

## Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet

Esther | *The Sovereignty of God and the Salvation of His People*

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Over the past couple weeks, we have looked at the stories of Ezra & Nehemiah who led a remnant of the Jews out of exile and back to their home to the land of Judah. God had promised that He would free them, and God had also promised to protect them (see Isaiah).

But there came a day (about 55 years after God's people were first released) when a wicked man planned to destroy every Jew on the planet (or at least every Jew from India to Africa), and he had the political support and the military power to make it happen. The largest empire that had ever existed was preparing to slaughter every Jew on the face of the earth, and there was nothing that anybody could do to stop it. It would have been the most widespread racial genocide in human history.

But what this villain didn't realize was that there was no way his plan could ever work because the sovereign God of the universe had promised to save His people. Throughout the history of God's people, He continued to save them in the most unexpected ways:

- Like a shepherd boy with a sling and a stone
- Like a man hanging on a cross

Well, this time, He was about to save His people in another very unexpected way: through an orphan girl.

The book of Esther is the story of how God keeps His promises even when evil seems unstoppable. It's the story of God's sovereign power to save His people no matter how hopeless their situation may feel. And this promise is just as true for us today as it was for God's people back then because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

### PRAY

- About 600 years before Jesus was born, the king of Babylon (King Nebuchadnezzar) destroyed Jerusalem (**587 BC**). During that attack, God's chosen people were either killed or exiled to Babylon.
- About half a century later (**539 BC**) the king of the Persian empire (King Cyrus) captured Babylon.
- The very next year (**538 BC**) King Cyrus made the decree that all the Jews could go back home to Jerusalem.
- That same year (**c. 538**), Zerubbabel led a remnant back to Judah to rebuild the Temple.
- During the reign of King Cyrus and his son (Cambyses II), the Persian empire became the largest empire the world had ever seen up to that point, stretching from India to Africa.
- After Cyrus and his son were dead, **King Darius** became the king of Babylon (**522–486 BC**), and we will hear more about him when we read Daniel's story.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> King Darius is also mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah.

- After King Darius died, his son took the throne. His name was Xerxes, and he ruled the Persian Empire from for a little over twenty years (486–465 BC). King Xerxes is also known by another name: **Ahasuerus**.<sup>2</sup>

And that brings us to the book of Esther.

- The book of Esther opens in the third year of King Ahasuerus's reign when he was home at his palace in Shushan (also known as Susa). He has just finished hosting a 7-day drinking party with all the important people in his kingdom. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, when he was quite drunk, he decides to show off his queen to all his drunk friends (1:10–11).
  - So, he tells his servants to go get her, but she refuses to come (1:12). Apparently, she didn't feel like being paraded through a crowd of drunk men.
  - Well, the king was furious with his queen for blatantly disregarding him, and so he signs an unchangeable decree that Queen Vashti was never allowed to come into his presence again (1:19).

So, there *just so happens* to be a vacancy for the queen of Persia?

That brings us to **chapter 2**.

- Some time passes, and it seem like the king realizes his foolish mistake. But there is no changing the decree that he made. So, his servants come up with a plan.

### **READ 2:2–4**

Hundreds of young women throughout the land were taken to Shushan to compete for the king's heart. And one of the young women who was taken was an orphan girl named Hadassah. Her father and mother had died, and she had been raised by her older cousin, Mordecai. And before she was taken, Mordecai told her not to let anybody know that she was a Jew, so she keeps that a secret (2:10) – which is why she is known by her Persian name: *Esther*.

So, the women who were taken spend an entire year getting ready to meet the king. Oils, perfumes, skin care... the Bible says that it was a year of “preparations spent in beautifying women” (2:12) – which seems a bit excessive.

And then each girl would have one opportunity to compete for the king's heart. *Can you imagine the pressure?* This is your one and only chance to have a husband. If the king doesn't choose you, it's not like you get to go back home and then life goes back to normal. No, you get put into the king's harem for the rest of your life. So here's what's at stake: either you get to the queen of the most powerful ruler in the world, or you don't ever get to marry. That's why I said, *can you imagine the pressure! And what if you're not really a first impression kind of person?*

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<sup>2</sup> Like his fathers, he was a man of war with a desire to conquer. Specifically, he wanted to conquer Greece. And it was during one of his attacks that the famous story of the Spartans took place. There is a movie called 300, which tells an embellished story of 300 Spartans holding off over 100,000 Persians in a two-day battle. That took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus.

Well, it finally came to Esther's turn to meet the king, and she stole the show.

**READ 2:17**

Of all the available women throughout the entire kingdom, Esther *just so happens* to be chosen as the Queen of Persia.

Now, there are 5 main characters in this story.

1. Ahasuerus, king of the largest empire in the history of the world
2. Esther, his new queen

And then there's her cousin Mordecai, and his part in this story really begins here at the end of chapter 2.

**READ 2:21–23**

Mordecai *just so happens* to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to overhear this plot against the king – and he ends up saving the king's life. And so the king makes sure that his actions were written down in his personal history book: *the book of the chronicles*.

But it *just so happens* that nothing is done to honor Mordecai for saving the king's life.

So we've got (1) Ahasuerus, (2) Esther, and (3) Mordecai.

In **chapter 3**, we are introduced to the 4<sup>th</sup> character in this story: Haman. He's the villain.

**READ 3:1–2**

Haman has been elevated to one of the highest positions in the Persian Empire, and the king had commanded that everybody show their respect by bowing in his presence; but Mordecai won't do it (now, there is some important history between Mordecai and Haman which helps to explain why Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, but the important thing is simply Mordecai's action: he *refuses to bow*). And Haman is furious. He is so angry that instead of just laying his hands on Mordecai, he decides to unleash his wrath by slaughtering Mordecai's entire bloodline.

**READ 3:5–6**

So, Haman approaches the king with his horrific plan by making it sound like he would be doing the king a favor.

**READ 3:8–11**

Now remember that nobody in the palace knows that Esther is a Jew. So, the king signs an unchangeable law stating that, within several months, every Jew throughout his kingdom (*including all the Jews back in Jerusalem*) would be annihilated... and he had the military power to do it.

When Mordecai learns of this law, he sends a message to Esther telling her “to go in to the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people” (4:8). But as far as Esther was concerned, going to the king without being summoned was basically suicide. She sent a message back to Mordecai, saying...

**READ 4:11**

Everybody knows how unpredictable and irrational the king is (e.g., Vashti), and so Esther is scared to death of entering His presence without being summoned.

So Mordecai responds...

**READ 4:13–14**

I don't know what Mordecai's relationship with God was like or what he believed about divine providence, but he makes two statements that are gloriously true of God and of you.

1. God doesn't *need* us to accomplish His purpose. God delights in *using* us for His good pleasure, but He doesn't need us. He will accomplish His purposes *with* or *without* you.
2. God has put you exactly where He wants you for a divine purpose.

What situation are you facing in your life right now?

“Who knows whether you have come [into this situation] for such a time as this” (4:14).

How does Esther respond?

**READ 4:15–17**

Three days later, Esther enters into the presence of the king, and *it just so happens* that he is delighted to see her (5:1–2).

**READ 5:3–5**

She has clearly developed some sort of plan. First, it seems that she wants to make her case in a *more intimate setting*, and secondly, she wants to do it *with Haman in the room*. So, the king and Haman attend the banquet that Esther has prepared, and the king asks his queen again, “What do you want baby? Just tell me, and it's as good as done.”

**READ 5:7–8**

Esther had invited them to her banquet to plead for the life of the Jews, but it seems as though something makes her pause. For some reason, she doesn't go through with it. Did she sense something in the king or in Haman that unnerved her? Did she notice something about the king's relationship with Haman that made her think he would side with him instead of her? Did she just chicken out? Did she have a voice whispering in her ear to wait? The Bible doesn't tell us.

- *All we know* is that this seems to be the perfect opportunity for Esther to speak truth, and she doesn't.
- *All we know* is that it seems like the perfect opportunity for God to show up and save His people from this evil plan, but He doesn't.
- *All we know* is that the opportunity has come and gone, and God's people are still left without any sense of hope.

### How often does that happen in our lives?

- The sun rises and sets on our sorrow, and God appears just as silent in the evening as He was in the morning?
- As you lay your head down on your pillow, your heart is screaming, "Where were you today, God? I needed You, and You didn't show up? I prayed that You would rescue me, and I got nothing. Where were You?"
- *I know I've prayed like that.*

I can only imagine the disappointment that Esther must have felt as she went to bed that night, but what she didn't realize is that even while she was mourning over her failure, God was at work in moving all the pieces of the story to accomplish a salvation that the Jews would celebrate for the rest of their history. As Esther wept and slept, her God was working (that very night) in ways that she could not imagine.

Two significant things happened that night.

1. First, Haman has a run-in with Mordecai on his way back home...

### READ 5:9-14

Haman goes to bed happy because the enemy will be hanging from the gallows within 24 hours

2. While Haman is constructing his gallows, the king is suffering from insomnia. He can't sleep. So, he has one of his people read him "*the book of the records of the chronicles*" – which was basically like reading the king a storybook of all his accomplishments. So, the attendant is reading, and eventually (sometime in the early morning) he gets to the story of Mordecai saving the king's life.

### READ 6:3

Mordecai saved the king's life, and *it just so happened* that nothing had been done for him.

Well, while this story is being read to the king, it just so happens that Haman has just entered the palace to ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had built last night.

Now remember:

- Haman doesn't know that the king is planning on *honoring* Mordecai
- And the king doesn't know that Haman is planning on *hanging* Mordecai

Both men are thinking about Mordecai, but their thoughts could not be more different!

#### **READ 6:4-12**

Haman left his home hoping to get permission to hang Mordecai, but instead, he was commanded to parade him around the kingdom while shouting his praises! So he goes back to his home, and he is utterly miserable. He vents to his wife, and she goes, “*Wait. The king just honored Mordecai, the Jew? And you are planning on killing all the Jews in a few months? Oh honey...this doesn't look good for you!*”

But *it just so happened* that before Haman could come up with a plan (like taking down the gallows that he had built for Mordecai), the king's attendants come to hurry him away to the second banquet...

#### **READ 6:14-7:4**

So, there's her petition. She asks the king to save her from the one who is planning to kill her and to annihilate all of her people.

And the king is furious.

#### **READ 7:5**

Who would dare presume to kill my wife and her people?

- Who is he?
- And where is he?

Well, it just so happens that he's sitting right over there...

#### **READ 7:6**

Well, now the king is beside himself. Not only has Haman plotted to kill his wife and all her people, but the king had signed it into an unchangeable law. He had effectively sealed her death warrant. So, he goes out into the garden to think, and while the king is in the garden, Haman begins pleading for his life.

#### **READ 7:7**

Haman is so scared and so desperate that he falls onto the couch where the queen is sitting and is begging for his life.

*And it just so happens* that, at that very moment, the king walks back in and sees Haman laying on top of his wife, and it looks bad.

- It looks like he is assaulting the queen. He's not. He's just begging for mercy, but that's not what it looks like to the king. It looks like he's assaulting her.

## READ 7:8

Before Haman has a chance to explain, the guards covered his face. And then *it just so happened* that *at that very moment*, one of the servants noticed the gallows in Haman's backyard.

## READ 7:9-10

What a difference a day can make!

The rest of the book (**chapters 8–10**) tell the story of how Mordecai was promoted into Haman's position and how he and Esther made a plan to save the Jews from Haman's law. They couldn't change Haman's law, but they could come up with another law that overpowered the first law and which resulted in the salvation of the Jews and the mass destruction of their enemy.

## THE GOSPEL

That's the story of Esther, but it's not just the story of Esther. It's the story of the gospel.

- From the very beginning, Satan devised a plan to destroy God's people through sin.
- There has been an unchangeable law regarding sin since the Garden of Eden:
  - And that law is that **the wages of sin is death**
- Satan was anticipating the death of every single one of us – because all of us have sinned.
- But just like Haman didn't plan on the schemes of an orphan girl,
  - Satan didn't plan on the Son of a virgin girl.
- Though God could not simply forget the law of sin, He could do something to overpower the law of sin, and that something was the cross of Jesus Christ.
- Satan had planned for our sin to destroy us all, but on the cross, Jesus took our sin and suffered our consequences.
- And while His body lay dead in a grave, and His followers mourned and trembled, Jesus was accomplishing the greatest rescue in human history.
  - As His body lay dead in a grave, Jesus was storming the gates of hell, trampling the powers of sin, taking the keys of death, and destroying Satan's claim on us – forever.

## TRUTHS TO CLING TO IN THE NEW YEAR

1. If you are a child of God, then He is always at work (in every situation and in every detail of every situation) for your good – even when it seems like He is silent.
  - You do not see the Name of God mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther, but His hand is everywhere.
  - God orchestrated every painful experience in Esther's life (including her failures) in order to save an entire nation from genocide.
2. God is sovereign over every moment and over every detail in your life. From our vantage point, it often feels like “it just so happened” that things take place – but that's not true from God's perspective. He declares the end from the beginning, and therefore you have never experienced a coincidence; you have only experienced the sovereign hand of God orchestrating every event in your life for purposes that we couldn't even begin to fathom.

3. His timing is perfect. Elizabeth and I have experienced many things in our life together where it felt like we were ready for something, but God was waiting.
  - a. Ready for a hard season to be over
  - b. Ready to move
  - c. Ready for children
  - d. Ready for close friendships
  - e. Ready for healing
  - f. Ready for a home
    - ... and so we pray
    - ... and God waits...
  - But then (occasionally) He lets us peek behind the curtain (as it were), and we see how God wasn't waiting after all. Rather, He was working out 10,000 details that we couldn't see so that when He answered our prayer – it would be better than we could have imagined. His timing is perfect.
4. He is faithful to His promises. He has been faithful to His promises, and He will be faithful to His promises.