



A HOUSE REBUILT: RESCUING HER PEOPLE

Catalog No. 20130210
21st Message
Book of Esther
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February 10, 2013

SERIES: EPIC

When I was a little girl I lived in an upstairs apartment and my downstairs neighbor was a very old woman named Mrs. Weber. She had white hair and a full bodied figure and made these great sugar cookies that she cut out with a star shaped cookie cutter. After they came out of the oven we sprinkled them with sparkling white sugar. They smelled so good and were delicious too.

One day when I went over to Mrs. Weber's house her kitchen was filled with unusual smells and many baked things which I had never seen before. She had set up a large rectangular table in the middle of her small living room and covered it with a white lace tablecloth. All kinds of strange foods were placed on the table and there was a very large silver candlestick on the table too which fascinated me. She looked a little nervous having me around her fancy table and her breakable dishes, but she did explain to me that when her son and his family came over they would light the candles, sing, pray, and eat all these special foods. And of course the candlestick was a Menorah. All this strangeness was very inviting to me, because Mrs. Weber was always so inviting of me.

God has a plan for his people. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the then exiles in Babylon and said, "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and daughters.... Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

God has a purpose for his people. They are to show the nations around them God as well as be a blessing to them. Just as Mrs. Weber showed me something of God that I would never have known without her, so God promised father Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed and he often did it by scattering his people around the globe. He even uses exile to accomplish his ends for the nations and not just for Israel's sake.

Background

We are in the second week of the *EPIC* era called *A House Rebuilt*. Last week we heard the story of God

delivering the exiled people of Judah from their 70 year Babylonian captivity through Cyrus, King of Persia. God put it on Cyrus' heart to return the people of Judah to their home for the purpose of rebuilding their temple. So 50,000 Jews went back to rebuild the temple. But what happened to the remaining Jews who did not return? This week we shift our attention to those Israelites who did not return to Jerusalem, but remained in Persia.

Our text for this morning is the Book of Esther. It is a beautifully told history which feels like you are in a fairytale or some age-old folktale. As we listen to it we are invited to notice that the circumstances written here are far more than random events. The hand of God is actively working behind the scenes of history to accomplish his plan for his people. This is good to know. How often in our everyday lives do we recognize God actively at work? Sometimes we just don't know what he is doing in our time and place, but Esther's story allows us a glimpse of God's hand of providence working out his plan to prosper his people, even if they are not aware of it at the time. Since Esther's story is God's story, we are invited to look behind the events of our own lives to find God there as well. The Book of Esther begins with a royal banquet.

Royal Banquet

Esther 1:1-4:

¹This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: ²At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

⁴For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.

Xerxes took 180 days to show off his wealth and glory! This could be the beginning of a great reality TV show. As our story begins we have an inside look at a Persian king

—the only King actually of his time. He ruled the world from Susa, his captital seat. Only Greece was not under his sway. If Marie Antoinette said, “let them eat cake” this guy was serving it to them on golden plates!

Xerxes I the Great is Cyrus’ grandson. His name might appear in your Bibles as Xerxes or Ahasuerus. Xerxes is what the Greeks called him and Ahasuerus is what the Hebrew’s called him. You can see how short the glory of man is since his name is left to us in two languages but not his original tongue.

Esther 1:5-11:

⁵When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. ⁷Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality. ⁸By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

⁹Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

¹⁰On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas—¹¹to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.

Ok, well this is getting good. Can you imagine the pomp of this gathering? The king is trying to impress and overwhelm his guests. Xerxes was wanting to build up support for a campaign against Greece and showing off this wealth made him certainly look like he might be able to carry it off. Xerxes did do battle with Greece and it was a terrible defeat for Persia. He never does get Greece in line.

But at this point in our story the king is on top of the world. He is at the end of a week long wine fest and is

feeling really happy as is everyone else I imagine. Always a master of timing Xerxes thinks now is the right time to display his beautiful wife, so he sends off his servants to get Vashti.

Vashti Refuses Xerxes

Esther 2:12:

¹²But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Every women here knows why Vashti did not come. It was undignified. She was being treated not like a queen, but like an object and the king and his male guests are completely drunk. I imagine they are not very attractive at the moment. Some rabbinic traditions teach that his request for Vashti to appear wearing only her crown was literal. She was to appear naked before them. If this is true, no wonder she did not come.

But Xerxes is not the kind of king you say, “No” to. He is enraged by her refusal. This becomes a pattern in this story. Xerxes is constantly drinking and making foolish choices and then becoming enraged when something goes wrong. The Greek historian Herodotus in his *Histories* tells a story of Xerxes becoming so enraged with a body of water (the Hellesport) that became so violently whipped up in a storm that it knocked down a huge bridge building project Xerxes had been working on. Xerxes was so enraged that he ordered the Hellesport to be whipped 300 times. He is portrayed as an angry man, often drunk, changing his mind quickly, and very impressionable.

Xerxes asks his royal advisors what to do about Vashti. He always consults his advisors about everything and that would be wise if they were wise advisors, but they are portrayed as rather comical characters. When his advisor Memucan tells him that queen Vashti has done wrong and that all the women in all his provinces will now disrespect their husbands when they hear of Vashti’s “No.” Xerxes deposes Vashti as advised. His reason for doing so is that now “all the people will know that every man should be ruler over his own household.” I immediately thought William Shakespere must have had Vashti and Xerxes in mind when he wrote his comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*. Menfolk who are worried that their wives are out of control can make for a funny story line. But for Vasthti it meant she was no longer a queen and one hopes that is all it meant. For we never hear of her again. When kings with total power get drunk and angry bad things happen, even to queens.

Later after Xerxes sobered up he was sad with regret at what happened with Vashti. This gets the seven unwise advisors off and running to fix the sad king. Their next big idea is to have a royal wife search.

Wife Search

Esther 2:2-3:

²Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. ³Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.

Notice what the unwise advisors and Xerxes are looking for in a queen?

What makes a good queen in their minds? Character? Loyalty? Truthfulness? Intelligence? Nope. Nothing but superficial beauty which seems to be Xerxes bent and the author's point.

This king and his kingdom are of this earthly world. Power, politics, displays of wealth, and pleasure are what this world offers at its' best. There is nothing very "cute and cuddly" about this queen search.

Here is what this really meant. It meant that girls only 13 or 14 years old were taken from their families and communities. For 12 months the girls are pampered with beauty products and oil bathes and beautiful clothes and then they have their one shot to impress the king. Xerxes the Great will enjoy a different virgin each night discarding her to his concubine herd when done with her and then the next girl will have her chance. These girls have no choice. Their families have no choice but to hand them over to the king. There is no saying "No" to Xerxes. Vashti is a good example of this. So, most of these young women will never have a normal family life at all. But then that was life in Persia at this time under an omnipotent earthly king.

But another unseen truly omnipotent king is working out a different plan behind the scenes. We don't see him and his name isn't mentioned in this text, but he is so very present. Not once in this book is God's name mentioned. Isn't that amazing? Yet on every page his hand is evident. And here is where we catch a glimpse of God's presence in our story.

Mordecai and Esther

Esther 2:5-7:

⁵Now 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, ⁶who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. ⁷Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up since 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.

Here is the first mention of one of God's people living in Persia and he has a beautiful cousin in his care. We are invited to be intrigued. We are invited to wonder if God just might be doing something behind the scenes of this queen search.

Mordecai tells Esther (I like her Hebrew name Haddasha better) not to reveal that she is of Jewish heritage. I have pondered why Mordecai told her this as you might have if you are following along in our *EPIC* series? Did he want her to be queen? Was he ambitious for her? Was he thrilled with this opportunity? Had God put it on Mordecai's heart to tell Esther this? We don't know. It is not revealed in the text. But I imagine from Mordecai's point of view he was protecting Esther whom he loved. He knew the king's men would take her because she was beautiful. And he knew that if she was known to be a Jew, Xerxes would not make her queen. What would then happen is that Xerxes would have ruined her innocence and she would wind up in his harem with all the other beautiful young women. This is not the life Mordecai hopes for Esther. So he does what he thinks is best in a bad situation and God uses it for good for his people.

Well, Esther is much more than a beautiful woman, she is a gentle, humble, thoughtful, and wise young woman. She wins over everyone who meets her. She does everything Mordecai tells her and then she does everything the king's eunuch tells her and he becomes her advocate in this king wooing business. Now, Esther is not the most beautiful woman in the land I bet, but God is working something through her that is appealing to everyone she meets. After Esther has her evening with the king, he becomes smitten.

Esther Wins the King's Heart

Esther 2:17:

¹⁷Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

This is an amazing turn of events. To have a young Jewish orphan girl be the one chosen to be Queen of Persia is a shocking surprise! Not to God, but to the hearer of the story. We are in on a good secret since Xerxes doesn't know who she really is. Xerxes' response to Esther is genuinely a surprise as well. Xerxes feels love, not just sexual but familial, and kindness toward her and she pleases him. In other words he is happy around Esther.

We haven't seen anything soft in Xerxes and so this is something different. Beautiful ending right? But we are just beginning the real reason (the plan of God) which is orchestrating these events.

After Esther is made queen the first thing we hear is that Mordecai, who sits at the king's gate, overhears a plot to kill Xerxes and then tells Esther so she can warn the king. It seems Mordecai has some kind of position with the court to be sitting at the gate. Xerxes is saved and Esther gives Mordecai the credit, but the king uncharacteristically overlooks rewarding Mordecai. Persian kings liked to reward those who helped them. Instead of Mordecai receiving a reward, we hear that Haman is elevated to the highest position in the land. This oversight of Mordecai and elevation of Haman is a surprise twist in the story.

Haman Rises Up

Esther 3:1:

¹After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.

This is not good news for the Jews in Persia. Haman is a descendant of King Agag who was an Amalekite king. The Amalekites were constant enemies of Israel. God finally judged them and commanded King Saul, the first king of Israel, to destroy all of them. But Saul spared King Agag and his disobedience to God got him replaced by King David. The prophet Samuel had to dispatch Agag, but now we see there is a surviving descendant of Agag in Haman.

Perhaps Saul had spared more royals than he said he did. Regardless, Haman is an enemy of God's people and he is now in a position coiled to strike God's people at any moment. And attack he does.

Mordecai who sits by the king's gate is the match that strikes Haman's fuse. When King Xerxes elevated Haman he gave an edict that everyone had to bow to Haman. But Mordecai refused to bow. This affront enraged Haman so much that he set out to destroy all the people of Mordecai.

Haman consults his gods and casts lots (*pur*s) to find the perfect date when it would be favorable for him to wipe out all the Jews in Persia.

A 2nd Royal Decree

Esther 3:7-11:

⁷In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the pur (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.

⁸Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. ⁹If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹"Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."

As with any lie, it is good to mix in some truth. The Jews did have different customs (which tells me they still carried some on), they did have different laws—Torah law, but they were not against the Persian king. Remember in Jeremiah's instructions they were to pray for and bless the nation where God took them into captivity. They were to be good citizens; which they were. Consider how Mordecai and Esther had already saved Xerxes life. Xerxes knew that Mordecai was a Jew but not about his relationship to Esther. But Haman is clever, he doesn't say who the people are that he wants to destroy—he carefully leaves that out.

Haman's hate is nothing if not demonic. When Xerxes gives him full reign to wipe these people out, they both sit down and drink some more. Xerxes is so careless with life and Haman is just vicious. When the death edict is sent out, the instructions say to kill, murder, and annihilate every single Jew in Persia, young or old, on the 13th of Adar (Jewish calendar date) which is March 7 on our calendar. Rather overkill don't you think? That kind of rage is personal. Haman informs everyone in the land that 11 months from now all the Jews should be annihilated per Xerxes orders and Persian kings' decrees cannot be repealed. Can you imagine your family knowing this was coming down on your heads in 11 months? Haman was enjoying the suffering. Esther records that the Persian people were perplexed. They seem to have more sense than Haman and Xerxes.

But this is not just Haman who is planning all this evil. There is a powerful enemy of God behind the scenes here who rears up his head in every generation to thwart God's plan and to overcome his people.

The apostle Paul tells us: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

There are Hamans in every generation. That is because the wicked spiritual forces behind these Hamans are the same. It seems there are more and more in our generation.

The Jewish grandmother I told you about at the beginning of my sermon was a Holocaust survivor. I don't remember how my mother told me about it, but she told me when I was very young that all of Mrs. Weber's family were taken to the camps and she and her son survived. It broke my heart even as a small child to think about this happening to her. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to kill whole families of people. Even though this terrible thing had happened to her, she still prayed, celebrated Hanukkah, and was a kind soul who welcomed me into her home.

God's people were to be a blessing and an influence to the other nations around them. They were to show others that there was a true God and his name is Yahweh. Mrs. Weber introduced me to him without words.

Twenty five years later I came to know the Jewish Messiah, Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Part of what convinced me that there was a God was Mrs. Weber. The terrible evil brought against her people also convinced me that spiritual forces of evil were also very real. The Haman's

in this world are sick and demented—they are evil. But God is greater than all of them. As we shall see.

When Mordecai hears of the terrible death edict he goes into mourning. Not the way we usually mourn but the loud, over the top kind of mourning.

Mordecai's Lament

Esther 4:1-3:

¹When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ²But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Here is our first glimpse that the people of God have remembered who they are and who their God is. All of them go into mourning for the death sentence cast on them. They not only go into mourning but they also fast. Now what is a fast? A fast is a spiritual discipline that says, "I need God more than food." There is no fasting without earnest cries for help, for mercy, and for God to come and do something. This is prayer without saying the words. Our text is showing us prayer. If God doesn't provide for his people, there is no hope for them.

Psalm 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." The Jews of Persia need him now.

When Jesus was led out into the wilderness for his time of temptation he fasted for 40 days before he met Satan face to face. He withstood the test because he had prepared himself for the fight. He had earnestly called on God and depended on him to win the fight. "We do not live by bread alone Jesus said but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). How will we stand when we are in such times of peril? By calling on God as Mordecai did, as the Jews in Persia did, and as Jesus did.

Mordecai also makes a plan along with his fasting and lamenting. Depending on God does not mean we don't have to take action in our lives. Mordecai asks Esther to intervene with Xerxes. This is terrifying for Esther because to walk into the king's presence without being asked was a death sentence, unless the king extended his royal scepter out to you. He hadn't called Esther to him for 30 days.

Maybe he is tired of her. She has no idea, but she does know that he has an evil temper. Queens don't always fare well in his presence. So Mordecai does not mince words with Esther.

Mordecai's Challenge to Esther

Ester 4:13-14:

¹³... "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴For if you remain silent at this time, 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 royal position for such a time as this?"

Mordecai is reading Esther like a book. She wants to save her life and so is hesitating in doing the right thing.

Jesus said, "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 9:24). Faith makes sacrifice the best choice, but it is not our first choice in our humanity.

Mordecai makes a declaration of faith that is remarkable. He trusts that God will deliver his people with or without Esther. But if Esther won't stand up and be used by God then God will find someone else. I love the confidence Mordecai shows that God is in control and will accomplish his will in delivering his people.

I am not always that confident are you? Most of us are afraid sometimes to do what God asks us to do. Sometimes we are afraid to tell the truth to our boss. Or we fear going to a scary part of town to minister to people not like ourselves. Or we fear standing up to an abusive person in our life. I have not been challenged as Esther was and that is what makes her a heroine in our story. Still we have moments when we would rather fade into the background and not do what God has asked us to do and hope that he doesn't notice. But he does.

Have you ever been afraid to do something God has asked you to do?

Mordecai's challenge can help us get over ourselves. God would like to use us in this kingdom plan. But if we won't allow him to use us, he will get his plan done anyway and we will not have the joy of being in the sweet spot of God's will.

Have you ever experienced this? Have you let fear keep you from serving and missed an opportunity? Are you

hesitating to obey him right now? Perhaps you have come to this position for just such a time as this? Mordecai has a word for you.

Esther Stands Up

Ester 4:15-16:

¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

Esther has decided. She will do the brave thing and go in to Xerxes to ask for her people's deliverance. What does she do to prepare? She calls for everyone (all her Jewish community) to fast for three days for her. Esther's wisdom and humility is serving her well. Faith is coming to the forefront as the hidden people of God begin to exercise it. Esther knows she will not stand if God does not go with her.

Proverb 18:10 says, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." Esther is running to her strong tower.

Esther's Request to the King

Ester 5:1-3:

¹On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. ²When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

³Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

What a relief. Xerxes is well disposed to Esther. Can you see how God's hand is all over the circumstances of this story? God is making a new deliverance for his people. This time it is not Moses who is leading his people, but Esther who gets to lead her people in this new deliverance in Persia.

So here is what happens. Esther cleverly exposes Haman to the king and the king has him killed. Haman's terrible plot to kill all the Jews in Persia on Adar 13 is offset by a new kingly decree which says that the Jews can defend themselves in the exact same way that the first edict went down.

When the Jews of the land heard this wonderful life-saving decree, they rejoiced and celebrated. When that day came, they did defend themselves and many of their enemies died, but Israel survived. Mordecai was lifted up and became the wise advisor that Xerxes needed. Esther remained as queen. So God's people were saved, but king Xerxes was also blessed to have wise Queen Esther and Mordecai as advisor.

Esther and Mordecai established a new annual celebration for Israel called Purim (after the word *pur*, lots). It is celebrated 30 days before Passover. It is coming up soon on February 23rd this year.

Conclusion

I began our time together remembering my Jewish neighbor who made such an impact on my young life by inviting me in for cookies. She didn't do anything overtly heroic. But she allowed herself to be used by God to love on a little girl. She was an instrument of God's grace in my life.

May we remember that God has a purpose for our lives too.

Esther 4:14:

¹⁴ . . . who knows but that we have come to our royal position for such a time as this?

And don't we want to be found in the sweet spot of God's will? "The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name" (Zechariah 14:9).

We may not have heard his name in the Book of Esther, but it will be the only name we hear in the end.

For this period of Israel's history, the following reference books were used:

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