

God's Message to Us in Esther

Halifax, NS

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Introduction

This afternoon, we are returning to our sermon series in which I am preaching through all the books of the Bible—with a sermon or two on each book.

- Our focus in this series is on the message that is in these books for us today.
- God's word is unique in that He gave each book in the Bible not only to the people who were alive in the time of its writing,
 - but also to all those who would come after.
- Paul emphasises this when he speaks about the Old Testament in his writings.
 - In 1 Cor 10:11, he says of things written in the time of Moses: **Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**
 - And in Romans 15:4, he says: **For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.**
- So my focus in this series has been to draw instruction and hope from what God says to us in each of these books.
 - It is my prayer that as we go through this series, it will help you to be able to get more out of the Scriptures as you read them—that you will understand how they speak to us in our day—that your obedience and faith will grow.

This afternoon, we have come to the book of Esther.

- In previous messages, we looked at the two books that precede Esther in our Bibles, Ezra and Nehemiah.
 - These books were written in the same period of history—the time of the Persian Empire when Israel was released from captivity.
- We saw in Nehemiah and Ezra how various groups of Jews returned to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple which had been destroyed in 586 BC.
 - The first group of them went under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 536 BC when the Persian king, Cyrus, made a decree that the temple at Jerusalem should be rebuilt.
 - The temple was finished twenty years later in 516 BC.
 - Ezra the priest came as a reformer almost 60 years later in 458 BC,
 - followed by Nehemiah 13 years after that in 445 BC to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to bring more reform...
 - with a second visit by Nehemiah in 432 BC (after thirteen more years) to bring reformation again.

The book of Esther begins right in the middle of all of this work of rebuilding—probably in 519 BC—just before the building of the temple was finished in 516 BC.

- Esther 1:1-3 tells us that it was in the third year of King Ahasuerus.

- Ahasuerus is a throne name like Caesar or Pharaoh, so he this name alone does not tell us which king he was.
 - Although many identify him as Xerxes, it fits the Biblical data much better to identify him as Darius the Great, or Darius Hystaspis, who reigned immediately before Xerxes.
 - This Darius Hystaspis reigned in Persia from 522 BC until 485 BC when Xerxes succeeded him.
 - Darius the Mede, whom we know from when Daniel went to the lion's den, is not the same as this Darius Hystaspis.
 - Darius the Mede reigned for only two years, about thirteen years before Darius Hystaspis.
 - The reason Xerxes does not fit as the Ahasuerus of Esther is because the Ahasuerus of Esther is said to reign over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, but by the time of Xerxes, the kingdom had been reduced.
 - By seeing Ahasuerus as Darius the Great, it also means that Esther's uncle Mordecai (who is a leading figure in the book of Esther) is the same Mordecai that is mentioned as going up with Zerubbabel in 536 BC in Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7.
 - Like Nehemiah and many other leaders, Mordecai would have gone back and forth from his city of exile (Shushan in his case) to Jerusalem, seeking to minister to the Jews in both places and exert influence on the kingdom as opportunity allowed.

So you see that Esther takes place right at the crucial time when the rebuilding of the temple was almost complete.

- Satan was trying in every way to put a stop to the restoration of God's people.
 - In Ezra and Nehemiah, we have seen the opposition of the enemies around Jerusalem at this time of the rebuilding,
 - and today in Esther, we will see the opposition that occurred in Shushan in the courts of the king of Persia at the same time.
 - Satan was working locally and also at the heart of the Empire to destroy the people of God.

TRANS> And that brings us to the first thing I want you to see from Esther.

I. The book of Esther reminds us that there are those who want to wipe out God's people.

- A. In Esther chapter 3, we are introduced to a man named Haman who is Satan's henchman.
 - 1. In 3:1, we are told that he got a promotion so that he was advanced above all the princes of the kingdom of Persia.
 - a. The king ordered that all the elders who sat in the king's gate would bow down to Haman, but Esther's uncle Mordecai refused... and this was brought to the attention of Haman.
 - b. Now it should be understood that this was not a matter of refusing to worship Haman—it was a refusal to show respect to him.

- We could even debate whether it was right for Mordecai to refuse to obey the king in this matter.
 - But it is almost certain that his reason was at least in part because of his zeal for the LORD.
 - You see, when Haman is introduced to us, we are told that he was an Agagite.
 - The Agagites were of the Amalekites, the people that God had commanded his people to utterly destroy, and that Saul had spared—a decision that caused God to reject Saul as king.
 - God had ordered their destruction because they were the cowardly ones who attacked the weaker people at the back of the procession when Israel was coming out of Egypt.
 - Nothing angers God more than those who would attack the weak among His people!
 - c. Very likely, disdain for the Amalekites had something to do with Mordecai's refusal to acknowledge this man—in other words, it was righteous anger...
 - But the thing that is certain is that God was in Mordecai's refusal whatever Mordecai's motives may have been!
2. We are told how Haman reacted when he found out.
- a. In verse 5-6, it says:
 - **Esther 3:5-6: When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. ⁶ But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai.**
 - Understand that this would have meant that all the Jews would be destroyed including those who were finishing the temple in Jerusalem.
 - This was nothing less than an attempt to wipe out the people that God had chosen... the very people that He had appointed to bring the Messiah into the world that the world might be saved.
 - If Haman had been successful, there would be no salvation.
 - b. We are told what Haman did to put his purpose into action.
 - He went to the king, pretending to be acting in the interests of the king, and got him to sign into law a plan to destroy every Jew on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.
 - **Esther 3:13-15: And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, 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, which *is* the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions. ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as law in every province, being published for all people, that they should be ready for that day. ¹⁵ The couriers went out, hastened by the king's command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed.**

- B. This reminds us that Satan and God cannot share the throne.
1. God's decree that the Amalekites be wiped out represents His ultimate decree that Satan and all who are united to him shall be wiped out...
 - This is very matter that Jesus speaks about so often when He warns us about hell in the New Testament.
 - He tells us that unless we come to Him as our redeemer, we will be cast into the place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.
 - The people of God and the people of Satan cannot co-exist.
 - Satan is a liar and a murderer, God is the Creator, a God of love and truth.
 - Because He is a God of love and righteousness, He has decreed Satan's ultimate destruction.
 - As Christians, it is our calling to plead with all people to come to Christ before it is too late.
 2. And until the final day, it is Satan's desire to wipe out all Christians.
 - a. We see persecution going on around the world.
 - Whether it be in a decision such as was made in the Supreme court of Canada last week that Trinity Western, a Christian university, cannot train lawyers because they do not approve of gay marriage...
 - Or whether it be the killing of 250 Christians a month in the persecuting nations of the world...
 - Or whether it be Satan chipping away little by little at the things we believe and the commandments we obey (just getting us to slip and compromise and doubt God a little here and there)...
 - the goal of Satan is total destruction of the people of God.
 - b. This wickedness and rebellion is more fully developed in Haman than it is in most people...
 - But the same root of this rebellion is in all who are without Christ.
 - In the end, they will stop at nothing less than the total destruction of Christ and all His people.
 - God restrains most of them, but He allows some to bring forth the terrible fruit of mature sin so that we can see its true nature.
 - It helps us to understand why Hell is reserved for all who are not redeemed in Christ.
 - c. But Satan and his people are no match for our mighty God.
 - He will prevail and the whole world we be restored under His Son in perfect love.
 - Satan and all his followers will be cast into the eternal pit.
 - They will be the ones who are wiped out at the last day because that is what they deserve—as we all do but for the saving mercy of Christ.

TRANS> But until that final day comes,

II. The book of Esther shows us how God works in the world by His secret ordinary providence to preserve us.

- And that is our next point and the principal lesson in the book of Esther.

A. Do you know what providence is?

1. Take a look with me at our Confession of Faith—the Westminster Confession.

- Chapter 5 is on the providence of God.
- In the first section, it says...
 - WCF 5:1: God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.
 - In other words, God is in control of all that comes to pass—it is His plan that we see worked out in history.
- In the second and third section of chapter 5, it explains that God uses secondary causes to bring about His plan—for example, He uses clouds to bring rain. Section 2 says:
 - WCF 5:2: Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.
- And section 3 tells us how He ordinarily works: “God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.”
 - In other words, most of the time He does not do miracles, but uses ordinary things to bring about His purposes... for example, He can send us food from heaven, but ordinarily He gets food to our table by enabling us to grow crops and by sending the rain and the sunshine to cause them grow, and blessing our use of pesticides to keep bugs away.

2. What we have in Esther is not an account of special miracles, such as God used to get Israel out of Egypt with the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea,

- but we have the marvellous use of ordinary providence to protect His people from utter destruction by Haman...
- There is not one miracle in the book, but God’s hand is everywhere.
 - Nothing extraordinary happens, but everything happens at just the right time and in just the right way to frustrate Haman’s plans.
- As we look at this, we need to realise that God is protecting us and preserving us in these ways every day!
 - We would have been ruined long ago apart from His mercy—even the food we eat each day by ordinary providence is totally from His hand.
 - In a million details, He is bringing about His purposes concerning us and caring for us.

B. So what do we see in Esther of this marvellous providence?

1. In chapter 1 and 2, we see how God brings Esther to the throne.

- a. In case you do not know, Esther is one of God's people—a Jew—who is used to deliver God's people from Haman's plot of destruction.
 - It was most unlikely that she would ever be the queen of Persia, for he was married to a woman named Vashti whom he loved very much.
 - 1) But chapter 1 tells us that he held a great feast for 180 days, as was the custom of the kings of Persia, in which he showed off all his riches.
 - The people of his empire would come from all over during this time to see the exhibition.
 - As was also customary, his wife Vashti made a separate feast for the women, for the Persians considered it inappropriate to have men and women feasting together.
 - 2) But somehow the king, as he was showing off all his treasures to the people, got it into his head to show off Queen Vashti to them in her royal apparel as well!
 - She was very beautiful and he loved her, but this was not an appropriate thing for him to do to her.
 - We are told that he had had too much to drink, so that probably has a lot to do with it.
 - But you see, all of these things were for the purpose of having Esther become queen instead of Vashti.
- b. So Vashti refuses to come, even though the king sends great men to call her to come—and she refuses even after they press her.
 - 1) Her refusal is understandable, yet it was also wrong for her to refuse to submit to her husband.
 - They were both wrong, but that is not the point here—the point is that this is the way God took Vashti off the throne so He could put Esther on the throne to save His people.
 - 2) The king was very angry, but not wanting to behave rashly, he called his counsellors to direct him about what he ought to do.
 - Their counsel was that he ought to remove Vashti from being queen.
 - From what we know of his love for her, he was actually very sorry about this decision, but his counsellors were concerned that by letting her refuse to submit it would set a bad example for all the wives in the empire so that they would all have contempt for their husbands.
 - This is lost on us because we have rejected the notion that is actually from God that wives should submit to their own husbands.
 - But many societies, pagan and Christian, know this... just as they know that murder and stealing are wrong.
 - 3) So Vashti was removed from the throne and the king went to look for a new queen.
- c. Chapter 2 tells us the procedure—which was not a proper one at all.

- 1) The king sent servants out to find beautiful women who were not married and bring them to him to be his concubines.
 - It would seem that these women were given no choice in the matter, but were taken as slaves by the invincible authority of the king.
 - Each one was given beauty treatments for a full year and then brought to him—it appears for him to have them for the night.
- 2) To his credit, he did not use them as mere prostitutes, but took them as his concubines, wives that he provided for for the rest of their lives...
 - It was a wicked custom of the ancient world to take more than one wife, but because it was the way things were done, it was not as wretched seeming to them as it is to us—many of the women would have felt honoured to be chosen and would have enjoyed living in a palace with all that it provided.
- 3) But again, despite the wrong in what the king did—for a man is meant to have only one wife—God was in all of this...
 - And it ended up that the woman for whom the book of Esther is named was chosen not only to be one of the concubines,
 - but chosen from among them to be his queen in the place of Vashti.
 - 2:17 says: **The king loved Esther more than all the *other* women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.**
 - It took four years for all this to transpire, so we are now at about one year after the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem was finished.

TRANS> So this is the first thing that God set in place (this crowning of Esther) by ordinary providence to bring about the deliverance of His people.

2. The second thing He set in place is much simpler.
 - a. It is found in 2:19-23 and has to do with Esther's uncle Mordecai who brought her up—for she was an orphan.
 - Mordecai was something like an elder in Shushan, for we are told that he sat in the gate of the city—which was the place of the elders.
 - b. And being in this position, Mordecai found out about a plot of two eunuchs to kill the king—
 - and he revealed it to Esther who told the king in Mordecai's name.
 - It was found to be true, and the men were hanged on a gallows and the matter recorded in the chronicles of the empire, though little notice was taken of it at the time.
 - c. This was all in the hands of God to set things up for later, as we shall see.
3. And then we have Haman's conspiracy to completely destroy the Jews which I already told you about.
 - Remember that Haman's anger against the Jews was especially directed against Mordecai because of Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him.

- Whether this was right or wrong is not the point—the point is that God was in all of this because it was His plan to destroy Haman and his people for their wickedness.
 - The decree to kill the Jews is drawn up by Haman and sent out to everyone, and all the Jews, including Mordecai, go into mourning.
4. In chapter 4, Mordecai instructs Esther to go to the king and plead for her people, and in doing this, we see the providence of God at work so that Esther goes on the perfect day to accomplish God’s purposes.
- a. She is afraid to go because no one was to go to these tyrannical kings of Persia unless the king called for them.
 - If they did go without being called, they could pay for it with their life—unless the king extended his sceptre to them to show acceptance.
 - Mordecai reminds Esther that she is in a place to possibly help, and that if she doesn’t, she will not be spared from Haman’s decree either.
 - In Esther 4:13-14, he sends these excellent words to her: **“Do not 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, 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?”**
 - b. Esther asks Mordecai to call for a three day fast for her among the Jews, which is done.
 - The drama rises as Esther goes in before the king, not knowing what will happen, but he extends his sceptre and offers to give her up to half his kingdom.
 - Instead of making her request at this time, she invites the king to a banquet along with Haman whom she wishes to expose... but she is afraid and does not reveal her purpose even at the feast.
 - Instead, she invites them to come to a second banquet the next day, promising that she will make her request then.
 - All this delay is from the Lord that the timing of her request might be just right for the accomplishment of God’s purpose to save the Jews by her.
 - c. So Haman goes to his house full of hubris—that the queen invited only him to the banquet—yet he is also grieved by something...
 - **But 5:9 says: “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.”**
 - He goes home and boasts of the favour of the king and queen, but also of his disdain for Mordecai.
 - With his family’s encouragement decides to prepare a gallows to hang Mordecai on.
5. And then what should happen that night but that the king cannot sleep.
- The Lord is in all the details!

- And what does he do but call for someone to come and read the chronicles of the empire to him, and they just happen (all in God’s providence) to read about the plot that Mordecai had uncovered—saving the king’s life.
 - The king asks what has been done for Mordecai and is told that nothing was done!
- What timing!
 - The king calls for Haman in the morning and asks him what ought to be done for the man that the king wishes to honour!
 - 6:6-10 tells us the wonderful outcome: **So Haman came in, and the king asked him, “What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?” Now Haman thought in his heart, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?”** ⁷ **And Haman answered the king, “For the man whom the king delights to honor, ⁸ let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹ Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!’ ”** ¹⁰ **Then the king said to Haman, “Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king’s gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken.”**

6. Esther, not knowing about all this, has her second banquet for the king and Haman that very evening... and this time, she reveals her heart...
 - What timing! A day earlier would not have brought success.
 - She tells the king that there is an adversary who has made plans to annihilate her and her people.
 - The king asked who it is and she points to Haman!
 - You ought to read it to capture all the drama, but the result is that Haman and his sons are hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

TRANS> You can see how everything worked out perfectly in God’s providence...

- That Esther was made queen in place of Vashti.
- That Mordecai uncovered the plot and saved the king, but was not rewarded at the time.
- That Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, bringing out Haman’s hatred against the people of God and causing him to plan their destruction.
- That Esther was afraid and delayed speaking to the king until Haman had built a gallows for Mordecai and the king had remembered Mordecai on a sleepless night.
 - Every event to the last detail was used to bring about God’s purpose of gracious deliverance for His people.

C. So everything was turned around for the Jews, all through God’s providence.

1. Although the decree to kill the Jews could not be reversed, the king allowed Mordecai to write another decree in his name, authorising the Jews to destroy those that wanted to destroy them.

- In chapter 8, verse 10-12, it says
 - **10 And he [Mordecai] wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealed it with the king's signet ring, and sent letters by couriers on horseback, riding on royal horses bred from swift steeds. 11 By these letters the king permitted the Jews who were in every city to gather together and protect their lives—to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, both little children and women, and to plunder their possessions, 12 on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.”**
 - The Jews were thus authorised to kill those who wanted to kill them.
 - The tables were completely turned.
 - Instead of them being wiped out throughout the empire, their enemies were wiped out.
- 2. They were even given an extra day to carry out this work—and they did.
 - Haman's ten sons were executed, also hundreds of the Jews' enemies in Shushan, and tens of thousands throughout the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire.

III. Think of what this means to us!

- A. Presumably, if this had not happened, the people God chose to bring salvation to the world—to bring Jesus Christ to the world—would have been destroyed.
- We would be lost—without hope—without a Saviour or a way to be saved.
 - What could we do to save ourselves without Jesus?
 - What offering could we make to atone for our sin?
 - Redemption comes only through His blood, the only Son of God!
 - How could we open our eyes even to see that we need a Saviour or that it is desirable to be saved if Jesus had not come and given us the Holy Spirit?
 - God preserved the Jews, not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of all the nations for whom salvation was to come.

TRANS> That makes this account in Esther all the more significant for us.

- It shows us how much God loves us.
- B. How we ought to praise the LORD for His love and mercy.
1. We have seen even greater things now that our Saviour has come.
 - Our worship is centered around and directed by Jesus Christ who has rescued us from Satan himself.
 - Our Lord Jesus is going to crush him so that we can serve God in righteousness and holiness forever.
 2. What sincere, heartfelt praise ought to arise from us!
 - As we hear the gospel preached!
 - As we sing praises to God.
 - As we read His word and as we consider what He has done.
- C. And how we ought to trust God when we see His hand of providence displayed.

1. Know that as history unfolds, God is in it all for us.
 - Even when bad things happen—God is directing it all.
 - He was just as much in the details when Jerusalem fell as He was in the details of preserving His people in the exile.
 - He brought about the fall of Jerusalem to chasten them because they were not serving Him—so that they would not depart from Him...
 - But then He preserved them because of His unfailing promise of love.
2. That means you can trust Him in all the affairs of life.
 - Do not doubt that He has control of the details of life.
 - Do not doubt that His purpose is to bring about good for His people.
 - Often, you will not be able to see how His plan will all unfold, but you can hang on to His promises that He is at work in all the details to bless us as His people...
 - The account of Esther is there to help you believe that when things seem to be going wrong.
 - This little book about God’s providence in ordinary things stands to support you in those times.
 - It is God’s word to you—it is His gift to us upon whom the ends of the ages have come when we must endure much tribulation.
3. The last section of our Confession testifies to what is taught in Esther when it says:
 - **WCF 5:7:** As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so after a most special manner, it taketh care of His Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.
 - And Romans 8:28 says: **“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.”**

Conclusion:

- Little believer, trust your great God!
 - He is at work in every detail to bring about His grand purposes for us His people.
- And if you are not a believer, I advise you to come to Him at once!
 - Do not be like Haman who thought he was getting on well in the very days that destruction and judgment were being prepared for Him.
 - If only you will repent and turn to Jesus Christ, the Lord will receive you and pardon all your sins.
 - None of us who know Him were pardoned because of our own goodness, but only through His free mercy.
 - Come to Him and be with those for whom every detail of history is a work to bring about their happiness.