

Esther – Part 2

God is Mighty to Save

We're looking at the book of Esther in three parts. Last time we did an overview of the book, in which I suggested that in every generation God brings a storm, to set up a contest between good and evil, light and darkness. And *in* that contest, God positions His people for what lies ahead. He puts us in strategic locations in which we must exercise our faith, putting on the full armor of God. We take the battle to the very gates of hell, so that the Light of Christ may shine in the darkness. We **will** overcome, by God's grace. That's to God's glory, and our good.

This doesn't make God the author of sin. It means that God is completely sovereign, over ALL things; and we're completely responsible for our actions in every circumstance in which God places us. God determines the outcome according to His *will* alone, and for His *purposes* alone. And yet God works *through His people*, to bring about His will in the world. We are free agents, in whom God's mighty power is at work, to accomplish His purposes. Paul puts it this way,

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“To this *end* **I also labor**, striving according to **His working**, which works **in me** mightily.” (Col 1:29 ^{NKJ}) “It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” (Phi 2.13)

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In any battle between light and darkness, good and evil, we must know three things: (1) the risks; (2) who our enemy is; and (3) what we're fighting for.

Now, a Christian's salvation is never at risk, because we're held in the hand of Christ. None can pluck us from his hand; we're *eternally* secure. *But if we stand for Christ*, our lives and liberty in this world may be at risk. Our fortunes, and our sacred honor, as the American founders put it, may also be at risk. But *we don't live here*; not really. We're *foreigners* – strangers in a strange land – we're looking forward to another country, a better country, a heavenly country – where God has prepared a city for us (Heb 11.13-16).

Esther is a young woman. She and her adoptive father have grown up in exile, in the Persian empire. But they haven't forgotten who they are in the sight of God. They haven't forgotten their heritage. They've adapted themselves to the ways of these foreigners, and taken foreign names. But – like Joseph, and Moses, and Ezra, and Nehemiah – they know they are **God's** people; they are remnants of a chosen race. They are Israel, even when Israel has no place to call its own, and nowhere to rest its head.

They look forward to the Messiah who is to come, who will deliver them. And yet, entirely dependent on God's grace and strength, they will, as they have opportunity, do what is right in God's sight – they will do good to all people, but especially to the people of God (Gal 6.10).

If we simply do what's right, not worrying about **why** things have happened, or **how** things will turn out, we'll always be in a position to be used by God.

Here's a recap of the first three chapters.

Chapter 1 – Ahasuerus, or *Xerxes*, is the King of Persia. He has thrown a six-month party to celebrate the accomplishments of his empire, and to entertain his officials from his 127 provinces. He calls for his queen, or his favorite wife, to join the party.

Queen Vashti does not obey the king's notice to appear before him and he divorces her; this 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 bow to the king. But Mordecai refuses because he's a Jew; he bows only to God, or to 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.

Today we'll examine chapters 4-6. How will God deliver His people from the hands of the enemy – not *Haman*, but *Satan*? Our enemy is never the people that Satan uses and abuses; they're his *victims*, his prisoners. **Satan** is our constant enemy and accuser; and we set the prisoners free, with the Gospel.

God isn't mentioned in this book; but His presence is clearly evident. His people are under His care, even in exile – even in the dire circumstances that God has placed them in – yes, that **GOD** has placed them in. If God is sovereign over all, then whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, they're the result of God's will. They're *not just bad luck*; we're **not victims**. We're more than conquerors, strategically placed in the field of battle.

Satan isn't mentioned in this book either; but his snares and tactics should be familiar. The question on the table, for the Jews *then*, and for us *now*, is "What are we fighting for?" It *cannot* be just for survival. If that's all life is for, *surviving*, then why should we put ourselves at risk? Just *fit in, stay low*, be *invisible*. The story of Esther is not about survival, but about prospering by God's hand, *wherever* we may find ourselves. It's about our *devotion* to God, our *dependence* on God, and our *trust* in God. Knowing we're in His hand, we can willingly *surrender* ourselves to His care. In Gospel terms,

"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal 2.20)

We'll see three more things we need in a spiritual battle: (1) *get* informed and *make others* informed; (2) *fast* and *pray*; (3) have a *plan*, not just a *speech*.

OK. At the close of chapter 3, verse 13, Haman's decree has gone throughout the empire, "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, ... and to plunder their possessions." We're told that when it was announced in Shushan, where the King resided, he and Haman sat down to have a drink together – as if it was business as usual – as if the *genocide* of the people of God was no big deal. In every genocide, the leaders convince one group, that they're the victims of the other group, claiming it gives them the right to kill and plunder the others. That's what Hitler told his followers about the Jews. Like I said, these are *familiar tactics* – even today.

We read that the city itself – not just the Jews – the *whole city* – was "perplexed," or in a state of confusion. They didn't know what would happen once the decree was enforced. It would be anything *but* "business as usual," for *them*. Friends and neighbors, customers in their shops, their children's playmates, would be hunted down and killed. How would they explain that to their children? How could they live with it? Those who make such decisions, are usually *not* the ones who must live with the consequences. We're also seeing *that* in our own day.

Chapter 4. "When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the *midst of the city*. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry."

This was a **public** lament. In part, this was *his* doing; it was the consequence of his not bowing down to Haman. Maybe he questioned whether it was worth it. Did he do what was right in the sight of God, or was it just his pride? We can second-guess ourselves after we take a costly stand. The time for deliberation and prayer is **before** we act, not **after**. Then we stand firm.

² He went as far as the front of the king's gate, for no one *might* enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

That's an interesting rule, isn't it? No right of public protest, no shedding of tears are permitted within the sight or hearing of the King. He's above human compassion; the suffering he causes is of no concern to him. It's an attitude of privilege and superiority. This is what Esther must deal with, and persuade him against, if she is to save her people. But I'm getting ahead...

³ And in every province where the king's command and decree arrived, *there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and **many** lay in sackcloth and ashes.*"

When I say that God is not mentioned, but God is everywhere to be seen; when I say that Esther, Mordecai, and the other exiles have not forgotten that they are the people of God, **THIS** is the evidence of it.

They're not fasting for its own sake. They're not trying to impress the locals, or change the King's mind by it. They're not doing it to elicit compassion from their neighbors. These are acts of contrition ***in the sight of God***. HE is the one they're reaching out to. Prayer is nowhere mentioned in Esther; but fasting and prayer often go together, hand in glove. The people of God are reaching out to God to *deliver* them, as He delivered them from bondage in Egypt; as He delivered them from their enemies in Israel; as He delivered their relatives who have *returned* to Israel. They know the word of the Lord, and they've taught it to their children — like these verses:

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¹¹ Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, ***your salvation comes***; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."

¹² And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City **Not** Forsaken. (Isa 62:11-12 ^{ESV})

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"It is I, speaking in righteousness, ***mighty to save***." (Isa 63:1 ^{ESV})

⁹ They will call upon my name, and ***I will answer them***. I will say, "They are my people"; and they will say, "The LORD is my God." (Zec 13:9 ^{ESV})

And so they call upon the Lord, and call Him their God, contrite in heart and humble in Spirit. For who else can deliver them in the day of their trouble?

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¹⁰ When *I wept and humbled my soul with fasting*, it became my reproach.

¹¹ When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. ¹² I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.

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¹³ But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your ***steadfast love*** answer me in your ***saving faithfulness***. ¹⁴ *Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.* (Psa 69:10-14 ^{ESV})

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Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about the unrest in town; she was deeply distressed. She sent clothing to Mordecai, to change out of his sackcloth— as though these were mere outward gestures, and not the evidences of a broken and contrite heart. She's young, and clueless, living in the lap of luxury for a couple of years now. She's been isolated from the world outside the palace, insulated from its pain and sorrows. Her every need is attended to. She wants for nothing.

You might think she forgot her roots, or she's hoping that if she keeps her secret, she can continue her life of ease. *But that's not what's going on.* She's been kept ignorant; she's unaware of what's going on. When Mordecai won't accept her gifts, she sends one of her eunuchs to find out **why**. That's how we know she lacks *knowledge*, not wit.

Mordecai explains to the eunuch what has happened, and gives him a copy of the decree, so Esther has it. She needs to be *informed*, so she *understands the danger*. Mordecai asks the eunuch to tell Esther to go to the king to intercede for her people. The eunuch conveys her father's message.

Esther isn't sure she can do what is being asked of her. If the King doesn't call for her, and she shows up *uninvited*, it could be her death. The King must hold out the golden scepter to her, granting her access to his presence. But she hasn't been in his presence for over a month now, and she has no idea when it might be. She sends the eunuch back to Mordecai to let him know.

Here is what I think is the key verse in the whole book. Mordecai explains the facts of life to her, *because she's failing to connect the dots*. His fatherly advice isn't easy to give, because he knows he's asking her to risk her life. But her life is at risk either way. She needs to hear it, from *him*. This isn't a rebuke. It's an exhortation, spoken in love, with a breaking heart. Verse 13.

“Don't think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews.” ¹⁴ *“For if you remain completely silent at this time,*

relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place [i.e., God **will** save His people], but you and your father's house will perish. Yet *who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*"

Will **you** be God's means to fulfill His will? It's a question each of us is faced with when we're between a rock and a hard place. When we look at our circumstances in *worldly* terms, and not in *heavenly* terms, we need to be reminded of who we are, and where we're headed. We're just visitors here. We have work to do while we're here, and we can't shirk our responsibilities. *But we must not mistake this world for our home*. We can be beguiled by Satan's temptations as easily as Esther. This world has many blessings to offer. What will we sell our soul for? A piece of fruit, as our father Adam did? Or will we stand firm, in obedience and submission to God?

Mordecai is letting Esther know that she has a decision to make. Is she an imitation Persian, or a true Israelite, in whom there is no deceit? (Joh 1.47)

Esther receives her father's counsel, and embraces the choice set before her. *She gets it*. She has indeed come to the kingdom, for such a time as this. God has placed her there, and He may use her however seems good to Him.

She sends a message to Mordecai, perhaps her farewell.

"Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"

If she is to survive her trial, it must be by God's hand. It is Christ surrendering to the Father, *"Into your hands I commit my spirit."* (Luk 23.46) Esther isn't a type of Christ; she's a type of the Church – testifying of God's deliverance of His people through their only Savior.

Chapter 5. The three days of fasting are over. Knowing that God has heard the cries of His people, Esther can surrender herself to Him. It's time to act.

She dresses in her royal robes; she lets herself be seen by the King, across the courtyard, demure, inviting. Now, just as God changes the heart of a sinner, and gives him life and breath – *eyes to see and ears to hear* – God opens the King's heart to receive his bride into his presence. The King held out his scepter to her. And as she went near, she touched the top of the scepter – to acknowledge his kindness, and as a sign of her submission to his power. *She says... nothing*. So the king says, ⁶*"What is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your request, up to half the kingdom. It shall be done!"*

That sounds like a prime opportunity to blurt out everything. But Esther is wiser than that; she's spent three days in prayer and fasting, calling upon God for guidance, depending on God to go before her.

God has given her the words to speak in the presence of the king, just as He promises to give **us** the words when the time comes (Mat 10.19).

Esther has prepared a plan of action, not just a speech. *Timing is everything*, and so is the *setting*. She tells the King that she has prepared a banquet for the next day; she invites both him and his right-hand man, Haman. She'll delay making her request till then. Now it's *Haman* who doesn't have a clue. He doesn't know she's a Jew. Neither does he know that she's Mordecai's daughter. He's operating in the dark, as a creature of darkness.

In any good story, the reader likes to identify with the hero or heroine. And in this historical novel of Mordecai and Esther, we'd like to believe we would have acted as they did — that we're *honorable* and *noble*, like Mordecai, who saved the King's life, and expected nothing in return — that we are *young*, *beautiful*, and *wise*, like Esther, and have the world at our fingertips. Yup, we like to fantasize. *But in reality*, there are many things about Haman, that are all too familiar in our own life. We may recognize in Haman a lot of the things we don't like in ourselves.

I'm going to read this description of how Haman reacts to Esther's invitation, of how he reacts to Mordecai's continued refusal to bow down to him — how he speaks of himself to his family and friends — and how he responds to flattery. How Haman thinks of himself, and speaks about himself, is a lot like many of us think of ourselves. The Bible never once says that we suffer from a lack of self-esteem. It assumes just the opposite. Listen, chap. 5, verse 9:

⁹ So Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and that he did not stand or tremble before him, he was filled with **indignation** against Mordecai. ¹⁰ Nevertheless Haman restrained himself and went home, and **he sent and called for** his friends and his wife Zeresh. ¹¹ Then Haman told them of his great **riches**, the multitude of his **children**, everything in which the king had **promoted** him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and servants of the king. [He's all about *status*, and *position*, and *possessions*, and *accolades*.]

¹² Moreover Haman said, "Besides, Queen Esther **invited no one but me** to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am *again* invited by her, along with the king. ¹³ "Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."

If there's even one thing wrong, amidst all this fame, wealth, and glory, he's not content. He's a whiner, a complainer. And he lets everyone know it.

¹⁴ Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet." And that pleased Haman; so he had the gallows made.

It's horrifying to think that his wife and friends would suggest such a thing, speaking of it offhandedly the way they did. But Haman, like all of us, draws around himself people who think like he thinks, behave as he behaves, and want what he wants. *Peas in a pod*. He has no one near him, who might disagree with him, no one to call him to account – *no true friends*. And maybe that's why God sent him this ornery old Jew named Mordecai, who won't mask the truth, who won't honor this dishonorable man, who grates on Haman's nerves. It's important to have a friend who speaks the truth to us, *lovingly* – even when we don't want to hear it. It's to expose our sin; to let in the healing light; to uphold God's justice; and to demonstrate **God's** love, which *will not let us continue down a sinful path unopposed*.

Chapter 6. God keeps the King from sleeping. He wants a pleasant bedtime story, about how great he is. So he has his servants fetch the Chronicles, with all his mighty deeds. Curiously – this is a God thing – they open to the page about how Mordecai saved the King's life. He's surprised to learn that nothing was done to honor Mordecai, the unpretentious savior of the empire.

The King calls for someone in the court to advise him. Haman is standing there, so the King calls him in, and asks a question, without a context. He asks, "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?" Of course, being full of himself, Haman thinks the King means HIM. So he gets out his wish list of things he'd like for himself – such as wearing the King's robes, and riding the King's horse in front of all the people, so they can see how important he is, and worthy of their praise.

The King says it sounds great; *go do that for Mordecai*... Haman is mortified. By the King's command, he must honor the man he wants to hang. God's sense of humor is wonderfully portrayed here.

After Mordecai is honored, he returns to the King's gate, unimpressed by his 15 minutes of fame. But Haman went home, head covered, mourning for himself. He complained to his wife and friends about what happened. But now his wife rubs salt in the wound. She says, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him."

Like Rahab, she's heard of the God of the Jews. Haman is then summoned to Esther's party, where an even worse fate awaits him. *But that's for next week.*

APPLICATION

Every day of our lives, and every circumstance of our lives, is a day in court. We're not necessarily in a trial because we're the accused, but because we're witnesses. *God* is often the accused. Or *Christ* is the accused. The people of this world *love* this world, and the *things* of this world. They lust after its material comforts and its pleasures, like the king and Haman did. They're materialists. They look for comfort first, and purpose second. They resent the very idea that God must come *first*, or that only Christ can save us from our sin. They reject the very idea of sin, justice, and Judgment. Other people are treated as though they exist to serve them, and to meet their needs.

Rather than submit to God, they raise their fist to Him, and accuse Him of injustice; they mock Christ, and believe they can save themselves. Or they claim that Judgment and hell are a figment of our imagination, and there's *nothing to be saved from*. They are deaf and blind – **dead** in trespasses and sins, and don't know it. They live in bondage, thinking they're free.

But we know different. And so we're called to testify of the truth of the Gospel, *not only* by what we say, but by how we live. Like ESTHER, we need a plan of action, and not just a pretty speech. Like MORDECAI, we must be informed about what's going on around us, recognize the danger, and take effective action. They built their lives on the word of God; they *lived* as the people of God. And in the end, they let it be known that they *are* the people of God, even in exile, even when it will cost them dearly. They were witnesses to the goodness and the justice of God. ***That's*** what life is for.

We fast and pray for the lost. We have a God-given plan of action. We warn those who don't know Christ, of the danger they're in, and of the Judgment to come. God wakes these prisoners from their sleep of death, convinces them of their sin, persuades them, *through us*, that Christ died on the cross to **atone** for their sin. God converts their soul, and sanctifies their life –they become new creations. ***He is MIGHTY to save.*** Having redeemed them, God adopts them, and enlists them, to testify of what Christ has done for them. And then they too become the light in the darkness.

We cry out to the lost, "Flee from sin, flee to Christ, that you may ***live free!***" Let me ask, Are ***you*** the one we're crying out to today? Have *you* fled to Christ? If not, *why not??* Why not ***now?*** Why would you continue to live in sin and despair? ***Come*** to Christ. He is mighty to save ***you*** – ***now.*** *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.* (Act 16.31)

We need to remember what life is for.

This *life* is NOT all there is. If this life is the most important thing to you, then every hurt, every loss, every affront, every disappointment, every fear, will provoke you to complain to God and to men, that all is not well in your kingdom – ***your*** kingdom, not God's. The truth is, we **own** *nothing* here – we are **owed** *nothing* here. Not by God; not by men.

The Church is under attack today, just as it has been since the beginning. Our enemy, Satan — the great Dragon of John's Revelation — is enraged with the woman, who is the Church. He “**makes war with her offspring, who keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.**” (Rev 12.17) He seeks our destruction, but God is mighty to save. Let us call upon God in our hour of trouble. Come quickly Lord Jesus. ***Deliver your people!***

Let's pray.