

Introduction:

- A. Turn in your Bibles to *Esther* (p.368). You may not know much about this book. I didn't. It is easy to overlook. In fact, I read that for the first six or seven centuries after Christ there was not one Christian commentary on *Esther*.

The story of *Esther* gave rise to the Jewish celebration of Purim which comes up in about a month. As a family festival, Purim—the celebration of this story—is second only to the Passover celebration. We may not know much about this book, but among Jews it is one of the most beloved parts of Scripture.

- B. But there's this serious problem with the book of *Esther*. God is never mentioned. Not once. Some say his name is encoded in the Hebrew text. I don't buy it. God is simply not named in this entire 10-chapter story, and it is a story of salvation. Go figure! What do we make of that?

Of course, many of you live in a world where God is never mentioned either. You can go through years of schooling and never hear God's name mentioned seriously. You can work in a company till retirement and never hear God factored into a single decision or business conversation. Or how about politics? All the candidates say, "*God bless America,*" but I've never heard one say, "God, in his wisdom, teaches us to take such-and-such a stand." But of course, all that doesn't mean that God *hasn't* been working at your school or company or government. After all, *you* were there and God is with you.

God is not *absent* from the story of *Esther*—nor from your story. He is just disguised. Working undercover. Hidden in plain sight. In fact, the very fact that he isn't named prompts us to look for him more intentionally... and find him!

- C. We're going to take this story in three parts over the next three Sundays—like a three-act play. The first act of a play

usually introduces us to the setting, circumstances, and characters, and then... our first taste of trouble! So it is with Esther 1-3.

Travel back to 483 bc and meet Xerxes (a.k.a. Ahasuerus). Prepare to be impressed - 1:1-4... This was kind of one-man world's fair. He was fresh off military conquests as far away as Egypt and now for half a year, he invites a continual parade of officials from every part of this vast kingdom—the biggest in the world! They all come in from the provinces, wide-eyed and agape, to the very table of the most powerful man on earth. Now we zero in on the grand finale—one final week-long bash with a round-the-clock open bar. Try to picture what is described here. For all the extraordinary things we've seen in our time, we may have never seen anything quite like this: **vv.5-11... Talk about living large! I'll show you my gardens, my solid gold and silver couches, and my mosaics, my golden goblets (each one unique) and all the wine you can drink. And now (stifling a drunken hiccup) let me show you my woman.** One thing never changes:

I. POWERFUL PEOPLE WILL OFTEN DO ANYTHING TO SHOW OFF (1:1-2:4)

- A. God may lay low in this story but Xerxes certainly doesn't! Powerful people rarely do. After all, what good is power if no one sees it? What good is wealth if no one oohs and aahs? What good is a beautiful woman if you can't show her off? Whether it is your company or your community, your school or our government we all have to live around people who throw their weight around, who want us gaping at their power.
- B. Then someone resists. Vv.12...Powerful people do *not* like to take no for an answer. So Xerxes calls in his seven top advisors and they decide Vashti's refusal to given into the drunken demand of her husband could upset the whole social structure. If they don't do something, nobles' wives will be ignoring them and women in far-off Cush or India will be telling their husbands they can make their own

supper! **Two things must be done:** 1. Get rid of Vashti and find a better woman, and 2. Pass a law making it a federal crime for a woman to disobey her husband. **V.22...** When powerful people are threatened they can do some pretty radical things. You've probably seen that somewhere you've worked or in some other organization you know well. Some hotshot feels slighted and next thing you know there are new policies in place, or someone gets fired. (I wonder if Xerxes' law worked? Here's a bunch of women in the market of some backwater town. The king's herald reads the new law and says what happened. I'm seeing these women winking at each other, bumping fists, and whispering, "You go, girl!") **Whatever happened, it was a colossal case of bureaucratic overkill.**

- C. There's one more extravagance that Xerxes wants us to see: 2:1-4... That's some power! Of course, we cannot even imagine the brokenhearted farewells, the marriages that never happened and the children who were never born; the loveliest girls in all that vast empire—most of whom were condemned to live out their days without husband or family at the whim of one megalomaniac!
- D. Well, there is the scene. Xerxes. 127 provinces, a 180-day combination of banquet and world's fair displaying the wealth of his kingdom "*and the splendor and glory of his majesty.*" A queen who has one line in the whole story: "*No!*" And an entire empire with a useless law and generation of lost girls all for a man who has to have his way. And in all this, not one mention of God. I suppose it was pretty much that way this week at Abbott Labs or Stevenson High School or the *Chicago Tribune*. I guess in the real world, God doesn't have much to say. God is just for church. Right?

But now two people step into this story with a pedigree that only God could love: **vv.5-6...** That family tree was important, because

these people had been exiled for over 100 years. If they didn't keep repeating their family tree, they would forget who they were as the sons and daughters of Abraham. Mordecai had never laid eyes on the hills of Judea nor on Mt. Zion. To us, Mordecai sounds like the quintessential Jewish name, but it wasn't. The Persian god was Marduke so Mordecai's name came from the Persian culture.

There's another important thing here, the mention of **Kish**. This makes Mordecai a direct relative of Israel's first (and failed) king Saul, because Kish was Saul's father.

V.7... An orphan girl, taken in by her older cousin. She has a Jewish name, Hadassah, but only her family knows it. She, too, has taken a Persian name, Esther.

So here in this tale of lavish excess and power gone crazy are two people whom neither Xerxes nor any of those innumerable nobles knew or cared about. But their lives were about to intersect... somehow...

Vv.8-16 explain how these young virgins were brought to Susan from all over the realm, given all kinds of special beauty treatments, until their night with King Xerxes. Esther was among them, and **v.9** says that she immediately caught the eye of the eunuch in charge and was given all kinds of preferential treatment. Nonetheless, we read that story with a kind of incredulity. *Is what happened what I think happened?!* Yes. Every night. A young woman used and then sent packing to the 'used women' section of the palace where, so far as we know, she'd live out her days. Remember, this was a queen search, so each girl's only hope was to somehow capture the king's attention from out of all the most beautiful girls in the empire. In one night. Their first night. With a king who clearly had intimacy issues. But if you look quick, you may catch a glimpse of the unmentioned God?

II. OUR UNSEEN GOD POSITIONS HIS PEOPLE FOR HIS PURPOSES EVEN WHEN NO ONE NOTICES (2:5-18)

- A. When we were introduced to Mordecai and Esther I'm sure you caught the tragedies in their stories—a Jewish family carried off into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, never to

return home. A young woman orphaned. It's a pretty familiar scenario in the Bible. In fact, God often maneuvers his people on the wheels of life's troubles. For example, there is Esther's spiritual twin, Joseph over a thousand years earlier in Egypt who ended up saving all Israel. Or Daniel who was also captured by Nebuchadnezzar but then mightily used by God. In the New Testament Aquilla and Priscilla were positioned by God to help Paul because they fled persecution. And John wrote *Revelation* from exile on the Isle of Patmos. **Trouble in life repositions us.** Sometimes geographically; always emotionally; usually spiritually. It is unsettling and tragic, but God relocates people for a purpose.

- B. Three times this passage mentions how Esther found favor wherever she went. With the eunuch in charge of all those scores of young women: **v.9**, *"She pleased him and won his favor."* Re/ the whole court: **V.15**, *"Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her."* Remember, they're seeing scores of charming young ladies. And then there's the king himself: **vv.17-18**... *"Now the king was attracted to Esther more than any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins..."* I have no doubt that Esther was a unique woman, but still... how does that happen? How does she consistently get everyone's attention in a world of beautiful people? It happened because God controls favor. God not only positions his people but when it suits his purposes, he moves them—*moves us*—into strategic circles and situation. A chance meeting. An unexpected connection. Someone in HR looks longer at a resume. A kindness or courtesy at just the right moment. **And someone whom God loves and can use wins favor; gets in someone's good graces.** God has ways of making sure people in power do *his* bidding. All without ever hearing his name!

- C. Notice one other thing in **vv.10-11**... Esther has a dangerous secret, but she also has a guardian. Every day, whether she knows it or not, Mordecai is checking on her welfare. Here is God in disguise again. God looks after you the way Mordecai always looked after Esther.
- D. Up to now, this story has something of the flavor of Cinderella or Snow White. You could almost imagine tucking a little girl into bed with stories of how the orphan girl Esther became the queen, and had a royal banquet in her honor (so long as your little girl doesn't ask too many questions!) *Now, time to turn off the light and go to sleep.* But the storyteller clears his throat. *Um, I'm not quite finished. I was just coming to a good part. V.19-20...* There's that secret again. When you're reading a story and someone has a dangerous secret, what do you think is going to happen? It doesn't bode well. Meanwhile, Mordecai apparently works there at the king's gate, probably as a government official: **v.21-23**... *Well, that was a good part. So both Esther and Mordecai end up being honored. Now, we really need to turn off the light and get some sleep.*

Actually, this is where things start to get messy. **3:1-2**... Jewish listeners, familiar with their history, heard Haman the **Agagite** and their eyebrows popped up. He was an *Agagite*?! When Israel came out of Egypt after the Exodus, they ran into a people called the Amalekites, who became their first official enemy. After Israel defeated them, God said, *"Write this down... I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven."* [Ex 17:14] Fast-forward three or four hundred years to the reign of Israel's first king, Saul. *(Wait, didn't we just hear something about Saul. Wasn't he the son of Kish? And Mordecai was also a descendant of Kish? What a coincidence!)* Anyway, God sent King Saul to wipe out the Amalekites, once and for all. Saul won a great victory but he wanted a trophy. **1 Sam 15:8**: *"He took Agag king of the*

Amalekites alive.” That was the beginning of the end for Saul and the doom of Agag, whom Samuel killed on the spot, but evidently some of Agag’s descendants lived on, always the mortal enemies of the Jews, and now half a world away, a relative of Saul and a descendant of Agag meet again! What a coincidence! And even though Haman is the second-most-powerful man in the greatest empire on earth, Mordecai will *not* give him his props; he will *not* bow when Haman passes by. And that is a problem. A *big, big* problem!

III. **THOUGH OUR GOD REIGNS, HIS PEOPLE ARE NEVER FAR FROM MORTAL DANGER (3:1-15)**

- A. **Vv.3-6...** There was a reason why Mordecai had Esther hide her identity. Even in an empire that was a true melting pot, Jews were in danger, because Jews are the people of God in a world that is hostile to God. That never changes. Jesus told us that all who follow him will be in constant danger from the world around us. All it takes is one wicked man with the right opportunity, and a holocaust is being plotted.
- B. Listen to how Haman spun his pitch to Xerxes: vv.7-15... Don’t you hear that and think, *“How can this happen!?! How can two men, one of them probably drunk, decide to annihilate an entire people—God’s people?!”* Brace yourself, my friends, that is an old story, and the last chapter has not yet been written!

For the two most powerful men in the empire, it was “a final solution” and time for a drink. In the city around them, people were aghast. And as for the terrified Jews, on the next day, the 14th day of the first month, as they had done for 1000 years, they celebrated the Passover, remembering the time the angel of death passed over their blood-marked houses in Egypt.

But where was God this time? Where is God when powerful people are out of control? Where is God when no one even mentions his name? [Come again next week.]