

Where is God? Story of Esther The Silent Sovereignty of God

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This morning we begin a series of four messages on the book of Esther. It is a short book - only ten chapters. I hope you will read it several times this month. It reads like a suspense novel with plot twists, irony and plenty of partying.

Recently I completed a series of messages on the book of Daniel. The story of Daniel takes place when the Israelites had been conquered by Babylonia and many of the leaders were carried off into exile. The story of Esther takes place about 50 to 100 years later after the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians. During the time of Esther, the Persian King is a man named Xerxes. In order to impress the nobles and princes from the 127 provinces in his Empire, Xerxes invited them all to his palace. He culminated the festivities with a banquet that lasted seven days. Scholars estimate there were at least 1,000 men at the banquet. And, they each received individual attention. Each one was given a unique goblet for wine. The king instructed the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished—no table wine at this banquet!

After seven days the men were fairly intoxicated including the king. While he “was high in spirits from wine,” Xerxes decided he wanted all these men to see his beautiful queen, Vashti. She had been hosting a banquet for all the women at the palace. When the servants delivered the message, Vashti knew she did not want to be paraded in front of a bunch of drunken men. She sent word back to the king that she would not come. The king was furious that she had refused him. He consulted his advisors who warned him that if the Queen got away with this, all the women in the Empire would disrespect their husbands and create chaos in the land. To keep order in

the Empire, the king would have to strip the crown from Queen Vashti and ban her from his presence forever. All the men at the banquet thought this was a great idea, and so the king issued the order and had it read all over the Empire.

But now he needed a new queen. His advisors, always eager to please the king, offered a great idea. The king should send his servants throughout the Empire, and they would select the most beautiful single women and bring them to the palace. They would be given a full year of special beauty treatments and then each one would spend a night with the king. He would select the one who pleased him most. It was like the Miss Persia 485 BC pageant. The winner would become the new queen.

After their night with the king, four things could happen. If the young woman did not please the king, she was sent back to the harem never to be sent for again. They could not go back home. They could not leave the palace. They could not marry anyone. It was not a very desirable outcome. But this is what happened to the majority of the young women—perhaps hundreds of them.

If the king liked the young woman, she would return to the harem as a concubine on call. If he really liked the young woman, she could become one of two or three that he would marry. The Persians practiced polygamy so the King could have several wives. Their children would become heirs.

The one he favored most would become the Queen. She would have special favor and stature.

Our scripture reading picks up with the story, when it is Esther's time to spend her night with the king.

Esther 2:15-18

¹⁵ When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. ¹⁶ She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

¹⁷ Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

How are we to interpret this story and the message of this book? Esther is a unique book in the Bible. It is the only book in the Bible which does not mention God. There is no reference to prayer or to scripture. Is this an oversight by the author? Is it a mistake for this book to be in the Bible since it does not mention God? This book has a powerful message for people of all time—and especially for our time. It is very deliberate that there is no mention of God.

Later in the story we learn that the Jewish people are in great danger. There are some Persian leaders who want to annihilate them. Previously when the Jews were threatened by the Egyptians in the time of Moses, we see God work in powerful ways. He is very visible in the book of Exodus. He sends 10 plagues upon the Egyptians. When the Jewish people are fleeing from Egypt with Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, God spectacularly parts the Red Sea and the Jewish people walk across. Then the Sea comes crashing on top of Pharaoh's army as it attempts to cross. As the Jewish people move into the wilderness, a pillar of fire leads them at night. God is very present and visible in the book of Exodus.

Not so in the book of Esther. God is not ever mentioned. As we reflect on the book we observe a chain of events that happen. If they had not happened, the Jews would have been wiped out. But because this sequence of events happened the Jews were saved. The events at the time seem ordinary or coincidental. The king gets drunk

and orders the queen to appear at his banquet. She refuses and is banished. A new queen, Esther, who happens to be Jewish, is chosen. Her cousin, Mordecai, overhears a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Esther who tells the king and saves his life. All these events will be important as the story unfolds, but none of them seems like God at work—especially compared to the parting of the Red Sea and the pillar of fire by night. When Xerxes gets drunk we don't say: "Now there is God at work!" But God is working. Now God did not cause Xerxes to get drunk. God did not cause Xerxes to order Vashti to appear at the banquet. And, God did not cause Vashti to refuse the king's command. We see the power and sovereignty of God at work in subtle ways in the book of Esther. He is able to use even the bad choices of people to ultimately accomplish his will. He is working behind the scenes and beneath the surface to redeem his people. He is working even when we don't see him. He is working even when we are not aware of his presence. We sometimes prefer God to work in dramatic ways where we can see him. But Esther makes it clear, that God also works in subtle ways.

This is encouraging to me. Even when we do not see or feel God working, he is at work. Often we can look back and see his hand and how he used experiences and a chain of events in our lives to accomplish his purposes. At big moments, we know he is there. But, in the little, ordinary moments we think he is not there. The Book of Esther affirms, God is working all the time. God is working in your life right now, even though you do not see him.

The Book of Esther makes it clear that God does not care about appearances. We want God to make spectacular appearances in our lives. We get upset and think God has abandoned us when he is not working in some visible way in our lives. The king's banquet reveals that God does not care about appearances. Before the final seven days of partying, the guests have been at the palace for 180 days. The king had

invited the guests to see his power and wealth. He wanted to impress them so that they would recognize his greatness. It took 180 days—six months to parade all of his wealth and possessions in front of the guests. Every day there was a parade of livestock and silver and gold. And, then, finally he wanted to parade his beautiful queen in front of them. When they saw her beauty they would envy him. In the Persian Empire the most important thing about a man was his wealth and power. The important thing about a woman was her physical beauty. Now I know that is hard for us to imagine. This was such a primitive culture that determined the worth of a man by his wealth and the worth of a woman by her physical appearance. Thank goodness we have come so far!! Of the reality is, some things never change. We are just like the Persians. In our society, externals still matter more than character. What we have and how we look matters more than what we are. We have allowed the secular world to determine how worth is measured. People choose careers they hate because it will bring a high income or status. People develop eating disorders because appearance is so important. The book of Esther exposes our sickness. We depend on externals to determine our worth. When we depend on those things, we are always in danger of losing our worth. Wealth, power and beauty can all be lost. The only source of worth that lasts is our value to our Creator. When we know that we are his children and that he loves us as we are, we know we are of infinite value no matter what we have or how we look. What is the source of your worth?

Another amazing theme in Esther is how God uses her even though she is very flawed. In the beginning of the story, Esther has sold herself out to the Persian culture. Esther was an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. When she is selected as one of the beautiful candidates to wear the queen's crown, Mordecai tells her to keep it a secret that she is a Jew. Daniel was selected as a young leader in Babylon. He

discovered a way to cooperate without compromise. He made it very clear that he was a Jew. He followed the Jewish dietary laws and prayed openly to his God. He refused to bow down and worship the Babylonian idols. But Esther chooses to keep her identity as a Jew secret. Then she sleeps with the king. She compromises the moral standards of the scripture of reserving sexual intimacy for marriage. Then when she is chosen as Queen, she marries a non-believer. The Jews were strictly forbidden to marry anyone who did not share their belief in the one true God. Esther sold out. She compromised her faith and her morals.

And, yet, God used her anyway. She became the one who would save the Jewish people from annihilation. Because of her courage, the stage would be set for the coming of Jesus Christ to save the world. The message of Esther is encouraging to me. We all have compromised with the world. We all have given in and compromised our faith and our moral standards. But, God can still use us. Just because we are flawed, God does not abandon us. Even if we have sold out in the past, God can still use us. Does God only bless those who live exemplary lives? God gives his grace persistently, relentlessly to people who don't ask for it; don't deserve it; and don't fully appreciate it even after they receive it. We all have compromised and failed, but God does not give up on us. God loves us in spite of our flaws in order to make us beautiful.

In the coming weeks we will see how God works behind the scenes to accomplish his purposes. We will see clearly how God uses even our failures to accomplish his will. We will see the silent sovereignty of God powerfully at work. Even if you can't see him, God is working in your life right now. Even if you failed miserably, God has not given up on you. He still wants to use you to accomplish his purposes. Our God can work all things together for good. Will you trust the silent sovereignty of God?