



Moments for YOU

Volume 54, Number 2

Theme: Esther

TRAGEDY, YET HOPE

What can be said for the religious purpose or message of a book in the Bible that mentions a certain Persian king 190 times in 167 verses but mentions God not at all? Martin Luther is recorded to have said, “I am so great an enemy to the ... book of ... Esther, that I wish [it] had not come to us at all.” Most Christians are less outspoken, but they nevertheless harbor much doubt and confusion as to the true message God wants to convey to His people through this portion of His holy Word.

KILLING FOR GOD?

In the first place, the very idea of an Israelite theocracy is offensive to many Christians today. Can we take seriously the idea that God delivered millions of Israelites from bondage and settled them in Canaan when doing so involved the death of vast numbers of Egyptians and Canaanites? How could the holy God of Israel then destroy Gentiles throughout the Persian empire and record this slaughter in the book of Esther without any reference to Himself?

The answer to the first question is found in the fundamental attributes of God and the nature of sinful man in the light of God’s eternal purposes. God is absolutely holy and sinful man has no right to stand before Him (Genesis 6:6-8). However, God is also gracious, and has determined to bless nations in proportion to their response to His message through one nation, Israel, created by His sovereign grace (Gen. 12:1-3; Deut. 7:6-11).

FORSAKEN BY FORSAKING GOD

For Jews to have adopted the pacifistic attitude of “live and let live”

toward idolatrous Gentiles in Palestine would have been to invite divine judgment (Judges 1-2). Such a tragedy is what finally happened. Because of centuries of disobedience, especially in religious compromise with Gentile neighbors, first the northern tribes (722 B.C.) and then Judah (586 B.C.) were deported and scattered throughout Mesopotamia and beyond. However, in 536 B.C., only half a century before the opening scenes of Esther, fifty thousand Jews were led by their gracious God to return to Jerusalem. They joyously set up an altar of sacrifice and began to rebuild their temple.

The situation described in the book of Esther, however, is vastly different. There seems to be no evidence that Mordecai or Esther harbored any desire to relate to the heart of God’s theocratic program by journeying to Jerusalem, offering the prescribed Mosaic sacrifices, and praying to Jehovah in His holy temple. Esther does not display the “Judaism at any cost” spirit that distinguishes Daniel. The impression remains that Esther’s Jewishness was more a fact of birth than of religious conviction.

HOPE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

The undeniable providence of God as seen in the detailed events of this amazing book, coupled with the complete omission of His name, point to both the tragedy and the hope of Israel today. Even though many Jews are back in the land of promise, Israel, as a nation, is completely unregenerate. They have both seen and rejected their Messiah. But the book of Esther is a divine message of hope for Israel as well. Even in her unsaved condition, she has not been forgotten by God. It is true that He broke her off

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from His tree of blessing, but it is also amazingly true that “if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again” (Romans 11).

This is the mystery and the message of the book of Esther to our world today. Divine rejection and yet divine providence. Tragedy—and yet hope.

—Condensed from *Esther and the Destiny of Israel* by John C. Whitcomb. Copyright 2005 by John C. Whitcomb.

Where are the heroes in the Book of Esther? Look no further than Mordecai and Esther. They are the ones who take the necessary risks to secure the deliverance of their people.

Where are the spiritual heroes in the Book of Esther? Look elsewhere; there are none to be found in this book.

—From “Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen” by A. Boyd Luter & Barry C. Davis.

THE KING’S PROBLEMS

Let’s begin by getting acquainted with the king. His Persian name was *Khshayarshan*, which in Hebrew becomes *Ahasuerus* and in the Greek language, *Xerxes*. His father was Darius I, and his grandfather Cyrus the Great. Ahasuerus ruled over the Persian empire from 486 to 465 B.C.. Like most monarchs of that day, Ahasuerus was a proud man; in the first chapter of Esther, we see three evidences of his pride.

HIS BOASTFULNESS

Eastern rulers enjoyed hosting lavish banquets because each occasion gave them opportunity to impress their guests with their royal power and wealth. In Esther chapter 1, the king hosted a six-month display of his majesty for the nobles and officials of the empire, followed by a seven-day feast for all in the capital city of

Shushan (Susa). The Greek historian Herodotus (485-425 B.C.) states that Ahasuerus was conferring with his nobles and military leaders about a possible invasion of Greece. It was important that Ahasuerus impress them with his wealth and power. When they saw the marble pillars, the gorgeous drapes hung from silver rings, the gold and silver couches on beautiful marble mosaic pavements, and the golden table service, what else could they do but submit to the king?

HIS DRUNKENNESS AND ANGER

Scripture ignores these military matters because the writer’s purpose was to explain how Esther became queen. It was at the conclusion of the seven-day banquet that Ahasuerus, “merry with wine” (1:10), ordered Vashti, his queen, to display her beauty to the assembled guests—but she refused to obey. As a result, the king’s “anger burned in him” (1:12).

As you study the book of Esther, you will discover that this mighty monarch could control everything but himself. His advisers easily influenced him, he made impetuous decisions that he later regretted, and when he didn’t get his own way he became angry. As for the anger that King Ahasuerus expressed toward his lovely queen, it was ignorant, childish, and completely uncalled for. Had the king been sober, he would never have asked his wife to display her beauties before his drunken leaders.

HIS VINDICTIVENESS

When the ego is pricked, it releases a powerful poison that makes people do all sorts of things they would never do if they were humble and submitted to the Lord. The Persian king had seven counselors who advised him in matters of state and had the right to approach his throne. They also knew well how to flatter the king to secure

their positions and get from him what they wanted. They advised the king to dethrone Vashti and replace her with another queen. They promised that such an act would put fear in the hearts of all the women in the empire and generate more respect for their husbands. But would it? Are hearts changed because kings issue decrees or congresses and parliaments pass laws? Are love and respect qualities that can be generated in hearts by decrees and demands?

How could seven supposedly wise men be so calloused in their treatment of Vashti and so foolish in their evaluation of the women of the empire? They were encouraging every husband to act like King Ahasuerus and manage the home on the basis of executive orders. What a contrast to Paul's counsel to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:18-33! Motivated by anger and revenge, and seeking to heal his wounded pride, the king agreed to their advice and had Vashti deposed. The stage was now set for the entrance of the two key persons in the drama: Haman, the man who hated the Jews, and Esther, the woman who delivered her people.

—Condensed from *Be Committed* by Warren W. Wiersbe. Copyright 2005 by Cook Communication Ministries.

THE ENEMY

"After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes" (Esther 3:1).

Haman is now brought upon the scene. In order to understand the reason for Mordecai's unyielding attitude in regard to Haman, it will be necessary to look into the history of the Amalekites. Agag was the name given to the kings of Amalek, the first

of Israel's foes. In Genesis 36:12 we find that Amalek was the grandson of Esau, who in Scripture is always a type of the flesh. Even before the birth of the twins Esau and Jacob, they struggled together—a picture of the flesh warring against the Spirit.

In the seventeenth chapter of Exodus, God provided water for His people by having Moses smite the rock. A lovely picture, surely, and easily understood in the light of two New Testament Scriptures. "That Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). "Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink ... this spake He of the Spirit" (John 7:37-39). It is at this moment that we read: "Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel" (Exodus 17:8).

And so the lusts of the flesh will always come in to hinder the believer's enjoyment of the refreshing influences of the Holy Spirit. The Christian is beset by a tireless and hateful foe who makes it his business to defraud him, if possible, of the blessing that is rightfully his. "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Galatians 5:16,17).

It was on this first occasion of Amalek's hatred and attack against His people that the Lord said, "I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven ... the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:14-16). In Numbers 14, Israel was defeated when they disobeyed the word of the Lord, and presumed to go up in their own strength to meet the Amalekites. Likewise, the moment a believer gets out of God's order he

exposes himself to the power of the flesh. There is no safety except in obedience to the Word.

Balaam foretells the doom of this haughty foe in Numbers 24:20. Moses, too, in his last charge to the people, reminds them of Amalek's opposition and appointed doom (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Study Judges 5, 6, and 10, to learn more from Israel's struggles with and victories over Amalek. Notice that whenever the people rose up in the energy of faith and the lowliness of self-judgment, all of Amalek's power was broken.

The inspired account in 1 Samuel 15 of God's command to destroy Amalek and Saul's failure to carry it out is most instructive in connection with our study of the book of Esther. Even though Saul gained a wonderful victory, he spared Agag; Haman is witness that he likewise failed to exterminate the rest of the royal family. Had Saul been true to God, and yielded implicit obedience to His Word, Haman could never have appeared on the scene. Saul's unfaithfulness made the plot of "the Jew's enemy" possible, and exposed the chosen nation to destruction.

There is a solemn lesson here. Sin unjudged, and evil tendencies allowed to remain alive today, will result in grave trouble later for the Christian. Is the reader conscious of indulging some fleshly desire—something, perhaps, that seems hard to put to death? Rest assured, it will be the cause of serious disaster if unjudged. It may go on unnoticed for years, but the day will come when it, like Haman, will rise in its power, and will eventually work to the undoing of your discipleship, and to the breaking down of your testimony.

—Adapted from *Notes on the Book of Esther* by H.A. Ironside.

Haman's character provides the perfect illustration of the things God hates:

"These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren" (Proverbs 6:16-19).

MORDECAI TAKES A STAND

The king had ordered that all should bow and reverence Haman. But Haman was by birth at enmity with God and with His people, so "Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence" (Esther 3:2). In taking a stand against Haman, Mordecai found himself standing alone. What a profitable example this is for Christians today! When we have to choose between honoring God or bowing to this world's evils, power, or influence, are we prepared to take a stand?

Much was against Mordecai. Not only was he violating the royal command; he was also standing firm when the unbelievers around him encouraged him to follow their example. One must know how to resist the solicitations and even the rebuffs of those who have nothing more than this world's interests at heart. "Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9).

The faith and steadfastness of Mordecai shows itself in yet another way. He did not hide the reason for his refusal: "He had told them that he was a Jew" (Esther 3:4). We Christians, heavenly people, a royal priesthood, children of God, belonging to Him who is the King of kings and Lord

of lords—should we fear to confess before the world and the adversary who we are? Perhaps we shall have to suffer the railings of the world and their disdain, and we may be timid and hesitate to bear witness for the Lord of glory. Let us remember the apostle’s exhortation: “Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.” (1 Peter 4:16). —Adapted

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

“Turn ye even to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil. Who knoweth if He will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him” (Joel 2:12-14).

ESTHER MAKES HER CHOICE

When the situation had come to a crisis, Esther was brought to a defining moment in her life by circumstances over which she had no control. It was “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14) that she was forced to choose between identifying herself with God’s covenant people or continuing to live as a pagan in the king’s royal court. Apparently no one in the court, including her own husband, knew that she was a Jew. To save her people would mean revealing her own identity as well. She would be admitting that she had not been living as a devout Jew should live. Furthermore, she would be identifying herself as a target of destruction under Haman’s decree and an easy mark in the treacherous Persian court.

After her decision to identify herself with God’s people, Esther becomes the active agent, commanding Mordecai, planning a strategy to

save her people, and even confronting Haman to his face. Her decision energizes her, gives her purpose, and emboldens her to face a threatening and uncertain future. There is a great reversal in Esther’s own life, through which consequently comes the great reversal of the destiny for her people.

DEFINING MOMENTS

It is unlikely that any of us will ever be in Esther’s dire predicament, but every one of us faces defining moments in our own lives. Certainly the most fundamental of them comes when we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and decide how to respond to it. The gospel confronts us with the decision either to continue to live as pagans or to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ. Our choice defines who we are and with what people we identify. The decision to be identified with Christ energizes our lives. It gives us a purpose bigger than our own concerns and problems and a hope that goes beyond our death. It transforms us into people moved by the Holy Spirit, human agents of God’s grace and love in the world.

However, it sometimes happens that even after coming to Christ, some Christians continue to think and live like pagans. At decision points, they take the path of least resistance instead of making the hard choice to obey God’s unpopular Word.

FOLLOWING GOD

It seems to be human nature that sometimes we will do the right thing only when it becomes too painful to continue to do the wrong thing! Esther finds herself between a rock and a hard place. Her life is in jeopardy by whichever choice she makes. It is interesting to see that even though Esther’s decision to join her “fasting, and weeping, and wailing” people

was made under duress, she does nevertheless end up identifying herself with God's covenant people. She leads her people to do what God commanded them to do through the prophet Joel in the face of such calamity. In spite of its flawed quality, Esther's right decision enables her to become the agent through whom her people are delivered, in fulfillment of the ancient promise.

Perhaps, like Esther, you have been brought to this moment in your life by circumstances over which you had no control, combined with flawed decisions you made along the way. Perhaps instead of living for God, you have so concealed your Christian faith that no one would even identify you as a Christian. Then suddenly you find yourself facing calamity, either in the circumstances of your life with others or just within your own inner emotional world. Regardless of the straits you find yourself in, turn to the Lord. Rend your heart, not your garment, "fast, weep, and mourn," and return to the Lord your God. His purposes are greater than yours. And, who knows? Perhaps you have come to your present situation "for such a time as this."

—Condensed from *Esther* by Karen H. Jobes. Copyright 1999 by Karen H. Jobes.

The feast of Purim, celebrated each year in Israel, was instituted by Mordecai. Its name, Purim, refers to the casting of lots by Haman to pick the day of the Jews' destruction. "Purim" is the plural form of "Pur," the Assyrian word meaning "lot." What a study in contrasts that this holiday, named for the random casting of lots, is really a celebration of the providence of God. Truly nothing is accidental with the Lord! —From *Following God*

THE MESSAGE OF HOPE

"And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews" (Esther 8:3).

A NEW DECREE NEEDED

Although Haman is dead, the sentence of death still hangs over every Jew in every part of Persia's domain, including those in Jerusalem. The decree he sent forth that Jews may be slain on a certain day is still in effect, and nothing could be done to change the decree. Even the king could not change the law. That presents a real problem. What is the solution?

Esther makes it quite plain to the king that the judgment against Haman is of no avail unless something is done to save her people. "Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew ... write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring" (Esther 8:7,8). Mordecai now acts swiftly to draft a decree allowing the Jews to "gather themselves together, and to stand for their life" (Esther 8:11).

The original decree is not altered in any way. It cannot be. It stands. But now another decree is made and sent out just as the first one was, signed by the king. This changes the entire picture. When this new decree comes to the Jews, their hearts are filled with joy and gladness.

GOD'S RIGHTEOUS DECREE

This is probably one of the most wonderful pictures of our salvation in Scripture. God has sent out a decree. It says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). This does not only refer to certain people on skid row or some criminals; it refers to everyone.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

We like to think that the problem is somewhere else, in someone else’s heart, but it is right in our own hearts. Out of the heart proceed all the evil things (Matthew 15:19). Men are sinners and need a Saviour. Many people don’t like to hear that. But it is God’s decree, and it stands unalterable. It means eternal death to ignore it.

A DECREE OF LOVE

But thank God, another decree has gone out from the throne of God. It is: “Be ye reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20). You do not have to do anything to soften God’s heart. His heart is already soft toward us because Jesus has already paid the penalty for our sin. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). What can we add to what Christ has already done?

God has a way to save sinners. You are not good enough to go to heaven, and you never will be. You and I have to come to Him and accept His salvation that provides for us a perfect robe of righteousness. Christ gives us His righteousness—you cannot improve on that! God has to work you over. God puts it this way, “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter 1:23). It is through hearing and believing the Word of God that we are born again and our lives are changed.

I don’t talk to people about “committing their lives to God” as if they had something to commit. Do you

think He wants your old life? My friend, He wants to give you a new life. He wants to regenerate you. He wants to save you. The decree has come out, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). If you put your trust in Jesus Christ, who died for you and rose again, you will be saved!

The Jews in Esther’s day had to recognize that a decree had been made to destroy them. They also had to believe that the king was on their side and had issued another decree to save them. We too must believe that the King of kings is on our side. I am an ambassador for Christ, and, therefore, on behalf of God I must say to you, “Be ye reconciled to God.”

—From *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* by J. Vernon McGee. Copyright 1991 by Thru the Bible Radio.

GOD’S PROVIDENCE

“The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will” (Proverbs 21:1).

The providence of God has several definitions, but basically means His shaping of ordinary events to accomplish His eternal purposes while providing blessing for His people. See how He directs all of these seemingly normal events in the book of Esther:

- A king’s banquet 1:1-9
- A queen’s refusal 1:10-12
- A foolish man’s decree . . . 1:13-22
- A beauty contest 2:1-18
- An overheard plot 2:19-23
- A sudden rise to power 3:1-6
- A year’s delay 3:7-15
- A favorable king 4:1-5:8
- A wounded pride 5:9-14
- A sleepless night 6:1
- A forgotten reward 6:2-3
- An early rise 6:4-5
- A dishonoring honor 6:6-14
- A careless act 7:1-10