

"Intro to Esther"
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July 10, 2022

In May we finished our journey through Ephesians, a New Testament book where the apostle Paul clearly spells out important aspects of Christian belief and practice. In other words, as we went through Ephesians, we learned what we as Christians are to believe and how we are to live. This month we begin a journey through an Old Testament book which begins with the letter "E." It is not Exodus, Ezra, Ecclesiastes, or Ezekiel. Our text will be the book of Esther.

I think this is one of the most unusual books in the Bible. In her community, Karen Jobes writes, "If one went through and replaced every occurrence of the words 'Jews' with the name of another ethnic group, (maybe the Swedes), there would be nothing that would indicate Esther had anything to do with the rest of the Bible."

Most conspicuously, God is not mentioned in the book, at least explicitly. Esther was originally composed in the Hebrew language, and the Hebrew text contains neither "Yahweh" the divine name, often translated, "Lord," or Elohim, the Hebrew noun that means God.

Yes, Esther is a story about the Jewish people, but there is really no mention of the Jewish religion. The events recorded in the book take place after the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem from exile in 539 B.C. Yet, there is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple that was being built there. No one prays in the book of Esther. No one quotes scripture, including the Old Testament law, no one sings a hymn or worship song, no one has a vision from God and there is no obvious miracle.

Yet, the book of Esther has been held in high esteem by many Jews. A leading medieval Rabbi said, "When Messiah comes, the other books of the Hebrew Bible may pass away but the Torah (the first five books) and Esther will abide forever."

The book is significant for the Jews because it tells of how, despite their very vulnerable position, the Jews were saved from annihilation and instead over 75,000 of their enemies were executed in the Persian Empire. The feast of Purim which usually occurs in March, continues to be a time when Jews

commemorate this event. Some folks suggest the book of Esther was written specifically to explain why Purim is celebrated, but it is far more likely that it is events of Esther that give birth to Purim. Christians, on the other hand have not been nearly as excited about this book. Even though Esther was included from the Christian Bible right from the beginning. There was not one commentary written about the book for 700 years.

Calvin and Luther, the two great leaders of the protestant reformation were not exactly enthralled with Esther. Calvin wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, but not on Esther. Luther, who said many wonderful things, also said, "I am an enemy of the book of Esther and wish it had not come to us at all, for it has too many heathen unnatural ties." Wow!

Yet, if we cut our Esther from our Bibles, we would also have to toss out the apostle Paul second letter to Timothy, because he there he writes. **2 Timothy 3:16, 17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.**

Folks, for Paul, all scripture means all 39 books of what we call the Old Testament, including Esther. The Lord has given us this book for our benefit. **Romans 15:4 for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**

And when Jesus explained to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, "All the things concerning himself" from Moses and "all the prophets," I am confident he talked about how the book of Esther pointed to Him as Messiah, Savior and King. Thus, we can be sure, the Lord has something to say, important things to say to us through the book of Esther. As Jobes says, "We can pick up the book of Esther with the assurance that despite first appearances, God has given us bread and not a stone."

Okay, now let's put the book of Esther in context of the Old Testament timeline. This is all really history, events that happened at a particular place and at a particular time. I am going to start with the year 1000 B.C., a thousand year before the birth of Christ. Who is the King of Israel? I should really have some chocolate candy to throw out for right answers. David the guy who killed Goliath is the King. And under him and his son Solomon, Israel enjoys its golden era, 80 years of essentially peace and prosperity. Yet, when Solomon dies in 931 things come crashing down. Remember when we are talking year "B.C.," we go backwards, counting to year zero, when Jesus was born. Anyway, in 931 B.C. a civil war erupts in Israel. The end result is that Jeroboam (an official in Solomon's court) rules the northern kingdom, which is 10 of the 12 tribes and is known as Israel. Rehoboam (Solomon's son) is the ruler of the southern kingdom, known as Judah. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin make up the southern kingdom.

For the most part, the rulers of the northern kingdom do not honor the Lord, while many of the rulers of the southern kingdom are godly leaders. In 722, the northern kingdom is conquered by the Assyrian Empire and the people are taken into captivity. As the years go by these folks end up being assimilated into this and other pagan societies and these Hebrew people essentially lose their identity. They become known as 10 lost tribes of Israel, though we know that some groups like the Samaritans have descended from the Northern tribes.

Though the fall of the northern kingdom was tragic, it was hardly the end. After all the temple and true worship were in Jerusalem, the southern kingdom. The Davidic line, descendants of David, through whom the Messiah was promised, were the rulers of the southern kingdom. Yet soon the kings and people of Judah were unfaithful to the covenant despite many warnings from the Lord they refused to trust and follow Him.

As a result, God allows Judah to be conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed, and the people of Judah are taken into captivity in 586 B.C. and scattered throughout the empire. Then, 47 years later, 539 B.C. the Babylonians fall. The Medes-Persians conquered Babylonian and rule the ancient near and Middle East for over 200

years. Cyrus is the emperor, and he almost immediately allows the Jews, as they were now called, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, using the resources of Persia.

He likely does this to strengthen his authority in the remote part of his empire. Ye, in Isaiah 45:1, the Lord calls this pagan king, "my anointed." By 515 B.C. Zerubbabel has finished the temple. Ezra leads more Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem in 457 B.C. and Nehemiah brings others in 432 B.C. Still, there were many Jews who did not return and the regions of Babylonia and Persia, modern Iraq, and Iran, contained thriving communities of Jews for centuries.

Esther tells the story of one group of Jewish people who about 30-40 years after the temple had been rebuilt, have not returned to Jerusalem. This provides an underlying tension behind the book. These are God's covenant people, living apart from the covenant. For whatever reason they have not gone back to Jerusalem. They are not worshipping in the rebuilt temple. They are not offering sacrifices. In other words, they are not keeping the covenant. Yet, as we will see, God is still keeping His promises to them. Even when they are faithless, God is faithful. Much more about this in the weeks ahead.

The book of Esther is set in the city and region of Susa, located in modern Iran, in the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus, (Ahashwerosh) whose Greek name was Xerxes the First. We know quite a bit about him from the Greek historians since there were battles between the Persians and Greeks during his reign. He ruled from 486 – 465 B.C., which provides us the dates from what happens in the book of Esther.

An implicit reference to Xerxes the Second in verse 1:1 means the book itself was composed by a God inspired unknown author after 424 B.C., about 50 years after the events had occurred. It is also fairly certain the book was written before 400 B.C. Again, one reason for Esther being composed is likely to explain why the Jews celebrated Purim. Now I am confident everything recorded in the book Esther actually happened. Yet, this is not a newspaper account of what occurred. The narrative provides an interpretation for us of these events and explains their significance. It helps us see what God expects from His people in

both ancient Susa, and here in northern Minnesota in the 21st century.

As we go through Esther, we will repeatedly see how God sovereignly and providently works through the events of history, and the events of daily life to accomplish his purposes. As Jobes says, *the major theological point of Esther is that throughout history God fulfills his covenant promises through his providence. The contemporary significance of this for application today is that God's will for an individual's life is unfolded through divine providence day by day.*

Friends, Esther is an amazing and wonderful story. And we will find that even though God does not appear in the book, not mentioned in the text, his fingerprints are everywhere in the book of Esther. I believe the Lord will encourage and challenge us in many ways in the weeks ahead.

Okay folks, that is my introduction to the book of Esther. Bryan is preaching next Sunday, so we will start our journey in two weeks. This morning I want to spend the rest of the time reflecting on why it is a worthwhile journey for us to take.

The first reason is because anytime we study a book of the Bible it benefits our souls. We already noted that despite what we might sometimes think, **2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture, EVERY PART OF THE BIBLE is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.**

Now, not all parts of the Bible are profitable in the same way or maybe even equally profitable. As Christ we are part of the new covenant, which I believe, makes reading and studying the New Testament a priority. My opinion if the four gospels and some of the apostle Paul's letters, especially, Romans and Galatians, are what provide a foundation all believers in Jesus need for trusting and following Jesus.

Yet, Paul says it is the Old Testament that is profitable for us. That is true for numerous reasons. First, whenever we read any part of the Old Testament, we learn truth about God. This is certainly the case in the book of Esther. Again, even though He is not mentioned by name, God's fingerprints are all over the story.

Second, anytime we read the Old Testament we learn something about God's story, the story of redemption, which culminates with the birth, death, resurrection, ascension, return and reign of Jesus Christ, forever and ever.

Thus, third, whenever we read the Old Testament, it helps us understand the New Testament better. So often people find different passages in the New Testament difficult to understand, simply because they are unfamiliar with the Old Testament. As we read the book of Esther, we will learn things about Judaism that will help us better understand things that happen in the New Testament. That is a good thing.

So, those are three ways reading any part of the Old Testament can be profitable or beneficial for our souls, for our spiritual health. Now some parts of the Old Testament are more profitable than others. The book of Psalms, for example is full of prayers, praise, and reflections on how the Lord relates to us as human beings. The book of Proverbs is full of wise sayings, truth that will enable us to grow in wisdom. That is very important.

The other parts of the Old Testament, however, that on the surface don't seem as beneficial for our souls. One would be Leviticus, a book full of rules and regulations that no longer apply to us today. Now, Leviticus is God's word for us. Yet, one has to dig a bit deeper in order to find truth that will be spiritually beneficial.

Though the book of Esther is a lot more fun to read than Leviticus, though it is fascinating enough to make a good movie, the spiritual nutrition found in Esther is not always obvious. Remember, the book doesn't even mention God. We need to dig a bit deeper to find the truths the Lord has for us in this book that can strengthen and encourage our souls. That is what we want to do over the next few months. We will be exploring the book in some detail, and will try to dig a little deeper, and discern the truth that the Lord has for us today in this portion of His word.

I am not sure all that will include, but I am confident God has things to say that we need to hear. So, for your well being and the glory of God, I want you to hear them. I hope you are able to join us most Sundays and if not. Please take time

to watch on YouTube. I don't want you to miss out.

The second reason why I believe our journey through Esther will be worthless is because I think the Book speaks very clearly to challenges we as Christians are facing right now, today, 2022. There are some important parallels between Esther and our own time, our own situation. Esther is the story of God's people experiencing God's grace and protection, while they are in exile. It is a story of Jewish people a long way from Jerusalem, a long way from the temple, a long way from the Jewish religion, Judaism. God's people are living in a pagan society. They are ruled by people who don't care about the God of the Bible or anything the Bible teaches. They, the Jews, God's people, are a vulnerable minority in that society.

Friends, as we have noted before, evangelical Christians, Bible believing Christians are a minority in the United States. Even if conservative allies like Roman Catholics and Mormon are included, there is no moral majority in our country. Our beliefs about human sexuality, especial LGBT issues and our insistence that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation are not only not shared by most people in our society but make us dangerous and evil in the eyes of many. And those many folks tend to be very influential in some prominent circles: Especially the entertainment industry, the new media and higher academia. If you are an executive at Disney, or a reporter for CBS, or a professor at the University of Minnesota and people learn that you don't think transgenderism is something to celebrate or think religions that don't recognize Jesus as the eternal son of God are wrong, your job, if not physical well being is at risk. Ye, the United States is not as anti-Christian as Western Europe or Canada, but we seem to be moving in that direction.

Now I want to be clear:

Though we face some opposition, I don't think Christians on the Iron Range are quite as vulnerable as Christian in many other places. For example, I had a conversation with Terry, the director of the Family Life Center in Hibbing. Most of you know that is a pro-life organization our church supports. Its focus is not so much opposing abortion, as helping pregnant women and struggling families so they don't feel forced to choose abortion. Terry and I agreed that the

supreme courts Dobbs decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, will not likely mean violence or even peaceful protests against the Family Life Center. We also agreed that if we were in Minneapolis, or maybe even Duluth, it might be a different story.

Yet, the message Esther has for us as we swim against the current in an increasingly anti-Christian society may be a little different than we expect. The book of Daniel, which covers events that happened just a few years before what occurs in Esther, highlights how Daniel and his friends remained faithful to the Lord even while they were living in a pagan society. They are wonderful examples for us. The book of Esther, however, focuses on how the Lord remains faithful to His people, when they are living in a pagan society. How He remains faithful, even when His people are not all that faithful to Him.

That Friends is why I find Esther to be a very encouraging book. It is a reminder that our ultimate well-being, our eternal joy, is not dependent so much on our faithfulness to God, but on His faithfulness to us. And that is good news. In **2 Timothy 2:13**, the apostle Paul tells us **If we are faithless, he remains faithful-for he cannot deny himself.**

Oh friends, in this increasingly secular world in which we live, it is important that we seek to be faithful to the Lord, I encourage you to strive to be faithful. But I know that sometimes you, like me, will fail. We will be unfaithful. Maybe not in big ways, maybe not in obvious ways, but there will be times when we focus on our own interests, rather than on the Lords, times when we fail to love God with our entire being or lover our neighbor as ourselves.

When that happens it is wonderful to that because the grace found in Jesus Christ, it is not our faithfulness to God, but God's faithfulness to us that matters. It is God's faithfulness that the Jews celebrate in the feast of Purim, it is god's faithfulness through Jesus Christ that we can celebrate every day.