

Bible Reading Schedule The Golden Thread

June 26 – Esther 1: 1 – 2: 23

The Book of Esther is a very interesting book of the Bible, because it is the only book of the Bible not to mention God in some form. But yet, God is the one who is clearly working behind the scenes throughout the book. Esther takes place after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Some of the Jews had been able to return to Jerusalem and the Promised Land, but many still remained in exile in Persia. That is where the story of Esther takes place. As we will see in future readings, there are some in Persia, who want to see the Jews exterminated, much as Hitler tried to do in Germany during World War II. But chapters 1 and 2 reveal the fact that God is at work to protect His people and carry out His plans.

Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*

That is exactly what we see here in the Book of Esther. There is trouble on the horizon for the Israelites. Severe persecution is about to break out against them, and in chapters 1 and 2 God puts the people in place who will be able to rescue the Israelites from the genocide. In order to do that, God first has to remove a Queen. Because of his great pride, King Xerxes throws a party that lasts 180 days so that he can show off his wealth and power. Xerxes views Queen Vashti as one of his prize possessions, and Queen Vashti doesn't like being viewed that way, so when Xerxes summons her to come to be shown off, she rebels and refuses to come. Because of her stubbornness, Xerxes deposes her as queen, which opens the door for Esther to become queen. After a long and drawn out beauty pageant, Esther is chosen to take Vashti's place. But that is just the first piece of the puzzle God is at work moving into place.

At the end of chapter 2, Esther's uncle Mordecai, who raised her, uncovers a plot against King Xerxes, and tells the king about the plot through Queen Esther. Notice how we are told in verse 22 that Mordecai was given credit for doing this. As you read this, it seems like just an interesting little detail, but it is more than that. Later on, in Esther, at just the right moment in time, we will see the king being reminded of what Mordecai had done for him.

What a strange coincidence! Esther, a Jew is made Queen of Persia, and Mordecai, Esther's uncle, is the hero in plot against the king. I was being sarcastic when I called this a coincidence. This is the hand of God moving people and things into place so that the Israelites could find

protection from the coming persecution. Sometimes we look at our lives and we wonder what God is doing. We often pray that God would change our circumstances rather than praying that God would use our circumstances to accomplish his purpose.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

No matter how it may seem at times, God is always at work, behind the scenes, directing events and people to be at the right place at the right time to accomplish His purpose. If you stop and think about, it there is no greater good that came from our lives than to be a part of accomplishing God's plan and purpose. Even when things aren't going well in our lives God is still at work. All we have to do to be reminded of this is to look at Jesus. In his prophecy concerning Jesus, Isaiah writes: **Isaiah 53:10** *Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer*

All along it was God's will and God's plan to crush Jesus for our sakes, but think of the great good that came as a result of that. Where would you be today without Jesus?

June 27 – Esther 3 and 4

Again, in today's reading we see God's sovereignty, but we also see how it combines with man's (woman's) responsibility. Let's start with the next example of God's sovereignty. Look at chapter 3 verse 7. In order to determine the best time to carry out his plan to eradicate the Jews, Haman casts a lot. It is the first month of the year when he does this, and the when the lot is cast it comes up on the 12th month of the year. That is as far away as it could possibly have landed, and it gave the Jews as much time as possible for a plan to save the Jews to be conceived and carried out. Once again we see God in control; it was the hand of God that determined the month the lot fell on.

Proverbs 16:33 *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*

But we also see man's responsibility in this matter as well. Turn your attention to chapter 4, and notice how Mordecai has to persuade Esther to get involved. You can understand Esther's fear; just look at what happened to Queen Vashti when she displeased Xerxes. Esther is very hesitant to speak up for her people for fear of what may happen to her, but what does Mordecai tell her?

Esther 4:13-14 *"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For 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?"

There are a few things we need to notice about Mordecai's answer to Esther. First, notice he is confident that God will provide a way for the Jews to be saved. How can he be so sure? Because he knew the promise that God had made to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his offspring had not yet been fulfilled. Mordecai knew that God was a faithful God who always keeps his promises, so Mordecai knew God would somehow provide a way for the Jews to be saved. But Mordecai also realizes that God has placed Esther in a unique position. She is the queen, and therefore has access to the king. She can have a role to play in saving her people. Even though Mordecai knows God will save his people, he also realizes that Esther has been put in place by God for "a time such as this."

Sometimes we get into big denominational arguments over whether God is sovereign or man is responsible, especially when it comes to our salvation. So which is it? It is both! God is sovereign and we, on our own, could never become a Christian without the Holy Spirit coming and working in our hearts. After all we are dead in our sin, aren't we?

Ephesians 2:1-3 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

So before anything good can happen to us spiritually the Holy Spirit has to come and work in our hearts. That is God's choice and He is sovereign over that choice. But we are called to respond to what the Holy Spirit is doing in our hearts—that's where our responsibility comes in.

Hebrews 4:11 *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

2 Peter 3:14 *So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*

Perhaps Jesus' words sum this up best.

Luke 13:24 *"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*

Notice that Jesus says it is our responsibility to make every effort, but then adds not every one will be able to. That is because we can't save ourselves through human efforts alone; God must work in our hearts.

June 28 – Esther 5: 1 – 6: 14

In chapter 2, we were told of how Mordecai had uncovered a plot against the king, but as we read chapter 5 we see that Mordecai was never rewarded for his service to the king. This was all part of God working out His sovereign plan to save the Jews from annihilation. The whole plot against the Jews was hatched because Haman hated Mordecai. Haman hated the fact that Mordecai did not show him the honor and respect that everyone else did, and Haman became so enraged at Mordecai's lack of respect that Haman couldn't wait for Mordecai to be killed with the rest of the Jews, so Haman had an extra big set of gallows built to hang Mordecai from. But the night before Haman goes to the king to seek his permission to execute Mordecai; the king has a restless night and cannot sleep, so he orders the record of his reign to be read to him as a bedtime story. Lo and behold, who does the king read about that night, but Mordecai? As the account of Mordecai's heroism is read to the king, the king realizes that Mordecai was never properly rewarded for his service. Haman comes into the king's presence to ask permission to execute Mordecai, but the king has something else in mind for Mordecai. As it ends up Haman is given "the honor" of escorting Mordecai in a royal procession throughout the whole city. What an amazing reversal! But it is just the first of many reversals in the book of Esther.

In this story we see not just a picture of God's sovereignty, but we also see a picture of the reversals that God specializes in. Reversals that lift up the poor and meek, and bring low the mighty, powerful and proud.

Psalm 18:27 *You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.*

God's grace always flows downhill. God's grace only comes to those who are humble in heart and to those who realize that in their own strength they cannot save themselves. That is what the cross is all about. That is why the cross is a stumbling block to the proud, but a means of grace to those who have humble hearts and see their need for a savior. Grace, mercy, and life flow downhill to those who are willing to see their brokenness and kneel at the foot of the cross—when they do God will lift them up.

Ephesians 2:4-5 *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions- it is by grace you have been saved.*

What a great reversal! Like Mordecai, we were dead men walking, but Christ has come and given us life.

June 29 – Esther 7

In a very real sense chapter 7 is the climax of the Book of Esther. In chapter 7 we see the culmination of God's sovereign plan to save his people. God has made Esther queen "for a time such as this." God has orchestrated the events of Mordecai's life, so that Mordecai's character stands in sharp contrast to Haman's character. Through God's sovereign plan the sheer evil that is in Haman's heart is revealed, and the gallows that Haman built to hang Mordecai were instead used to hang Haman.

But the thing we need to pay attention to in today's reading is how Esther stands against Haman and pleads with the king on behalf of her people. In doing that Esther is a picture of Jesus who stands at the right hand of God and pleads for us each and every day to save us from our sin.

Hebrews 7:25 *Therefore he {Jesus} is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

1 John 2:1-2 *But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins*

Haman has stood before the king as the accuser of the people of God, seeking their destruction, and Esther rises to their defense to speak for them—to defend them and protect them. As she does that, the accuser of God's people is thrown down in disgrace. Once again this is a picture of what is to come in Jesus. As Jesus goes to the cross, takes our sin, and stands in our place there is nothing left for Satan to say against us. Satan is thrown down and we are lifted up to glory.

Revelation 12:10-11 *"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers {Satan}, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. ¹¹ They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*

June 30 – Esther 8

Even though we have reached the climax of the book of Esther in chapter 7, there is still a problem. Even though Haman is no longer around, the order that Haman convinced the king to issue to annihilate the Jews still stands. In the Kingdom of the Medes and Persians laws could not be undone, even by the king, so in spite of the events that have already happened the Jews are still in mortal danger. Once again, we see another great reversal take place as the king allows Esther and

Mordecai to issue an edict that allows the Jews to defend themselves (make war against those who seek to kill them). This does not undo the King's previous edict, but it does allow the Jews a way to escape the death sentence that they were previously under. Think of how this is a picture of our spiritual plight—God's decree to Adam in the garden was:

Genesis 2:16-17 *"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."*

When Adam ate from the tree, he rebelled against God and as his descendants we were part of that rebellion.

Romans 5:12 *just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned--*

So we too are all under a death sentence.

Romans 3:23 *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Romans 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death*

Romans 2:9 *There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;*

Just as the king could not undo the law to kill the Jews that Haman had convinced him to decree, God cannot and will not undo the decree that the penalty for our sins is death. But just as the king provided a way for the Jews to escape the decree, God has provided a way of escape for us. Jesus died the death that we deserved to die, and by doing that he provided a way for us to escape the coming wrath of God.

1 Thessalonians 1:10 *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

1 Thessalonians 5:9 *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

But because of Christ, we not only have way to escape the coming wrath of God, we are also exalted and lifted up. Look how today's reading ends. Mordecai, the one who in particular was destined for destruction, leaves the palace robed in royalty. Through Christ the same thing happens to us. Because of Jesus we don't just escape the wrath of God, we too are exalted and lifted up and clothed in his righteousness.

Ephesians 2:4-7 *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the*

coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
alive in him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach th' eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th' eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ my own.*

And Can it Be? Charles Wesley

July 1 – Esther 9: 1 – 17

Even though the king had come to the aid of the Jews through Esther and Mordecai's intervention, the Jews still would have to fight to survive. They couldn't just sit back passively and do nothing, they had to take up arms and engage in the battle. The same is true for us. Christ has died in our place, Christ has given us his righteousness as our own, but we too cannot sit back passively and do nothing. We too are called to take up arms and fight. The arms we are called to take up are not sword and bow, but the full armor of God.

Ephesians 6:10-18 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

So often there is a temptation for us to just sit back and think Jesus has done it all and there is nothing for us to do. There is a sense in which that is true. Jesus has done it all for us. He has done what we can't do for ourselves, but because of what Jesus has done for us, we are called to not just sit back passively and do nothing, but rather to engage in the battle and offer our lives to him just as he has offered his life for us.

Romans 12:1-2 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

July 2 – Esther 9: 18 – 32

Because of what God had done in delivering the Jews from their oppressors, Esther and Mordecai send one final decree that the Jews should celebrate The Feast of Purim every year (verses 26 – 28). Purim was to be celebrated as a way to remember the deliverance that God gave to the Jews. In the same way, it is important for us to remember what God has done for us through Christ. Jesus told us to celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember what he has done for us on the cross.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

The Jews rejoiced and celebrated because of the deliverance God had granted to them. How often do we remember to rejoice and celebrate what God has done for us through Christ? The reason why we are so often lacking in joy is because we have forgotten what Christ has done for us at Calvary.

Psalms 103:1-6 *Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ² Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- ³ who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, ⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. ⁶ The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.*

The words of this Psalm sum up perfectly what God had done for Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, but even more they sum up what God has done for us through Christ. Through Christ our sins are forgiven. Through Christ our lives are crowned with love and compassion, through Christ our lives are renewed, through Christ righteousness comes to those who have been oppressed by slavery to sin. Christ is our redeemer and our deliverer. May we never forget what he has done for us. May we always rejoice in the salvation he so freely offers to us at the cross.

Philippians 4:4 *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

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