in exile because of their sin—and they knew it.

Israel had been in exile so long, oppressed by other people with other gods, that the nation was beginning to wonder whether, because of their sin, they had lost their status as "God's chosen people." In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther immediately follows the book of Lamentations. The last few verses of Lamentations powerfully sum up Israel's reason for staying in Persia:

**Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may
return;
Renew our days as of old,
Unless you have utterly rejected us,
And are angry with us beyond measure (Lam 5:20-
22, NIV).**

The Israelites remained in Persia because they were wondering if they were still "the chosen people of God" or if, because of their great sin, God had finally given up on them. It is at this time of religious and national identity crisis that the Esther story takes place.

The book of Esther is one of the most beautifully crafted stories in the Bible. It reads like both a Shakespearean comedy and tragedy at times. The story deals with issues that are extremely important, while poking fun at the Persians, the king, and even the Jews. It's enchanting stuff. Because time does not allow us to look at the whole book, I have condensed the story a little, updated the language, and maybe taken one or two liberties. But I think my retelling of it is safely within the spirit of the original. My version of the Esther story goes like this:¹

One day, during one of his lavish drinking parties, King Xerxes ordered Queen Vashti to appear before his guests, so that he might show off her much ballyhooed beauty. Being progressive for her day, however, Vashti refused. Xerxes, not quite as progressive, decided she wasn't such a good queen after all, and denounced her. When he had recovered from his loss, he held a beauty pageant to find a replacement for Vashti, and a search for fair young contestants was made throughout the Persian Empire. Among all the beautiful girls who were gathered in Susa, the summer home of Xerxes, the fairest of them all *just so happened* to be our hero, the poor orphan, Esther!

After a year's worth of beauty treatments (which would do the spas of Napa Valley proud), all these fair young women were taken one by one for a night with the king. The young woman who pleased the king the most would replace Vashti as queen.

Esther, who was a Jew, was fine of form and feature. She was the most popular girl in the whole contest, and she found favor in the eyes of everyone, from the palace eunuchs to the king himself. Not surprisingly, she was chosen queen!

Some time later, Esther's cousin, and father by adoption, Mordecai the Jew, a bureaucrat in the Persian bureaucracy, discovered a plot to assassinate King Xerxes. Mordecai told Esther, who told the king in Mordecai's name. However, she did so without letting on that she, too, was a Jew, for Mordecai had told her not to disclose her identity. Being a good daughter, Esther did everything she was told. Mordecai's good deed was recorded in the annals of the king.

A little while later, Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, the man who was second in charge of the Persian Empire. Haman, a very proud man, was furious. To get even with Mordecai, Haman convinced the king, who was not so bright himself, to approve the destruction and annihilation of a certain people who did not follow the laws of the king. These people, of course, were the Jews. Haman succeeded in getting approval to destroy the Jews, without Xerxes even asking who they were. Thus an edict of the king went out, which couldn't be overturned, stating that on the thirteenth day of Adar, all Jews, men, women and children, would be completely wiped out.

As soon as Mordecai heard about the edict, he ordered Esther to intercede for her people. Esther, however, was reluctant to approach the king, because the penalty for approaching the king unsummoned was death, and everyone knew it. But Mordecai insisted. He even suggested that it was *for such a time as this* that Esther had risen to her position. Finally, after much convincing, Esther proclaimed, "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." Getting all dressed up, Esther took her chances and approached Xerxes. Having found favor in his eyes, the king assured her that whatever her request was he would give it to her. Esther's request was simply to have both King Xerxes and Haman to a banquet which she would prepare that very day. At the banquet, the king assured her again that whatever she asked, up to half the kingdom, he would give her; but Esther simply requested that both the king and Haman come back again the next day for another banquet.

Haman left the presence of the king and queen, on top of the world. On his way home he encountered Mordecai in the town square. Mordecai still refused to bow down to him, even after all that had occurred. Not surprisingly, this infuriated Haman all the more. When he got home, he told his wife and sons all that he had accomplished, but then admitted that he could find no satisfaction as long as Mordecai showed him no respect. So Haman's friends and family suggested that he ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai. Because Haman was so confident that the king would see it his way, he had a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, in front of his house, on which to hang Mordecai.

However, it *just so happened*, on the night before Esther's second banquet that poor old Xerxes couldn't get a bit of sleep, so he had one of his servants read to him from the Annals of the King. And it *just so happened* that the man read about Mordecai's uncovering the plot to assassinate him. Xerxes asked his servant if Mordecai had been rewarded, and it *just so happened* that he had not. Well, this disturbed the king, and he set out to fix the problem. Xerxes inquired, "Who is in the court?" It *just so happened* that Haman was, and the king invited him in. Without indicating who he wanted to honor, Xerxes asked Haman "What should be done with the man that the king delights to honor?" Haman, being

rather full of himself, thought, "Who would the king delight to honor more than me?" And it *just so happened* that he devised an elaborate plan that included robes, horses, crowns and a nobleman of the king leading one around the city, proclaiming, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." And it *just so happened* that Xerxes liked the idea so much that he sent Haman straight away to do all just as he described—for *Mordecai!*

As soon as this was done, Haman was mortified. But shortly after arriving home and telling his wife and family of his trouble, it *just so happened* that the king's eunuchs came to take him to Esther's second banquet. During the feast, the king reassured Esther for the third time in two days that whatever she requested, he would do it for her. Esther, knowing that it was now or never, asked that she and her people might be saved from destruction and annihilation. When the king asked, "Who is he that might annihilate you?" Esther replied, "this vile Haman." Surprised and incensed, the king bolted from the room, leaving Haman begging for his life at the mercy of the queen. In the process, he touched her or her couch, and it *just so happened* that as he was doing this, the king returned. For this serious violation of decency and harem etiquette, Haman was immediately sentenced to death. And one of the king's eunuchs *just so happened* to notice that Haman had built a gallows to hang Mordecai on. Everyone thought it would be appropriate to have Haman hanged there instead.

The story concludes, like all good stories, with a happy ending. The Jews prevailed over their oppressors; they were allowed to defend themselves and ward off annihilation. Both Esther and Mordecai were rewarded and elevated in the eyes of King Xerxes. But, more importantly, the question about whether the Jews were still God's chosen people was answered in God's deliverance of them from Haman and his evil scheme. God acted to save his "chosen people" through the lives of Esther and Mordecai in order that his plan of salvation might be carried forward toward the cross. And finally, to acknowledge God's faithfulness, Esther and Mordecai established the celebration of Purim, which Jews around the world still celebrate to this day.

A quick glance at the story leaves us with the impression that both Esther and Mordecai were faithful and godly people who were committed to God and his covenant promises. But a closer look leaves us with some questions. Why didn't Mordecai bow down to Haman? Bowing for a Persian was a social, not a religious custom. It would be the equivalent of curtsying to the Queen of England. By refusing, Mordecai placed the whole nation of Israel at great risk. Why did Mordecai advise Esther to conceal her Jewish nationality? And, let's not be naive, Esther's encounter with the king before she was named queen, was probably not just dinner and a movie. Going into this so called "beauty contest," both Mordecai and Esther must have known that Esther would be required to "try out for the team."

So what are we to make of these shortcomings of both Esther and Mordecai? The first thing we need to see is that neither Esther nor Mordecai are the true heroes in this story. In the book of Esther, like the rest of the Bible, the true hero of the story is God himself. Neither Esther nor Mordecai are heroic—that is God’s work—what they really are is human. And this is our point of contact: we can relate to the humanity and fallibility of the characters of Mordecai and Esther. Who among us doesn’t struggle with taking a stand for Christ in the workplace? Who among us doesn’t ponder how to instruct their children when they are confronted with difficulties of living in the world? How many of us have not struggled with sexual sin in our lives at some level?

Esther and Mordecai were indeed faced with difficult decisions without any easy answers. My life is filled with choices that at the time, seemed just as difficult. Let me tell you about one.

I first arrived here in the Bay Area in the fall of 1987, as a freshman at Santa Clara University. I was fresh off the farm. The Twenty Something group here at PBCC likes to poke fun at John Hanneman because of his rural Nebraska roots. But my background from a small farming town in Northern California called Orland is no more urban than John’s; it’s probably less. I grew up farming “amends” (“almonds” for all you city folk), walnuts, oranges and olives with my father and grandfather, on a farm that my family homesteaded in the 1850’s.

My high school years in Orland were significant, because this is where my spiritual journey began. I was fortunate enough to be discipled by the pastor and his wife of the local Evangelical Free church. They simply loved me into the kingdom and started me on my path to maturity. Those weren’t easy years for me, but God was gracious and did some wonderful things in my life.

I came to Santa Clara because I thought I wanted to study business. You can see how that turned out. I didn’t know a single person on campus. It was a time of new beginnings; I could be anyone I wanted to be. Santa Clara was a clean slate on which I could have written whatever I wanted.

After the first week of orientation, I had made several new friends: my roommates, Thomas Hayden Davies III, from Salt Lake City; Bill, from Cleveland, Ohio; and Kelly, from Honolulu. We lived on the eighth floor of a dorm appropriately called Swig Hall. Things were going great; it was an exciting time. Then came my decision. Friday night arrived and the fraternity across the street from Swig Hall was starting the year off in grand style. All of my new friends were attending. Still struggling to establish my identity in my new setting, I accompanied them as the four of us set off to explore one of the exciting new arenas of college life.

As we made our way down eight flights of stairs and onto Market Street, I suddenly found myself confronted

with a choice. Who and what did I stand for? Who was this new person I wanted to be? I made a decision in the middle of Market Street in Santa Clara. Because of my faith, I decided that keggers on frat-row was not what I was called to. At the risk of potential alienation after one week with my new friends, I slipped out of the back of our pack of four and returned to my dorm room, where I spent the longest Friday night of my college career.

My story is not as dramatic as Esther’s. I didn’t save all of Santa Clara University from certain destruction at the hands of our evil rivals, St. Mary’s. But God was faithful. My roommate Tom came to Christ two years later. He was the best man at our wedding, and he remains one of the best friends I have today.

The question that I faced at Santa Clara, and the question that Esther was ultimately faced with, are the same: “Who do we identify with?” This is a dilemma that we face over and over again, day after day. Do we choose to identify with God or with something or someone else?

Esther came to a point of decision. Mordecai’s demanding question, “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time of this?” finally forced Esther to make a choice between the seemingly safe life as a Persian queen or possibly perilous faithfulness to her God. Esther decided to identify herself with the God of Israel and risk her own life by going before the king unsummoned, when she proclaimed, “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” And, because we know how the story ends, we know that Esther risked death for God’s sake and was rewarded with the salvation of the Jewish nation.

We are faced with the same choice. Are we willing to risk our lives to identify with Christ and his church? In the Gospel of Mark, right after Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus calls his disciples to identify with him by saying:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

Being a light in the darkness is hard work. Living in exile, whether in Persia or in the Silicon Valley, is a tough and tenuous task. Esther and Mordecai undoubtedly made some mistakes, but haven’t we all? They were faced with the same challenges that we confront every day as we live in the here and now. We, like Esther, do not often see God act miraculously in burning bushes, healing the sick, and walking on water. But we struggle day by day, living in this time and place, sensing that God is present, striving to live lives that are faithful and honoring to him. God was able to use Esther, even through her shortcomings and humanity, to save the Jewish people from certain destruction. He

likewise can use us, sometimes in spite of ourselves, if we choose to identify with him.

There is more going on in this story than Esther's choice to identify with God. The book of Esther also says something about how our God works in the world. Karen Jobes, a professor at Westmont College, in Santa Barbara, and a scholar on the book of Esther, defines providence in these words: "By God's providence we mean that God in some way governs all creatures, action and circumstance through the normal and ordinary course of human life without intervention of the miraculous."² For Esther and Mordecai, God's fulfilling of his covenant promises had to do with the big question which Jews were asking during the exile: "Are we still God's 'chosen people'?" God acted providentially by working through these seemingly secular events and answered their question with a resounding "Yes" in the deliverance of Israel.

Part of the irony of this story is the fact that although God's name is never mentioned, his presence and providence is felt throughout the whole account. You might have noticed a little phrase that kept popping up in my rendition of the story: "*it just so happens.*" The phrase was no mistake; neither was the sequence of events that led up to the great reversal that we see in the book of Esther. From the beginning of the story until its completion, one can feel God's presence acting and shaping it. From Vashti's disposal, in chapter one, to Esther's selection as queen, to Mordecai uncovering the plot to assassinate the king, to the hilarious turnabout in chapter 6, where Haman asks the king to have Mordecai killed, and ends up parading him through the streets of Susa, all these events are signs of God's providence working in Esther's story. One seemingly secular event after another leads to the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, made through the ordinary decisions and actions of Esther and Mordecai.

When Esther came to that defining moment in her life—she had to decide who she was going to identify herself with—she was not going out to try to save the world. Esther was simply doing whatever it is Persian queens did every day. However, her decision and its consequences were much bigger than herself. The book of Esther teaches us that God is so great that he can work through any secular or seemingly insignificant event to change our lives for his good.

When we encounter difficulties we often turn to God and ask him to do the miraculous for us. Esther's story clues us in to the fact that God is so great, he can answer our prayers and fulfill his promises to us in the ordinary outworking of our lives. Any god worth his salt can do a miracle here and there. But the truly amazing thing about our God is that he can use our everyday decisions and actions to fulfill his purposes in our lives. The mistake we often make is that we think that God

should act providentially in our lives to make us comfortable. But God often has a different objective in mind. Rather than working to make us comfortable, he works to make us godly.

When Tammy and I arrived back in California last summer, God providentially provided an apartment studio in the back of Mark and Kathy Asplund's home. We have very much enjoyed being a part of the Asplund family. We have observed amazing growth in their lives, even in the six short months that we've been here. God has been acting providentially to grow Mark and Kathy up to maturity in Christ. But, as Mark shared right here earlier last fall, their growth has been the result of a great deal of pain in their lives. To name a few of the difficulties that they have faced, Mark's father has cancer, and a lawsuit has caused severe financial hardship and, potentially, the loss of Mark's job.

But the one thing that Mark keeps telling me every time I ask him how he is doing, is, "I don't know how I would have made it five years ago." Five years ago, Mark was not a believer. He didn't have the group of men around him to support him that God has placed in his life here at PBCC. God has been working in the Asplunds lives, and the results of that work have not been easy or pretty, just eternal. God has been working providentially not to make their lives comfortable, but to make their lives godly.

In closing, we can reflect on Esther's story and see a little of ourselves in her.

1. We can relate to her humanity and identify with her struggles.
2. She models for us what it means to identify with Christ while living in exile.
3. Finally, her story gives us insight into how our God works through our everyday decisions and actions to make us godly men and women.

When we consider the effects of these three aspects of Esther's story on our own lives, we realize that our responsibility is to identify with Christ in every area. God's commitment to work in every area of our lives does not allow us to segregate the secular from the holy. Esther's story leaves us with the same question she had to answer: Are we ready *for such a time as this*?

© 1998 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. The framework for which the narrative of Esther is being described here has been modified from Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971) xvii-xiv.

2. Karen Jobes, *The Book of Esther: Providence Fulfilling Promise* Tape Series (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 1996) Tape 2602E.