

## ESTHER – Part 1

### *The Storm Clouds Gather*

In every generation of God's people, from Adam till today, there is a battle to be fought, an enemy to be defeated, and a prize to be won. In our own day, in the streets of our country, and around the world, a battle is being fought — for our old enemy has arisen, and we're racing for the prize that awaits us.

The thing about waging a war, is to know the *risks*, to know who our *enemy* is, and to know *what* we're fighting for. Adam in the Garden was mistaken about all three, and so he fell with a mighty crash into the darkness of sin. I suspect that in our day, we too are mistaken about all three, and there is a potential for this generation to fall into darkness. We Christians need to put on the **full armor** of God — be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

God placed Adam in the Garden, and gave him everything he needed for life and godliness. God gave him the precious gift of **freedom** — freedom of conscience — having a *clear conscience* before God. And then God gave him a choice: What would he do with his freedom? What price would he sell it for? In the end, a piece of fruit was all it took for Adam to surrender his liberty — to sell himself and his progeny into bondage to sin and death.

Adam didn't believe God, as to what was at STAKE. “On the day you eat of that tree you shall surely die.” He didn't recognize the sly serpent as his ENEMY, who lied when he said that God was jealously keeping something from him. Adam didn't understand that he risked the prize *he already had*, which was the freedom to be with God. Adam hoped for a different PRIZE; he wanted to be like God — to be God's **equal**. And so, in his lust, and in his pride, Adam made himself an enemy of God.

Yet God didn't withdraw his love, nor the prize. God redeemed Adam with a blood sacrifice. He put the prize securely in the hands of Christ, to be received by faith alone. But Adam was left with the pain of his transgression; and he was *crippled* by his sin. In the fulness of time, God sent **Christ** into the world, to be the final sacrifice, to forever bear the scars and pain of our sin, so we wouldn't have to. Christ set us free from sin and death.

Yet in every generation, God gathers the storm clouds, to repeat this contest between good and evil, light and darkness. He allows our enemy Satan to array his forces against us. And then He gives us a choice, “*What will we do with our freedom?*”

That's the question asked of a young woman, 450 years before the advent of Christ. Her name was Esther. She would save her people in her generation.

She would put her life at risk, to ensure the People of God would live *by the grace of God*. We'll spend the next three weeks exploring the situation she found herself in, and the choices she made. We'll look at those three things I mentioned: (1) knowing the *risks*, (2) knowing our *enemy*, and (3) knowing *what we're fighting for*.

The Jews call the book of Esther a *Megillah*, a "Dispersion story." It tells where the Festival of *Purim*, or *Lots* came from. But it's more than a story; it's *history*. The king of Persia in this book is named *Ahasuerus*, meaning "I will be silent, and poor" – he was neither. The NIV and NLT identify him as *Xerxes*, an actual historical figure. The text says very little about Mordecai – and some commentators go well beyond what's written.

I encourage you to read Esther in a sitting. It's just 8 typewritten pages – maybe 45 minutes. Curiously, God isn't mentioned in the book. And yet God's sovereignty, and His hand of deliverance, is everywhere to be seen.

The author of the book has been attributed to Ezra, or to the Mordecai mentioned by Ezra and Nehemiah, who returned from captivity in Babylon in 458 BC. *All agree that this book is inspired by the Holy Spirit.*

Determining when a book was written, is always debatable. The Babylonian Captivity began for Judah in 586 BC. The Persian Empire was founded by Cyrus in 539 BC, a half century later. It dominated the entire Middle East for 200 years. Cyrus is mentioned in 2Chronicles, Ezra, Isaiah, and Daniel. Cyrus conquered the Medes, Nineveh, Babylon, Armenia, and Lydia. Persia dominated the lands from India, north to the Caspian Sea, southwest to Egypt, and northwest to present-day Istanbul in Turkey – uniting diverse nations under a single kingdom.

Under Darius I, Persia built a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea, occupying the land east of the Nile down to Ethiopia. Xerxes, the king in this book of Esther, came to power in 486 BC. He was even greater than Darius, with a palace twice the size. His armies were defeated only by the Greeks at Salamis. You may have heard of the 300 Spartans who held off the Persian army in the pass at Thermopylae in 479 BC, before being overrun.

That was just before the events of Esther's life. Xerxes has returned home, humiliated, and in no mood to be trifled with. He threw a six-month party to lick his wounds, *and* to impress the princes of the kingdom, with the wealth he plundered from their nations. That's what he did with *his* freedom.

*And that's where our story begins.* The events of this book, I believe, began about 478 BC, a hundred years after the Babylonian Captivity.

A KEY VERSE is found in chapter 4: “Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?” It’s a question each of us can ask ourselves in our own generation: *What is my role in the Kingdom, in times such as these?*

Esther has many familiar THEMES in it. The one I want to focus on is that *God is completely sovereign, and we are completely responsible*. God’s sovereignty is no excuse for our inaction. We choose to pick up our cross *daily* to follow Christ — knowing the cost.

We won’t have time to read every line of the ten chapters. So ***Spoiler alert!*** Here’s the plot, and the cast of characters. This is a description of how God works in and through His people — sometimes putting us in situations where life and liberty are at risk. *Choose this day whom you will serve*. (Jos 24.15)

Now, here are the ten chapters of this book, in brief. We want to see God’s plan from beginning to end:

**Chapter 1** –Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, has called for his head wife, *Vashti*, to attend his party. He wants to impress his guests with her beauty. She’s a trophy wife. She’s called the *queen*, but the Hebrew word for queen, *malkah*, can also refer to the principal wife in a harem. She’s throwing a party of her own down the hall. And so, *in her pride*, she declines the king’s invitation. If the king ignores her rebuff, his advisors tell him, it will set a bad example, and undermine *his* authority, and that of every husband in the empire.

Queen Vashti does not obey the king’s notice to appear before him, and he divorces her. It results in a royal decree throughout the empire that all wives will honor their husbands.

**Chapter 2** – A beauty contest is held to select Vashti’s replacement. A Jew named *Mordecai* had been raising his uncle’s beautiful daughter *Hadassah* as his own. Her Persian name is *Esther*. She is gathered up with the other beauties. Mordecai warns her not to reveal her Jewish identity, then follows her to the palace. The King falls in love with Esther; she replaces Vashti. Mordecai overhears an assassination plot against the king, and warns Esther. The King is saved, and it’s recorded in the *Chronicles* of the king’s reign.

**Chapter 3** – Haman the Amalekite is appointed second-in-charge in the empire. Haman requires everyone to bow down to him, as they would to the king. But Mordecai refuses because he’s a Jew; he bows only to God, or God’s anointed. Haman learns of this and plots to destroy all the Jews throughout the empire by having the king issue a decree. But when? Lots were cast, called *purim*; the date was set for 12 months later – *that’s God’s timing* (Pro 16.33).

**Chapter 4** – Mordecai and all the Jews begin to mourn in sackcloth and ashes when they learn of the decree. Mordecai petitions Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of the Jews, but she’s afraid. Yet she resolves to do what she must do to save her people, even at the cost of her own life. “**If I perish, I perish.**” She asks Mordecai to have the people of God fast for three days and nights on her behalf.

**Chapter 5** – Esther prepares herself to be seen by the king, to find his favor, and be summoned into his presence. The king offers her *anything* she wants, “**up to half the kingdom.**” Before making her desires known, she begs him to attend a private banquet she is preparing for him — and to invite Haman.

Haman doesn’t know Esther’s identity, nor her relationship to Mordecai. He has ordered that a gallows be built for Mordecai, who still won’t bow to him.

**Chapter 6** – The king is having a restless night, so he has the Chronicles read to him. He’s reminded that Mordecai saved him from the assassination plot. He decides to honor Mordecai, and asks Haman how to honor someone. Haman (this is funny), thinking **he** is the one to be honored, lays out an elaborate ceremony – but then he’s told to fetch Mordecai for the honor. He’s *livid*, and he’s *humiliated*. And he lets it be known to friends and family.

**Chapter 7** – At the banquet, Esther reveals her heritage to the king, and tells him of Haman’s plot to destroy her and her people. The king is enraged, and orders Haman hanged on the gallows built for Mordecai.

**Chapter 8** – Esther is granted the house of Haman, and she puts Mordecai in charge of it. She then pleads with the king to repeal his decree condemning the Jews – but the king says that’s not possible; what’s written cannot be unwritten. Instead, he tells her and Mordecai to write a separate decree in his name. The decree that was written gave the Jews the right to defend themselves. The Jews feast in every town, in celebration of *the good news*.

**Chapter 9** – On the eve that the first decree was to be executed, the Jews rise up against their enemies and defeat them; their enemies fear Mordecai, who now rules over the house of Haman. Mordecai declares that there will be an annual *Feast of Purim* among the Jews to celebrate this rest from their enemies. On these two days of feasting, they are to send presents to one another, and give gifts to the poor. It’s still celebrated today.

**Chapter 10** – Mordecai becomes second-in-charge in all of Persia, as Joseph did in Egypt. He earned the king’s favor and that of all the Jews. He was a man who sought the good of his people, and spoke peace to all his seed. OK! Take a breath.

You may think this is a great plot, with interesting characters — political intrigues — good guys and bad guys — a hero and a heroine — and a happy ending. But this was also **real life**, with *real dangers*, and *real choices*.

In God's economy there are no unplanned events, no surprises, no accidents. He orders all things in accordance with His will, to accomplish His purposes. God says, "**I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do **all** these *things*.**" (Isa 45:7 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

We may be *surprised* by some events; or find ourselves in circumstances in which we have no idea what God plans to do, or how it will end. But hear this: our confidence must **not** be in the outcome. Our confidence must be **in God alone**. In other words, we may not be able to determine **why** something has happened. And we may not be able to control **how** things will turn out. But ***we do have control*** over what we do in the circumstances.

So, God is sovereign; BUT, *we also have free will*. We *freely* choose how to respond to what God has *sovereignly* ordained. When we come to Christ, the Spirit of God must first regenerate our faculties, and break the bonds of sin that enslaved our minds and hearts. We must be **born again**, so that we may **freely** accept God's gracious offer of redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. And then we **freely** choose to be led by the Spirit, and no longer by the flesh. *That's* our liberty, as sons of God, and as co-heirs with Christ. *What will we do with our freedom?*

Mordecai had liberty as a child of God. And he had an opportunity to save the king's life. He wasn't thinking of a reward. He simply did what was **right**. He demonstrated, he *testified*, that he worships the one righteous and just God. Mordecai literally stood up for God. He didn't bow to a man who thought of himself as a god. He took the risk of offending this powerful man, by doing what was **right**, according to his conscience.

Esther was likewise freed from her servitude. She was given an opportunity to live in the palace, in ease and luxury. She had an opportunity to save her people. By interceding for her people, she might lose not only her *comfort*, but her *life*. She chose to risk *both*, to do what was **right**.

So for the rest of our time today, and over the next two weeks, we're going to learn what this situation reveals about the will of God for us *today*, in our current situation — whether it's personal, or with regard to the church, or with regard to our conduct in the world.

We'll take the book in three parts.

**SLIDE**



Chapters 1-3 today; “*The Storm Clouds Gather.*” Satan is at work in every generation, provoked and enraged by the children of God, who obey God and will not bow down to him. God not only permits the darkness to gather, but His design is that we *provoke* and *expose* Satan who hides in the darkness, by shining the Light of Christ *into* that darkness (Eph 5.11).

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (Joh 1:5) For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, (2Co 4:6) so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, (Phi 2:10)

#### SLIDE

Chapters 4-6 next time; “*God is Mighty to Save.*” God doesn’t put His people in harm’s way without cause or purpose. He puts us between a rock and a hard place, to help us walk the straight and narrow, following in the paths of Christ’s righteousness. **And as we do**, God is glorified, and we are purified.

And they shall call them The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; And you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken. (Isa 62:12) The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zep 3:17)

#### SLIDE

We’ll finish with Chapters 7-10 the following week. “*The Call to Action.*” God ordains the outcome of all things, but God also ordains the *means* to be used. God acts **through** his people, **by** His Spirit, **for** His *glory* and *our good*. That means God will give us an opportunity to **act**, in His name.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **does them** will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the Rock. (Mat 7:24-25 <sup>ESV</sup>) “Work out **your own** salvation with *fear and trembling*; for it is **God** who works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Phi 2.12)

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**OK. Chapters 1-3.** *The Storm Clouds Gather.* We see that as the *darkness* is gathering, God is gathering and positioning *His people* – Again, He works *through* His people, to fulfill His purposes. Let’s look at how this plays out.

In chapter one, we’re given a glimpse of the opulence of Persia. All of the officials and servants of the king, all the nobles and princes of the provinces are called before him. All the riches of his kingdom, and the splendor of his majesty, are on display for all to see. But all of this materialism diminishes

individuals. Like Vashti, an unloved trophy wife, people have become commodities — expendable, replaceable. That's part of the darkness; and it's the reason why God will bring the light of His people into that darkness.

After six months with strangers, the King throws another week-long party, just for those in the palace — those who have known the king and queen for years. But I imagine Vashti is no longer impressed by the wealth and the feasts — they're empty shells — like her. Her only worth is found in the eyes of others, and in her utility to the King. This isn't God's design for marriage. So when the King summons her like a servant, to entertain his guests, I think she's had enough. Knowing the risk, she refuses — perhaps hoping for the prize of a husband's love. But rather than ask forgiveness, and honor his wife, the King listens to his advisors. He divorces Vashti; he demeans her, *again*.

Once he sobers up, the King realizes that his favorite wife is gone — his precious possession has been lost. He's depressed and dejected. So his servants — *sycophants* and *flatterers* — suggest a beauty contest to find a replacement for Vashti. Anyone will do, as long as she's pretty. They have no concept of the dignity and worth of a woman in the sight of God. *And that too is part of the darkness.*

But God will show them a different sort of beauty altogether. A young orphan named Esther has been adopted by her older cousin. They live in a foreign land, speak a foreign language, and use foreign names to fit in with the locals. Generation upon generation of Jews have been born and raised in exile in Persia. Esther has learned to hide her *heritage* well, for fear of harm. **And yet**, she hasn't abandoned her *faith* in God, nor denied her people.

Esther's Jewish name, *Hadassah*, means *Myrtle*. It's the name she's known by among the Jews. But among the *goyim*, the outsiders, she's known as *Esther*, taken from the Persian goddess Ishtar. The reason she's among those selected to come to the king's palace, is her God-given beauty. God will use this gift to position her in the palace, for what lies ahead. And how differently she'll be treated by this King, than Vashti was. From Esther's vantage point, it's a golden opportunity: to move from her father's house, to the king's palace, where she'll have choices and opportunities that others don't have. *But God is placing her there, for **His** purposes — not hers.*

All her life she's had to compromise with the culture. Now she'll have new choices, in new surroundings, with new people, and new customs. She'll be among the rich and powerful, *as one of them*. Till now she's led an ordinary life, among ordinary people. Her godly character is all she'll take with her — because all the externals of her old life will be washed away.

How much of her identity will she keep? And how much will she keep *secret*? It's a question we *Christians* wrestle with, living in a wealthy, pagan culture like America. What light are we shining into this present darkness? What do we hold onto that defines us? In Esther 2.8 and 9, we catch a glimpse of the *qualities* of this young woman, apart from her external beauty. Listen:

<sup>8</sup> Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai [the king's eunuch – and Esther's advisor], who was custodian of the women. <sup>9</sup> Now the young woman **pleased** him, and she obtained his **favor**; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance.

Other translations use “special diet” for “allowance” in verse 9. She's a Jew, and certain foods are forbidden. But she can't reveal that she's a Jew, or use it as an excuse for a different diet. This was Daniel's situation as an exile. Curiously, Hagai agrees to meet her needs. *That's God's hand at work.*

<sup>9</sup> Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king's palace, and [Hagai] moved her and her maidservants to the best *place* in the house of the women.

Esther has built a trusting relationship with him, and with her maidservants. Verse 15. After a year of training and preparation, when it's her turn to go to the king, she follows Hegai's advice to the letter. He saw something in Esther that was different from the others; she had *a different spirit*. The people of God, children of light, have a *different spirit* than those of the world.

We're told that Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who considered her. She has won the affection of Hagai and others, *not by her beauty*, but by her heart. Verse 17, **And the King loved Esther more than all the other women**. She has gained the love of the King — this too is *by God's hand*.

What about Mordecai? He's obviously a kind, generous, and compassionate man, who adopted his orphaned cousin as his own daughter. He brought her into his home, and taught her the ways of God. They're both strangers in a strange land – like Moses in Egypt.

When Esther was taken from him, Mordecai was compelled to follow her to the palace. It says in verse 2.11, that every day Mordecai would pace in front of the women's quarters to learn of her welfare. He wasn't passive; he didn't abandon her. He was attentive to her situation, watching out for her as best he could – finding out how she was doing. He did this for the whole year she was preparing for the king. In fact, Mordecai was sitting at the King's gate when Esther was presented to the King. He was moved by a father's love, to keep contact with his beloved daughter, through her devoted maidservants.



*That was part of God's design.* Being well-positioned, Mordecai overhears two of the king's eunuchs plotting to kill the King. He couldn't contact the king, *but God had provided a means*, through Esther's servants. Esther informs the King "in Mordecai's name," verse 22. The king was saved; and the incident was recorded in the book of the Chronicles, in the King's presence. *And there — seemingly — it ended.*

There was no thank you note; no free dinner at Wendy's; *nothing*. But Mordecai didn't take offense at this. He went on doing whatever it was he did to pay the bills, and to watch over his daughter. *His motives weren't to get ahead, but to be available to Esther. God used Mordecai's love, to further His purposes, for His own glory, and the good of God's people.* And now for the last piece in this gathering storm.

**Chapter 3.** Enter the bad guy. Haman is being *used by God*, even though he's serving *Satan's ends*. God ordains ***all things***. God lets Haman's desire for fame and glory, lead him to obtain a decree that the people should bow down to him, as they would bow down to the king. And the king signs off on it! Haman is a VERY wealthy man. He has influence with the King, above all the other princes. He was the Zuckerberg, Soros, or Bezos of his time – and like them, he was a bit full of himself.

But there at the King's gate, while everyone else is bowing down to Haman as if he were royalty, is the old Benjamite Mordecai. All the King's servants at the gate bow when Haman walks by; but NOT Mordecai. **Verse 3.2.** When asked by those servants, "Why not?" Mordecai lets the cat out of the bag, verse 4. He tells them he's a Jew. **WHY does he say that???** Why ***now***? Why over ***this***? Because God *causes* him to. God has positioned His people, and the time is ripe. God brings the Storm that Satan thinks will destroy God's people. God *causes* Mordecai to reveal his true identity, *for a purpose*.

Remember, Satan thought he'd won when Christ went to the cross; but in the very act of dying, Christ saved his people. When things are darkest, when the sun goes black, when the winds blow, God is still *sovereign over all*.

*The People of God bend the knee to God*, or to His *anointed*, as David did to Saul — God appoints kings and rulers. But to bend the knee to this pompous fool, who wrote the very decree that commanded others to bow to him, was beyond the pale. Mordecai wouldn't do it. It seems like God sent Mordecai to the King's palace to poke the bear, Haman. God will use this situation to free His people. God would have them worship Him ***openly***, even in their exile. And yet, for that to happen, something *terrible* is about to follow.

Haman won't punish just *Mordecai* for this injury to his pride. He'll punish all of Mordecai's *people* – all of **God's people**. Haman has no fear of God. Why is this?

Esther 3.1 says that Haman is an “Agagite,” a descendent of **Agag**, who was king of the Amalekites, a *thousand years* earlier. Agag was killed by Samuel for his crimes against the people of God (1Sam 15). Haman repeats here the sins of his father, Agag. Our nature **cannot** change, unless **God** changes it.

Haman goes to the King. He asks for a decree to exterminate the Jews, and take all their money. He pledges 10,000 talents of silver – about 17 million dollars – to be paid to those who will carry it out. He puts a price on the head of every Jew in Persia, to fund a mob in every province, to murder the Jews.

Mordecai refused to bow to one man, Haman; and now the life of every Jew in Persia is at risk. *How can **that** be part of God's plan??*

Everything that happens, happens for a reason known only to God. In every circumstance, our *only* duty, is to **do what's right**. It makes life simple, if we know the right thing to do. God didn't leave Adam wondering what the right thing to do was. And He hasn't left **us** wondering. He wrote it all down for us in His word. We might not find our exact circumstances in the pages of Scripture, but the principles which govern it **are**. And God provides us with examples to teach us the right thing to do in any given situation.

The stage is set; the players have been positioned; and the hand of God is at work. Next week we'll see how Mordecai and Esther respond to the situation that God has placed them in.

As I said earlier, God's sovereignty is no excuse for our inaction. Mordecai *chose* to act to protect the king; and Esther chose to use her opportunities well. They both knew the *risks*; they knew their *enemy*; and they knew what they were *fighting for*. **So must we**.

*Each of us has been positioned by God for such a time as this – in our jobs, in our homes, in our situations, and in *this church*. We've been called to arise in our generation, to fulfill God's purposes for His people, to the praise of His glory.*

God is completely sovereign, and we are completely responsible. *That **frees** us to act*, as God gives us opportunity. Be watchful. Recognize the times. Do what's right, *whatever* the situation. Stand firm in your faith.

**Let's pray.**