

Learning to Trust God's Unseen Hand

A Study of Esther

Lesson #1: Do not be deceived by appearances of those who seem to be against you.

Among the 66 books that comprise the Bible, 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament, the book of Esther stands out as a book that illustrates the perfect sovereignty of God without ever mentioning any form of His name. Despite His absence in written form, the Lord was most assuredly present by directing and allowing certain events to transpire which allowed for the survival and the protection of His people. As followers of Jesus, we will endure times of hardship, frustration, anxiety, and discouragement; but the Lord promises us in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good, for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

This well-known Roman passage serves as a good starting point because it reminds us of the people in Esther who were eventually spared...the Jews. At this point in redemptive history they most certainly were people who had a new-found love for the Lord (because of the exile) and they were certainly called to play a central part of the purpose of God in sending His son Jesus. This text, however, is more exclusive than inclusive, and presents to us a question which must be answered of everyone...do I truly love the Lord and am I called according to His purpose? To rephrase the question, "am I truly a child of God by having been born again (John 3:3 and seeking to conform my life to His will (Romans 12:1-2))"?

To be accurate, this is the only person to whom this promise is given. A worldly, nominal Christian cannot be guaranteed this promise because they fail and refuse to put the Kingdom of God ahead of their own reality (Mathew 6:33). So, before we begin a journey through Esther, before we can begin to learn to trust God's unseen hand, we must trust Him with our life by repenting and accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Background to the Book

- King Xerxes is also known as Ahasuerus. The difference in names is that Xerxes is Greek while Ahasuerus is Hebrew.
- The events take place not in Babylon as one would think, but in Susa, a city located in modern day Shush, Iran. This city is located approximately 250 miles SSE of Baghdad, Iraq.
- The events of Esther take place between the first and second return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem. In a biblical timeline, Esther takes place after Daniel but before Ezra/Nehemiah and Malachi.

- Though not stated, this banquet probably corresponds to the great feast Xerxes gave when he was planning to invade Greece. According to Herodotus it took Xerxes four years to get ready for the invasion he launched in 481.¹
- The Book of Esther says nothing about Xerxes' invasion of Greece, but other sources state that he wanted to avenge his father's defeat at Marathon near Athens. Xerxes' immense fleet defeated the Greeks at Thermopylae but was defeated at the famous Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. and the Battle of Plataea in 479.² It was after this defeat where we meet the new Queen...Esther.
- Verses 1-9
 - o The opening verses indicate a well-structured administered government.
 - o The entire event is compared to that of a world's Expo.
 - o The mentioning of the method of drinking in verse 8 is peculiar. Among the Greeks, each guest was obliged to keep the round or leave the company. "Drink or be gone," was the proverb. No normal custom of drinking is shown, but is, nevertheless, alluded to by the fact that the king issued a command to allow each guest to drink in his own way. The command was obviously intended to change the customary way of drinking.³
 - o The Queen also hosted a feast for the women. Her actions were in standing with the cultural practices and expectations during that time. Usually the queen ate with her husband and was not always excluded. At this time she was compelled to remain away, since she also gave entertainment to the ladies.⁴
 - o We do not know much about Vashti. However, the Greek historian Herodotus portrayed Vashti as a powerful and vindictive woman:

Amestris had woven a long robe of many colors, which she presented to Xerxes as a gift. Xerxes wore it when he visited Artaynta, the daughter of his brother's wife. Because she had pleased him, Xerxes promised Artaynta that he would grant her whatever she wished. Artaynta immediately asked for the robe. Xerxes offered her cities, heaps of gold, and an army instead of the robe, but Artaynta wouldn't change her mind. Amestris learned of the affair and discovered that the robe she had given Xerxes had been given to Artaynta. She confronted

¹ John A. Martin, "Esther," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 702.

² Ibid.

³ James M. Freeman and Harold J. Chadwick, *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 293.

⁴ John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Esther* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 34.

Xerxes at his birthday banquet, demanding Artaynta's mother as a gift. She then mutilated Artaynta's mother by cutting off her breasts, nose, ears, and lips, and feeding them to dogs⁵

- No particular theme seems obvious until we focus our binoculars and look at the passage in the context of the entire story. We then discover that the author has skillfully designed these verses to intimate that, in the midst of what appears to be a well-constructed, smoothly operating kingdom, cracks are developing in the walls of the king's house. This section fits nicely into a classic chiasmic structure in which the first and the last subsections parallel each other, as do the second and the fourth. The middle subsection, however, stands alone as that component which is being emphasized as the central point of the passage:

A A power player (1:1–3)

B A power play (1:4–5)

C A power display (1:6)

B¹ A power play (1:7–8)

A¹ A power player (1:9)⁶

- The center of this text is not just the display of possessions, but also pride. Pride is that which you display when you have nothing else for people to see. It is an empty and hollow construction of something that appears to be great, but is not.
- Lesson #1: Do not be deceived by appearances of those who seem against you.
 - Sometimes outward strength is a sign of inward weakness. Prov. 13:12
 - As followers of Christ we must be more concerned with the heart. Matt. 6:21
 - Use these times as opportunities for you to be gracious and kind. Prov. 24:17-18, Luke 6:35
- At the end of the day, Xerxes, Vashti, and their party were deceived by the evil one. They had no respect or desire to seek after God. Only by a faithful servant will they ever have a chance. Do not let appearances fool you. As a child of God, the Lord is with you. Let Him use you to be an instrument of redemption and to share the message of hope to those who appear as your enemy. They too, just like, need Jesus.

⁵ John D. Barry, Michael S. Heiser, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012), Es 1:9.

⁶ Barry C. Davis, "Expositions of the Book of Esther," in *Ruth & Esther: God behind the Seen*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 106.