

October 3

Esther 1-4

Welcome to the October 3 Project 4:4 edition. Today we begin our reading of the book of Esther, an amazing and exciting story of God's deliverance. We'll study the history of the Jews during the Persian period as we read the first four chapters of the Book of Esther.

There are five books that are grouped together in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. Four of them we have already read: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations. The fifth is the Book of Esther. In the Hebrew grouping Esther is the last of the books, perhaps because it is read during Purim, the last festival of the Jewish year. As you read the Book of Esther you will discover that it contains the story of how the feast of Purim began. Some scholars believe the only reason Esther is included at all in our Bibles is because without it there would be no explanation or justification for that most joyous of Jewish feasts.

Esther is one of two Old Testament books named for a woman (the other is Ruth) and much more curiously one of only two books in the Bible that do not mention the name of God (the other is the Song of Solomon). It is also one of two Old Testament books, along with Exodus, that deals specifically with the subject of persecution of the Hebrew people and tells how God delivered them.

Let's consider the point that Ester doesn't reference the word "God" in the text. No where is His name used, nor is there any mention of the law, the covenant, the temple or other prominent features of Israel's religion. In his commentary on Esther, F.B. Huey examines some of the more creative explanations for this omission. My favorite is this: The Book of Esther was meant to be read during the festival of Purim and at a time of "uninhabited merry making and drinking." An old Hebrew text says, "A man is obligated to drink during Purim until he is unable to distinguish between 'blessed be Mordecai' and 'cursed by Haman'." If a man is that drunk and he comes upon the name of God he might read it aloud and be profaned. So to avoid such a terrible mishap, the name of God is omitted from the entire Book! I guess that's one way to look at it. In truth I cannot give you a good reason for God's name to be absent, but I will tell you that His hand of providence is evident all over this short Book!

The providence of God, the hand of God moving the events of time and the affairs of men and women to accomplish His purpose in the redemption and salvation of His people is what we need to be looking for as we move through the Book of Esther together.

Today we met Mordecai and his niece Esther who after Xerxes deposed his queen named Vashti, emerged from a kind of Miss Persia pageant, to become Vashti's successor. We also met Haman, a rich man who was advisor to the king and who harbored a pathological hatred for Mordecai and the Jewish people. Haman's enormous pride launches him into a blind rage when Mordecai the Jew refused to bow down and pay him honor according to the command of the king.

Fasting is talked about. First we are told that when the word of Haman's edict calling for the destruction of the Jews was passed throughout the provinces there was great mourning among the Jews and they fasted. Then we are told that when Esther agreed to risk her life and speak to the king, she requested that Mordecai mobilize all the Jews to fast for three days before she went into the king. This voluntary denial of food is for spiritual purposes, to seek the protection and deliverance of Ester and the Jewish people.

Sackcloth and ashes were also mentioned in today's reading. They were a universal sign of mourning and humiliation. The Jews would put on sackcloth and ashes to repent, to mourn, to show humility, or at times of national emergency.

Now the most important words in the entire Book of Esther are located in chapter 4. They are found in verses 12-16. Mordecai learns through Hathach, the court eunuch who is Esther's personal servant, that Esther is reluctant to take the plight of the Jews to the king because of the old Persian law that prescribed death to any who come unbidden to the king, unless he decided to grant mercy before extending his golden scepter to them. The message Mordecai sent back contains an extremely important cluster of biblical principles. The message deserves to be memorized because you will have a thousand opportunities to share it with people, who like Esther, are reluctant to do the right thing because they fear that the cost will be too great. Mordecai's answer also proves that despite the absence of God's name from the Book, he at least knew some important truths about the way in which God acts with regard to His purpose and plan. Mordecai's answer to Esther's reluctance to go unbidden to the king was "Do not think that because you are in the kings' house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this point, 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 the royal position for such a time as this?" Actually there is not one but four principles there that deserve our complete attention and which, all by themselves, serve as a complete justification for the inclusion of this book in the Canon of scripture. The first one has to do with the immutability of God's will and purpose, but I can state it much more plainly than that: "You cannot thwart the will of God." His purposes will stand -- no matter what. Whatever God has decreed will come to pass whether or not you choose to cooperate with Him! The principle is stated in many places in the Word of God. Two that come immediately to my mind are Isaiah 43:13 and Numbers 23:19. The Isaiah passage says: "I am God, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?" The Numbers passage says, "God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" The principle is very clear. God's purposes will stand and will come to pass regardless of what you choose to do! You cannot thwart the will of God. If it is His will to deliver Israel, then it will be done no matter what Esther does or doesn't do. The only problem is that if Esther chooses to abandon her God given opportunity, God's deliverance will rise from some other quarter and Esther will lose the blessing that could be her's if she acts courageously and righteously. It provides great comfort from the realization that nobody can thwart the will of God.

The second great principle that flows from these verses is directly related to the first since God's purposes are immutable, then no single human being is ever indispensable to God. Every once in a while I hear someone say, "God needs you to do this" but the truth is God doesn't need anyone! Mordecai was right! If Esther had refused to act, God would have raised up someone else to do the job. It would not go undone. God's plan would not be thwarted by the rebellious disobedience of one human being!! And if you refuse the task He calls you to do, it will still get done. It's just that you will lose the blessing and the opportunity to be God's gracious instrument!

The third principle is so closely related to the first two that it perhaps is only a different way of saying what we have already noted. Mordecai's advice reminds us that God is omnipotent. He can (and will) do anything at all to accomplish His purpose. It looked to Mordecai that Esther was God's solution to the difficulty in which the Jews found themselves. But if Esther would not respond, God could still solve their problem in any number of other ways so while there is great concern on Mordecai's part, there is no panic. If Esther will not do her part, the work will still be accomplished. God is omnipotent!

Finally, and perhaps most prominently in Mordecai's message, there is an understanding of the divine work of providence. That doctrine teaches us that God is always at work, arranging all the affairs of our lives so that all things work together for His glory and our good. Next to the story of Joseph, the events recorded in the Book of Esther give to us perhaps the best illustration we will find in all the Bible of this doctrine at work. God, knowing the end from the beginning, and understanding what Haman would do to bring about the destruction of God's people so directed the course of events that first Mordecai would be in a position to uncover the plot against the king; secondly that Esther would be in a position to reveal it; that third she would be positioned to plead for the lives of her people; Mordecai was entirely correct. God had brought Esther to the palace of Susa for just "such a time as this." That is the doctrine of providence.

Are there things God is placing before you that you are hesitant to act upon? Is your first response to fast –going before the Lord expressing your dependence on him? Perhaps God is directing you to be a blessing to others by strategically placing you where you are for such a time as this. Tune in tomorrow when we reveal the rest of Esther's story and discover how certain people responded to God's invitation at such a time as this.