

THE BIG READ (47)

Jesus in Esther

A. Introduction

1. Every book of the Bible has one dominating theme – Jesus is the Christ.

“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”
(Luke 24:45-47)

Jesus is the Christ who will suffer and die.

Jesus is the Christ who will rise from the dead on the third day.

Jesus is the Christ who will forgive the sins of all who repent.

Jesus is the Christ who will be preached to the nations.

2. The Old Testament that Jesus read contained the same 39 books as our English Bibles but was arranged in a different order.

It had three sections – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44)

The final section of the Old Testament is the Writings.

Whereas the Prophets looked back to what happened to Israel and why it happened in order to call the nation to repent and return to God, the Writings looked forward to the hope that was coming to those who repent, through a King like David, and showed those who did, how to live faithfully in all of life’s circumstances as they waited for His arrival.

This means that though the books found in the Writings sections were written at different points in Israel’s history, it was after the Babylonian exile was over, that they were collected together to give the remnant hope and guidance as they waited.

3. The next book in the Writings is Esther.

Esther is unusual because God’s name is never mentioned in the book.

Yet the genius of this book is that whilst God is not named, Esther is clearly about how God is at work in all of the details of the story from beginning to end.

“But, though the name of God be not in it, the finger of God is...” (Matthew Henry)

Like Daniel, the setting for this book is exile.

After the Persian king, Cyrus the Great in 539BC gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, a small number did under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

But most chose to remain where they had been scattered to, including Mordecai and Esther, who lived in the Persian city of Susa during the reign of Xerxes (486-465BC).

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.” (Esther 2:5-7)

Like in the book of Daniel, Esther tells the story of how God cared for His people in exile, but unlike the book of Daniel, in Esther His care for them was not always obvious, clear, and easily to see.

B. Getting Started with Esther

1. Who wrote Esther?

We don't know.

There is no statement in the book of Esther that identifies who wrote it.

Scholars suggest that the contents of the book were put down in writing not long after they took place, and because it contains the personal experiences of both Mordecai and Esther, it makes sense to suggest that one of them wrote this book.

2. What should we look out for when reading the book of Esther?

There are three details to look out for when reading the book of Esther.

i) The number of coincidences that take place.

"For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Here are some of them:

That Queen Vashti just happens to refuse to come to Xerxes' feast and be put on display (1:10-12).

That Esther just happens to be Jewish, and she just happens to be beautiful (2:7).

That Esther just happens to be favoured by King Xerxes so that he made her queen instead of Vashti (2:9).

That Mordecai just happens to overhear the plot against the king's life (2:21).

That a report of this just happens to be written in the king's chronicles (2:23).

That Haman just happens to notice that Mordecai does not kneel down before him (3:2).

That Haman just happens to find out that Mordecai is a Jew (3:4).

That when Haman plots his revenge, the lot just happens to fall on the twelfth month, so delaying it for almost a year (3:7-14).

That Esther just happens to get the king's approval to speak up for the Jews (5:1-4), but then just happens to put off her request for another time (5:5-8).

That Esther's delay just happens to cause Haman to see Mordecai one more time, filling him with rage (5:9).

That seeing Mordecai, just happens to lead to Haman recounting this to his friends, who in turn encourage him to build some gallows immediately, and then ask the king the next day to have Mordecai hanged on it (5:13-14).

That during that night, Xerxes just happens to be unable to sleep, and he just happens to ask for the book of chronicles to be read to him which recounted Mordecai's deed (6:1-2).

That Xerxes just happens to ask whether Mordecai had been rewarded, to which his attendant just happens to know that he hadn't been (6:3).

That Haman just happens to approach the king just when he is wondering how to reward Mordecai (6:5-11).

That Xerxes just happens to ask Esther what her petition is, and this time Esther just happens to ask for her people to be spared from Haman's plot (7:1-6)

That the king just happens to return to Esther when Haman is pleading for his life in a way that could be misinterpreted (7:7-8).

That the gallows Haman built for Mordecai just happen to be ready when Xerxes wants to hang Haman (7:9-10).

That King Xerxes just happens to write a decree giving the Jews the right to protect themselves from their enemies (8:7-13).

ii) The conflict between Mordecai and Haman.

From the time of Moses there had been an ongoing battle between Israel and the Amalekites.

"The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:16)

The Israelites were given specific instructions to destroy the Amalekites completely when they entered the Promised Land.

"When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deuteronomy 25:19)

King Saul was commanded to do this.

"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." (1 Samuel 15:3)

Saul disobeyed God's command.

"Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs – everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed." (1 Samuel 15:7-9).

The genealogies of Mordecai (2:5-6) and Haman (3:1) remind us of this conflict.

Haman's decree for the total destruction of the Jews was his effort to do to Israel what Saul had failed to do to his descendants.

"Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and little children – on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods." (Esther 3:13)

When the fortunes of God's people are reversed in Esther, Mordecai and the Jews would not make the same mistake that Saul did.

"The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder." (Esther 9:5-10)

Israel then enjoyed rest from their enemies.

"Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies." (Esther 9:20-22)

iii) The establishment of the Feast of Purim.

In chapters 4-7, we have the two feasts of Esther which led to Haman being killed.

In chapters 8-10, we have the establishment of the feast of Purim communicated twice which celebrated the preservation of the Jews.

D. Jesus in Esther

1. Jesus saves us when God appears to be absent.

As Jesus hangs upon the cross, God seems to be absent, but in reality He is there finishing His work of salvation.

"At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" – which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"... With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." (Mark 15:33-34, 37-38)

2. Jesus saves us by defeating our enemies.

"He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:13-15)

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (1 John 3:8)

3. Jesus saves us and wants us to remember this.

"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)