

Series The Story of Esther

This Message #4

Scripture Esther 4:1-17

There are several reasons why Esther is a useful book to study. It is easy to read the story quickly and superficially, without getting into the deeper meanings behind the story, but when we begin to dig deeper, we discover that there is a lot of information to dig into.

First, there is the historical context. Xerxes was a real king — a powerful, vain, ambitious ruler who sought to expand his already enormous Persian empire, but, in trying to do so, he suffered a humiliating military defeat at the hands of a much smaller force of Greek defenders.

Xerxes was the fifth Persian king in the line after Cyrus the Great. Cyrus was the king who defeated the Babylonians and took over the Babylonian empire. One of the characteristics of the Persian kings was their amazing tolerance of the people groups who were under their authority. For example, Cyrus, in the early months of his rule, gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland in Palestine, thus bringing to an end their 70 years of captivity. This happened just as God had predicted many years previously. Cyrus paid for the expenses of their return from the royal treasury, and all the articles which had been removed from the tabernacle in Jerusalem by the Babylonians were given back. However, sadly, only about 50,000 Jews took advantage of the opportunity to return. The vast majority of the Jews were content to remain as part of the diaspora.

Generally speaking, the tolerant attitude of the Persian people for the Jews and other ethnic groups continued for more than 2500 years. When I lived in Iran in the 1970s, there were many ethnic Jewish citizens who were living comfortably in the cities. It was not until the ouster of the Shah and the swing to Islamic fundamentalism that Jews began to outward emigrate. Most of them left Iran by the early 1980s. Some commentators have expressed the thought that one of the main reasons the Persian monarchical system remained in place for so many centuries was because the rulers were tolerant of the Jewish people.

Esther is a good source book to learn about Persian history, and it is also a story from which to learn theology. In the previous message we thought about the reasons for the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, and by extension, the deeper spiritual conflict between Satan and God. Throughout the centuries since the creation of mankind, Satan has tried to thwart the purposes of God. The story of Esther highlights one of the devil's attempts to eliminate the Jews, the chosen people of God. The elimination of the Jews would have meant no Messiah, no salvation for mankind, no possibility of reconciliation between estranged sinners and holy God.

There is another theological lesson which emerges from the story of Esther: it is an object lesson about the sovereignty of God over human affairs. In previous centuries, going all the way back to the temptation and disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3, God made a number of incredible promises about His plans for the redemption of mankind. Having made such promises, God was obligated to fulfill all that He said He would do. Failure to do so would be evidence that God was not the almighty God that He claimed to be. God could not allow anything or any being to discredit His name and reputation.

In the next few minutes I want us to think about another aspect of theology — what is referred to as the “doctrine of God's providence.” This is the theological way of describing how God manages all things in creation in order that He may accomplish His eternal purposes.

The providence of God means that God has perfect knowledge of all things past and future, that He not only knows what will come to pass, but that He is involved in and directs all events throughout time and in every circumstance for His own glory and purposes. Practically speaking, providence means that almighty God has sovereignty over nations, families, and individuals.

God's activity is often hidden in the circumstances of our lives, behind the scenes, undetected by us, but that does not mean that God is not there. God is a spiritual, not a physical Being, and it is His nature to steer and influence and manipulate the choices of people to accomplish His ultimate purposes. As one commentator observed, “providence is the hand of God in the glove of human history.” He wiggles the fingers when it is necessary. As I mentioned in a previous message, God's “invisibility” does not detract from His “invincibility.”

Esther helps us to understand how God both anticipates and prepares for the threats against His divine program. Before Haman was elevated to his position of influence in the kingdom of Xerxes, God had already placed Mordecai and Esther in positions where they would be useful in keeping His eternal purposes on track.

Throughout human history, God has often brought positive results out of negative circumstances, victory out of seeming defeat, good out of evil. Let me give you an example. Think about what happened to Jesus at the crucifixion. When Jesus died, Satan must have assumed that he had, at last, won the victory he had worked for since the creation of mankind. Satan was undoubtedly shocked and terrified to realize, three days later, after the resurrection, that he had, in fact, lost the spiritual war in which he had been engaged. God turned the death of Jesus, what seemed to be a total defeat of divine purposes, into the grandest, most glorious of victories.

As we will learn in Esther, conspiracies against the providence of God are futile. In the passage today we will learn how Mordecai and Esther reacted to the crisis inflicted on them by Haman's edict. Fortunately, they responded to their calling and fulfilled their responsibilities in appropriate ways. There will be some practical lessons for us in this and the following chapters of the story. As the followers of God in our generation, we may be called to stand up for God in the context of our circumstances. All believers have a strategic role in God's purposes, probably not as dramatic and significant as the roles of Esther and Mordecai, but nonetheless important. Let's read what happened after Haman's edict was publicized.

Read Esther 4:1-17

On learning what Haman was planning to do, Mordecai demonstrated his distress and anxiety in typical Middle Eastern fashion: "He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes," and began to "wail loudly and bitterly." He was joined by the Jews of Susa, and, as the couriers disseminated the edict throughout the empire, "there was great mourning among all the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing."

Often these behaviors are outward signs of inner repentance and turning to God, but we don't know if this was the case among the Jews who were in the diaspora. Most of the Jews in the Persian empire had become secularized, and were estranged from the God of their fathers. Not only were they residing far away from the homeland given to them by God, but they had abandoned many of the religious practices of their ancestors.

I'm sure that all the Jews knew the stories about what God had done for their ancestors — the calling of Abraham, how the tribes were named after the sons of Jacob, the years of slavery and the exodus from Egypt, their entry into the promised land, the expansion of their nation under Kings David and Solomon. They would remember the temple worship and the miracles performed on behalf of their ancestors by their God. I'm sure this crisis initiated by Haman, this threat of genocide, brought back memories of the past and got them, once again, after many years, focused back on who they were and, more importantly, Whose they were.

Nothing pulls people back to the basics of their faith like a personal crisis, especially the threat of impending death, and the Jews expressed themselves in their crisis with sackcloth, fasting, and loud wailing. Their voices were raised in shock and dismay at the death penalty which had been pronounced against them. One day they were busily involved in their work and home activities; the next, they were mourning in sackcloth and ashes. We can imagine the impact the news of their impending annihilation must have had on them. They were undoubtedly calling out to the God of their fathers for mercy.

Esther was sequestered in the harem, oblivious to the plot against her people until it was reported to her by Mordecai. Since Mordecai could not come to her, Esther sent one of the eunuchs assigned to her to find out what was going on. After the gravity of the situation was explained to her, and Mordecai urged her to go to the king in order to plead for mercy for the Jewish people, Esther's first inclination was to beg off from such an action because it would require that she reveal her Jewish identity and it would put her life at risk.

Kings were so cautious about their safety that they had various rules in place for personal protection. They deliberately made themselves inaccessible except to those people whom they chose to invite. The penalty for an uninvited entry into the king's presence was death unless the king pardoned the individual by extending his scepter.

Esther was particularly fearful because she had not been summoned by the king for a month, and she did not know whether the king would forgive her if she approached him without a royal summons. Given Xerxes' capricious and unstable character, her trepidation was not without reason.

Mordecai challenged Esther's unwillingness to take action. First, he reminded her that she would not escape Haman's edict just because she was "in the king's house." The terms of the edict did not exempt any Jews. She would be as much endangered by her silence as by her intercession.

Secondly, he warned her that if she failed to use the position to which God had elevated her and she remained silent, deliverance of the Jews would come from another source. The statement and question posed by Mordecai in verse 14 are among the classic texts used to support the doctrine of providence which I described earlier: "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place," and "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" These sentences are the pivotal words in the book of Esther. [*See appendix*]

Let's think about this situation from God's standpoint. He knew what the eventual outcome would be — that His will would be accomplished, that no opposition to His purposes would be successful. Esther was positioned to be His key person to save the Jews. However, God had to wait until the logical arguments of Mordecai, even though they were secular arguments, to convince Esther that she must step forward to do what she could, in spite of the risk involved.

God could have selected another individual to be His key person to save His chosen people, the Jews. He had never been limited to using only Esther, but she had become His sovereign choice. In His foreknowledge and through His influence on human activities, God had, several years previously, put Esther in a strategic position to represent Him and the Jewish people and then had continued to sovereignly guide her, in His unseen and mysterious way, to the moment when she would respond to the challenge.

Mordecai's words to Esther were compelling, even though relayed through a third person. Esther responded affirmatively to Mordecai's instructions. From that point on in the story, she became the chief initiator of action. She directed Mordecai to assemble all the Jews in Susa in order that they might fast for her and with her for three days and nights. After that interval, she promised to go before the king even though it would be a perilous and unpredictable undertaking. In a final expression of courage and willing submission, she said, "If I perish, I perish." It was sort of like saying, "I'll try, even if I die trying."

Mordecai departed from the open square in front of the king's gate to carry out the instructions of Esther. There would be three days for Esther to get emotionally and spiritually prepared for the next action step.

There are some key principles we can extract from this chapter. God provides all of His followers with positions, possessions, or skills that enable them to serve His purposes. Believers should not let opportunities to serve God pass them by. In particular, they must not squander opportunities to be of service because of fear. Believers are often called to risk their resources, positions, and even their lives for the sake of Christ and His gospel. God's kingdom will come, either with us or without us. The will of God will be accomplished whether He has our cooperation or not. However, if we find ourselves in a position to deal with threats to the purposes and program of God, then we must be willing to put our lives at risk for Him. Each time we pray the Lord's prayer, we are asking that His will may be done by us and that His kingdom will come, in part, through us.

Appendix:

Many commentators assume that Mordecai was making, in verse 14, a clear reference to God with these words, and they go on to write at length about Mordecai's confidence in God's intervention on behalf of the Jews. They assume that Mordecai understood that God had been working behind the scenes, directing events so that one of His people would be in a position to help the people of Israel in their time of peril. According to these commentators, Mordecai had confidence that God would deliver His people, and that his only concern was whether or not Esther would choose to be the one through whom God would work.

In my opinion, such an interpretation doesn't fit the context of the story. Previous evidence in the story has caused us to think that Mordecai and Esther were secular, non-observant Jews. If Mordecai was making specific references to God and what God would do, it would mean that he had had a sudden and dramatic conversion experience. I am not sure that that is a warranted assumption. In my opinion, Mordecai was still thinking like a secular Jew, looking for a human solution to prevent the annihilation of his people. In his way of thinking, Esther, in her position as queen, was the only person with adequate influence to approach the king in an effort to get him to reconsider the edict.

There is another reason to interpret verse 14 differently than what is printed in most of our Bibles. It is possible to translate verse 14 so there are two questions. The text could read, "If you remain silent at this time, will relief and deliverance for the Jews come from another place?" and "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" It seems to me that Mordecai is telling Esther that she is the only hope that the Jewish people have, and that her failure to act will condemn herself, her family, and all Jews everywhere to death. This second interpretation does not change anything in regard to the providence of God.

More thoughts gleaned from unknown sources:

Mordecai applied a great deal of pressure on Esther by convincing her that she was the only hope of the Jews. Mordecai was not a godly Jew, one who trusted in God to save his people. In reality, he was a disobedient, unbelieving Jew. He assumes the deliverance of the Jews will be the result of man's initiative. If Mordecai does not mention God in our text, we dare not assume he is trusting in God. Esther is Mordecai's last hope, Israel's last chance for survival. If she fails, all will be lost. And this explains why he threatens Esther that her family will be wiped out. If deliverance comes from elsewhere, then why would Esther die? As queen, Esther will most certainly not die first. Mordecai's warning is that she will die in the end. If this is true, then all Jews will perish, and there will be no deliverance from elsewhere. Mordecai reasons that if Esther is the Jew's last hope, her failure will result in her death and the death of the entire race. No wonder he is so forceful.

Why are Christians so inclined to embrace Esther and Mordecai as model saints, examples of faith and godliness? It is because they err, assuming that people recorded in Scripture are all godly. The story of Esther and Mordecai is an example of reading the Bible through rose-colored glasses, seeing people in a way that makes us feel comfortable, and causing us to fail to understand the message of the book. When interpreting Scripture, too often we assume that if the right forms are present, the right function is present as well. We assume that there was repentance because the Jews mourned in Susa and all of the Persian empire. We also assume that because there was fasting, there must also have been earnest prayer. Since Mordecai spoke of the possibility that Esther's position as queen might prove to be the means of the Jew's deliverance, we automatically assume Mordecai had faith in God and in His providential care of His people.