



Wednesday Bible Education
Biblical Theology
Lesson 18: Esther

REVIEW

Questions from last week's lesson:

1. What is Nehemiah about?
2. How does Nehemiah help us today?

Answers:

1. Nehemiah recounts the third wave of Jews returning to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and opposition to that work.

Summary Statement

Nehemiah is about God's faithfulness to his promises. Just as he brought Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land, he also scattered them off the land for their disobedience and has brought a remnant back.

2. Understanding Nehemiah will help us see that prayer is an appropriate response to problems we face, sins we have committed, and the desires for God's glory we have.

Understanding Nehemiah helps us understand opposition we will certainly face in the pursuit of God's glory in our lives.

Understanding Nehemiah helps us see the sovereignty of God in action, working both in the lives of those obeying him and the lives of those opposing him.

Understanding Nehemiah helps us understand God is the finisher of his work regardless of what means he employs.

Understanding Nehemiah helps us see God's glory (9:5), goodness (1:10; 2:8, 18; 9:35), kindness (9:17), longsuffering (9:30), mercy (9:17, 27), power (1:10), righteousness (9:8), and wisdom (9:10) in keeping his promises.

Understanding Nehemiah helps us understand that sin must be confronted with God's word and repentance sought

INTRODUCTION

What is the book of Esther about? Esther becomes a queen to King Ahasuerus. Haman schemes to kill the Jews and Esther has to pluck up the courage to appear before the king. Haman's plan backfires and he is executed, while the Jewish people are saved from destruction.

Book Summary

Esther is about the sovereign providence of God to rule over the affairs of men and nations to keep his promises even to his people who are exiled in judgment.

Lesson Objective

This lesson covers the book of Esther. The lesson considers the structure and content of the book, along with major themes and practical applications to modern readers. We will consider what Esther reveals about Christ and his kingdom as it fits into the Bible's main story.

OBSERVATION

Esther is the twelfth and final book of history in the Old Testament. Esther is historical narrative recounting the plight and deliverance of the Jews from their enemies. The author is unknown, though some have suggested Mordecai as the author. The author doesn't provide theological commentary to the narrative, but structures and presents the story in complete sympathy with the Jews and plainly colors the character of the Jews' enemies as evil. The book takes place in Shushan (Susa), the capital of the Persian Empire, sometime after the first return of the Jews to Jerusalem.

The Persian king in the book is thought to be either Xerxes I or Artaxerxes I. If Ahasuerus is Xerxes I, then the third year of his reign (1:3) would have been 483 BC and place the events of this book between the return led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC and the return led by Ezra in 458 BC. This would put Esther between the sixth and seventh chapters of the book of Ezra. If Ahasuerus is Artaxerxes I, the third year of his reign would have been 463 BC. This would put the events of the book 20 years later, just prior to the return led by Ezra in 458 BC.

The book is named after the orphaned Jewish girl Esther, who was cared for by her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai held some office of court in the king's palace. The book opens with the king giving a 180 day feast for the nobles of Persia, which was followed by a 7 day feast for all the people, both common and noble. The Queen Vashti simultaneously held a feast for all the royal women. Vashti refused a lewd summons to appear at the king's feast, which led to her being removed and disinherited.

Ahasuerus wanted to replace Vashti and called for the eligible women to be assembled, including Esther. She is ultimately chosen and put in Vashti's place. The king gave another feast to celebrate the occasion and gave gifts and remitted taxes.

In the course of Mordecai's service, he discovered a plot to assassinate the king. He told Esther and she told the king. This led to the conspirators being found and hanged. Meanwhile, Haman is promoted and the king commands all within the kingdom to bow to him, which Mordecai refused to do. Enraged Haman concocts a plan to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire and is able to get his plan codified in the law.

Mordecai discovered Haman's evil plan and appealed to Esther to approach the king. She is afraid because such a move could cost her her life, but she ultimately agreed to do it. Her fears are allayed when she went before the king and was accepted to speak to him. Rather than immediately reveal Haman's plot, she invited the king and Haman to a banquet she prepared. She invites them to come again the next day. Haman perceived these events to be in his favor and he was especially enraged when he encountered Mordecai. Haman's wife counseled him to build a great gallows to hang Mordecai.

Providentially, the king could not sleep and ordered for the chronicles to read to him. The account of Mordecai uncovering the assassination plot is read and this reminds the king to honor Mordecai for his loyal service. About that time, Haman came to see the king, but is thrown off his purpose of hanging Mordecai when the king asked him how he should honor a man he wanted to honor. Haman perceives himself to be the honoree and goes all out on what the king should do. Ahasuerus agrees to the suggestion and instructs Haman to go do all those things for Mordecai.

When the king and Haman go to Esther's banquet, she revealed Haman's plot to kill her and her people. The king is greatly angered and Haman ends up hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. The irreversible decree to kill the Jews was still in force and Esther approached the king about it. He made a counter-decree that the Jews could defend themselves against their enemies. The Jews rose up and slew 500 men and the ten sons of Mordecai. The feast of Purim was inaugurated to commemorate it. The book ends with Mordecai being promoted.

A brief outline of Esther:

3. Chapters 1-2 Esther Comes to the Palace
4. Chapters 3-7 Mordecai Battles Haman
5. Chapters 8-9 The Jews are Delivered
6. Chapter 10 Mordecai is promoted

INTERPRETATION

What does Esther teach?

Faith

The book does not mention God by name, nor does it contain any supernatural acts we

would call miracles. The book clearly presents the motive of faith in God's promises (4:13-14). This is realized through Esther who goes from passive to active and embraces obedience unto death (4:16).

Providence

Esther may be one of the strongest teachings on providence in a single book. Esther happened to be Jewish, exceptionally beautiful, and favored by the king. Mordecai happened to be a Benjamite in the service of the king, putting him into direct contact with Haman, who happened to be an Agagite. Haman was an Amalekite descendant of King Agag, whom Saul was supposed to kill but Samuel actually killed him. The Amalekites first came out against Israel after the Exodus (Exodus 17:8-16) and were cursed (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). There was about a thousand years of bad blood between the Jews and the Amalekites.

Mordecai happened to discover the assassination plot, which happened to be recorded in the chronicles. Haman's lot for the enactment date of his decree to kill the Jews happened to fall a year out. Esther happened to be accepted by the king. Haman happened upon Mordecai, leading to his constructing the gallows. It happened that the king couldn't sleep and the recorder happened to read in the chronicles the account of Mordecai and the assassination conspiracy. Haman happened to approach the king precisely when he was thinking of how to honor Mordecai. Haman later happened to be pleading with Esther when the king comes back and misinterpreted the scene.

These instances are not all the instances of providence in this book where God ordained and orchestrated events for the deliverance of his people through judgment on his enemies.

The Messiah and His Kingdom

Esther contains no prophecies but does contribute to the expectation of the Messiah and his kingdom. Esther overcame the enemy of her people by willingly laying down her life to save them. Mordecai assured her deliverance would come, implying the coming of the long-awaited Messiah deliverer, but that did not mean their lives would be spared in this instance.

God had not forgotten Israel, though they were out of their land in exile. The promises of God to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to David were still sure. The Jews were taken from mourning to feasting in this book, which pictures their future judgment (desolation) and restoration at the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom.

APPLICATION

How does Esther help us as modern readers?

Understanding Esther helps us understand faith in God's promises despite dark circumstances. The Christian's hope and faith is not to be determined by what it looks like outside

or the news headlines.

Understanding Esther helps us understand obedience and faithfulness to God are more important than even our temporal lives.

Understanding Esther helps us understand God is in control and is working, whether we can see evidence of that or not.

Understanding Esther helps us understand we are to fear God more than the threats of our enemies.

CONCLUSION

Esther gives us a picture of God's chosen nation in exile. Though scattered and removed from their land, they still exist and have ethnic identity. Though under God's hand of judgment, he will not permit them to be utterly destroyed, because then he would fail to keep the promises he has made to the fathers. This book presents a great deliverance for the people, but it still not yet their salvation and restoration. It's a book that gives hope that God is still here and his Messiah is still coming.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This series is a study in biblical theology going book by book through the entire Bible. Each lesson typically covers one book of the Bible, though occasionally covers more than one book when the books are short. This PDF is provided for personal study, small group study, or use in a church class. Unless otherwise noted, all lessons have been prepared by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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