

# **Read the Bible in a Year**

Week 32 – January 9th, 2022

## **Read on Your Own this Week:**

*Psalm 94-96*

Matthew 5-8

## **Readings in Class:**

Nehemiah 5-13

Esther 1-10

## **Introduction to Esther**

Taking place around the year 478 BC, the book of Esther takes place after the Jews have been allowed to go home in 539 BC, but centers on the Jews who did not return home but live in the Diaspora. Esther takes place in the capital city of the Persian Empire, Susa.

The book opens up with Xerxes being angry at one of his wives Vashti for not appearing when called so he goes on the search for a new wife. Esther wins Xerxes favor and is made his queen. She hides the fact that she is a Jew for fear of what her identity means.

While this occurs, we meet a Jew related to Esther named Mordecai, who is a descendant of King Saul (Esther 2:5) who saves Xerxes from an assassination plot but fails to bow down when a magistrate named Haman comes into town. Haman is described as a descendant of King Saul's old enemy Agag (1 Samuel 15) who proceeds to devise a plan to slaughter all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. After tricking the king into signing in the legislation, the date is picked and all the Jews begin to mourn.

Mordecai convinces Esther to plead for her fellow Jews before the King. In a risky move, Esther persuades the King to write conflicting commands that confuse the enemies of the Jews and allow the Jews to fight back against those who will try to kill them on that date. Haman falls into his own trap and is embarrassed publicly and hanged upon his own gallows meant for Mordecai and the book ends with the Jews making the day a holiday that had been picked for their slaughter which had turned out to be their redemption. The date became known as Purim, which means the "lot that was cast" as a reminder of the lot that Haman cast which led to his undoing.

## **A Brief Overview of Esther**

1. The First Feast & Queen Vashti: 1:1-22
2. Queen Esther & The Second Feast 2:1-18
3. Mordecai foils a plot and is not honored 2:19-23
4. Haman is honored and schemes a plot 3:1-15
5. Esther Agrees to Help 4:1-17
6. Esther's Plea and 1<sup>st</sup> Feast 5:1-8
7. Haman's Pride 5:9-14
8. Mordecai Rewarded 6:1-11
9. Haman's Fall 6:12-14
10. Esther's Plea and 2<sup>nd</sup> Feast 7:1-6

11. Haman Hanged 7:7-10
12. Esther saves the Jews 8:1-17
13. The Jews Victorious 9:1-19
14. Purim Inaugurated and Celebrated 9:20-32
15. Mordecai Exalted 10:1-3

### **Where is God?**

Perhaps the strangest part of this book is that there is zero mention of God. Likewise, no religious practices are mentioned besides the need for Mordecai and the Jews of Susa to fast three days before Esther makes her request to the king. Outside of this, God is not mentioned in the book at all which has caused quite amount of detractors for the book's inclusion in the Canon of Scripture. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, goes so far as to include in it prayers and hymns from Mordecai and sections that add in mentions of God in order to make the book proper for being in the Bible. The silence from any reference from God is strange and makes this a truly "secular" book in the Bible.

Or could it be that God is referenced and alluded to in the strange coincidences that take part in the book. The story of Esther plays out with themes that are similar to Joseph in Genesis and Moses with the Exodus and the omissions that we would expect God to be mentioned in as he was in those stories from come at key parts in the narrative that allude to his working through strange coincidences. In particular, God is at work in the turn in the book in 6:1 when we are told that the king can't sleep at night and discovers through his late night reading that Mordecai was not honored. Kings not being able to sleep were often seen as divine intervention in the ancient world: Pharaoh with his dreams (Genesis 41:7) and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel (Daniel 2:1).

Much like our life now, God is hidden, but he works through the events and coincidences to achieve his desired end. His silent absence hangs over the entire book of Esther and in a way makes his presence more subtly felt. Esther reminds us that God's absence does not mean that he is not there and at work.

### **Reversal**

The main struggle in the book of Esther comes at the end when the Jews are allowed to take vengeance upon those who seek their harm. This is not a permission for us to take vengeance on our enemies but is set up here to describe a great reversal. The book of Esther itself contains several sudden reversals in fortune and suffering.

Haman falls for his own gallows; the enemies of the Jews fall victim to their own schemes. This describes a series of events that points forward to the great reversal that Christ would bring. Though he dies, it is the death of death itself and He is raised. Though our sins are thrown on Jesus, He triumphs over them. Esther points to and reminds us of the reversal of our circumstances that have been granted through Christ.