

Why Are We Studying This Book?

Steve Bartkowski, a former NFL quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, said: "For years the Bible was a dead book to me... like grits without salt. (Or if you're from Maine, 'like lobstah without buttah!') But after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, it became alive. I saw that it was God's way of talking to me."ⁱ

Today we begin a study of the Old Testament book of Esther. It is a unique book in many, many ways. First of all, it is one of only two books where a woman is the main character. Secondly, it is one of only two books of the Bible where the name of God is never mentioned. Not once! (Song of Solomon is the other.) Thirdly, it is a book marked by male chauvinism, anti-Semitism, attempted ethnic cleansing and political chicanery. So, with all of those negative attributes, why would we want to study this book?

John Piper puts the book of Esther in the same category as the books of Job and Ruth and says:

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He is plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱ

Today, I want us to take some time to study the context, the characters and the various plots and sub-plots of this most interesting story. So, the first reason to study the book of Esther is because...

I. Though God's Name Does Not Appear, God's Hand Does.

The story of Esther takes place at a very interesting time in Israel's history. We don't know for sure who wrote this book, it might have been Mordecai, Esther's cousin and guardian, but it doesn't specifically say that. We are more confident about the dates of the events that are described. It all happened during the Persian period of world history, from 539 B.C. to approx. 331 B.C. Ahasuerus was the ruler and the book of Esther covers the period of his reign from 483-473 B.C. The Greek name for Ahasuerus is Xerxes. So, the book begins with these words:

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush (Egypt): At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. (Esther 1:1-2)

Just to be clear, this all means that the events we're about to study took place in the capital city of the land of Persia, which today is Iran. Many Jews who were taken into exile by the Babylonians ended up in this town of Susa when the Persians captured the Babylonians. For example, both Nehemiah and Daniel lived in Susa.

When the Persians took over the Babylonian empire in 538 B.C., Cyrus, who then was king, released many of the Jews to return to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. A second group of Jews returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. with Ezra, the Priest, and a third group returned with Nehemiah in 445 B.C. The events of the book of Esther then, took place in Susa between the first and second trips of Jews back to Jerusalem from Persia.

Now, this week, we're not going to get into the specifics of the storyline but I do want to introduce you to the main characters. First is the king of Persia, Xerxes, who has been on the throne for three years when the book opens and will be on the throne another eight years after the book ends. Then, of course, there's Esther. Her Hebrew name is Hadassah. (If that name is familiar to you, it might be because former CT senator Joseph Lieberman's wife's is named Hadassah.) Esther was possibly a teenager when the story opens.

Next is Esther's older cousin, Mordecai. We're given an extensive biography of Mordecai and his relationship with Esther in chapter 2:

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)

Lastly, we must meet Haman. Haman was an Agagite which is a reference to king Agag, king of the Amalekites. The Jews and the Amalekites were mortal enemies from way back! Their feud goes back almost a 1,000 years to when the Jews were first coming out of Egypt. The Amalekites attacked the Israelites, which resulted in God's pronouncing a curse on them and they were severely punished because of it (Ex. 17:14).

In chapter three of Esther, Haman is honored by King Xerxes and elevated to a seat of authority higher than any other nobleman in his royal court. People were supposed to bow down to Haman when he passed by because of his position. Mordecai refused to do so, because of the history between the Jews and the Amalekites, and so began the fundamental tension in this drama.

"So," you might ask, "how is it possible to have a story that is so steeped in biblical history, characters, geography and tension and there not be even ONE mention of God?" There's really only one good answer to that question: this is a period when the Jewish people, here in Susa at least, were out of the will of God. In 538 BC, when Cyrus pronounced his decree that released the Jews to go back to Jerusalem, only about 60,000 went back. Over a million stayed in Persia! It wasn't God's will for them to stay! They should've gone back! So, those who stayed in Persia are what we might call "carnal Jews." They were Jews by name only, living outside the will of God.

God predicted that this would happen. In Deut. 31, just before he died, Moses spoke to the people on God's behalf and he predicted the 70-year exile to Babylon and Persia. He said:

...these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them... And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods. (Deut. 31:16, 18)

Has America done this? The Puritans absolutely believed that they were entering into a covenant with God as they came to America. Gov. John Winthrop, sailing to America on the ship *Arbelia*, said, "We are entered into Covenant with Him (God)... wee shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." ⁱⁱⁱ Winthrop believed they had a duty to fulfill the covenant with God and, in return, God would protect His chosen people. John Cotton, one of Winthrop's contemporaries, urged his congregation to "Have special care that you have had the ordinances (of God) planted amongst you." Because "As soon as God's ordinances cease, yor security ceaseth likewise." ^{iv} Could this be the explanation for the terrorist attacks, natural disasters and economic traumas of the last two decades? Our forefathers who entered into the covenant with God would certainly say so.

And they would also tell us the way out – repent. Prof. Perry Miller, in his book, *The New England Mind – from Colony to Province*, writes:

The only recourse to affliction was prayer and repentance, to be expressed through confession of the sins that brought the misfortune. It was the duty of the civil authorities to pursue and punish those who refused to confess and repent. ^v

If we had politicians who walked in the path of our founding fathers, they would not be beating their breasts and crowing about how America "will come back stronger than ever." No, they would be telling us that we have broken our covenant with God and days of confession and repentance are the only way to end the terrorist threats and the natural disasters and the economic turmoil. God has removed His hand of protection over America! There's only one way to get it back – confession of sin and real repentance: turning around as a nation and coming back to God.

What does this have to do with the book of Esther? Everything, because the book of Esther shows us how, even with a disobedient people, God's will will not be stopped. This is known as the Providence of God, how God provides. Even when His name is not being spoken in worship or prayer, His invisible Hand is still working. We'll see how in the weeks to come. Secondly, we should study this book because in it we'll see...

II. The Central Struggles of All People

When you're living in a society where the majority of the people are outside the will of God, there are going to be problems. In a workplace-related study in 2008, people were asked about their working conditions. When asked to identify what caused the most stress in their workplace, the number one response was, "co-workers." When asked if a co-worker had ever tried to make them look bad, 50% said, "yes." When asked if they worked with one or more annoying co-workers, 86% said "yes." ^{vi}

This is what we will see in the book of Esther, struggles between people – gender struggles, ethnic struggles, power struggles, emotional struggles AND spiritual struggles. Spiritual struggles? In a book that never mentions God? Yes, the Bible makes it clear that all struggles in this world have their root in our own struggle with God – whether we acknowledge it or not. Let me give you just a glimpse of this. Pastor John MacArthur says that the book of Esther can be compared to a chess game. God and Satan (as the invisible players) move real kings, queens and nobles across the board. When Satan puts Haman in place, it was as if he had announced, “Check”. God then positioned Esther and Mordecai and said, “Checkmate.”^{vii}

But this game has been going on since the Garden of Eden. Satan throughout history has been trying to sever God’s relationship with people and disrupt God’s promises to Israel. In the Old Testament, Satan is working overtime to destroy the line of David so that the promised Messiah could not be born. He got the line of Judah down to one man, Joash, in II Chronicles 22. One man! But God preserved Joash’s life because He had promised to do so when He promised Abraham:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:3)

These are not just words; they are a profound promise to the people of Israel that they will be preserved. This is not a contract that is dependent on Abraham’s doing anything or even being obedient. It is a promise that is all dependent on God! This is what we will see proven in the book of Esther. The people were not living in a faithful relationship with God. They were out of His will, but that did not stop God from fulfilling His promise of preservation. This is not just God fulfilling a legal covenant, but our gracious, merciful God fulfilling a promise of love.

Here then, in Esther’s story, we see the ultimate struggle of history, the struggle behind and beneath all struggles, the struggle between the promises of God and the dreams of Satan.

Do you understand that that is also true of the micro-struggles in your life? Do you understand that, behind the struggle between you and that annoying person at work, behind the frustrating struggle with your spouse, beneath the exhausting struggle with your parents is the struggle between God’s promises and Satan’s dreams? Satan dreams of driving a wedge between you and your co-worker, you and your spouse, you and your mom or dad. He lies awake at night, constructing ways to drive that wedge deeper and deeper and deeper. And God’s Holy Spirit stands over you, willing to supply all you need, from His riches in Christ Jesus, to sooth the hurt, to pour the healing oil, to give you the courage and compassion to speak the truth and offer grace and remove the wedge of Satan. But the choice is yours. Strike the wedge with the hammer of your anger and drive the wedge deeper making Satan’s dream come true! OR rely on the promises of God, remove the wedge and end the conflict. The story of Esther is the story of her struggle with these same two great forces. We have much we can learn from this remarkable, young, female warrior. Lastly, we must study this book because of the...

III. Remarkable Display of Courage, Loyalty and Faith.

The book of Esther explains the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim. This feast is still celebrated today every 14th and 15th of March. Esther 9 tells us:

Mordecai recorded these events... He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them. For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the *pur* (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. (Esther 9:20, 22-24)

Most of us know the famous saying of Socrates, "Know thyself." Socrates was not a Christ-follower but that's not bad advice, as long as knowing yourself isn't for the purpose of promoting yourself. But there's another Greek, Pittacus, who was one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece, who also said something of importance. He said, "Know thine opportunities." There's no question that this is a major theme of this story. Whether Mordecai speaks of it openly or not, he is fully aware that he has a great opportunity to influence his young cousin Esther to attempt a most selfless act to save her people, which is certainly the will of God. Haman, on the other hand, sees a great opportunity to increase his own status and power, and his strategy is definitely in direct OPPOSITION to the will of God. Esther's courage, loyalty and faith are crucial to the defeat of Satan's will and the victory of God's will.

Which side of that equation are you standing on today? We all have opportunities, some are larger in scope than others, but we all have opportunities in this life. We have a choice: on which opportunities will we spend our time and resources? Opportunities that will increase our own status and power or opportunities that will advance the will of God? Your time and resources are finite, they're limited. You must choose. Which will it be? Your kingdom come or His? Esther risked everything in the hope that God's will would win. As we study her story, may our choices be in sync with the invisible hand of God, so that His kingdom will come and all other kingdoms will be radically defeated. Amen.

ⁱ Steve Bartkowski quoted in "Power for Living," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 11

ⁱⁱ John Piper, *A Sweet and Bitter Providence* (Wheaton: Crossway Books & Bibles, 2010), pp. 101-102

ⁱⁱⁱ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Settlements to Society: 1607-1763*, ed. Jack P. Greene. (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 68

^{iv} John Cotton, "God's Promise to His Plantations," *Settlements to Society*, pp. 65-66

^v Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: from Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953), p. 198

^{vi} PreachingToday.com, "Annoying Co-workers," 10/13/2008

^{vii} John McArthur, "Grace to You," Esther, www.gty.org/resources/bible-introductions