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Esther Overview



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview, Steve Gregg discusses the Book of Esther in the Bible. Though it is a secular story with no mention of religious activities, the book depicts God intervening to deliver His people. Esther, a Jew who becomes queen of Persia, helps save the Jews from extinction with the help of her cousin Mordecai. The story reveals the dangers of pride and disobedience, while emphasizing that God is sovereign and can use anyone to accomplish His will.

Transcript

We're going to be having an introduction and an overview of the Book of Esther, the whole book, which is not a very long book. In some ways, it's like the Book of Ruth, although it's longer than Ruth. Esther is a short story, like some of the other books of the Bible.

The Book of Ruth is a short story. The Book of Jonah is a short story. Most of the books of the Bible are not short stories, but either protracted histories, like the books of Genesis and Exodus and the books of Samuel and Kings, that have very long histories that cover, in many cases, many generations.

Or else they're not histories at all. They're books like the Psalms or like the prophets, who have something else in mind than to tell historical information. But there are these three short stories in the Old Testament.

We've already studied Ruth previously. Jonah is still ahead of us. These are true stories, but they are stories that illustrate God's dealings with his people in remarkable ways.

It is not known who wrote the Book of Esther, but Josephus, the Jewish historian, believed that Mordecai wrote it. Mordecai is one of the main characters in the book. He figures very prominently in the book.

It's thought that he may have been the author. He certainly would be, probably of the characters mentioned in the book, the one most likely to write the Book of Esther. Whether he did so or someone else did later on, we don't know for sure.

We don't have to know. As long as we have reason to believe it's true, we don't have to know who wrote it. It's not really a story that requires that the author be somebody special, as long as they're telling a true story, because it's the story itself that is of value, the lessons in the story.

There are no prophecies in the book, and therefore it doesn't require an inspired author. It may have had one, but in order to tell a true story, you don't need inspiration per se. You just need someone who knows the facts and tells them accurately.

There is certainly evidence that the story is accurate. It, for one thing, names a known king of Persia, who we know as Xerxes. In the Book of Esther, he's called Ahasuerus, but he's the father of Artaxerxes.

Both Xerxes and Artaxerxes are well-known Persian kings. The fact that Esther has married him indicates that this is being told like real history. You wouldn't have a fictional character married to a known historical character, in all likelihood.

If you're going to have fiction, you'd probably have a fictional king as well as a fictional queen. It's told as a true story, and I believe it is. It's interesting that the palace and the courts of the palace that are sometimes described or alluded to in the book are known from archaeology to be accurate to the way that this particular palace was constructed.

You'll find the reference to the various rooms and courts and so forth as we read the book. They actually are known to conform to what is now known of the palace of Xerxes in Persia. It's interesting that about 30 years after the book was written, or after the story of Esther took place, this palace was destroyed.

Anyone writing after that time would probably not be familiar with the layout of the palace and the courts. It seems to have been written right at the time or right in the very period of time that the alleged events took place. Basically, this story is about how God takes care of his people even when they're away from Israel and even when many of them are not very close to God.

This story took place about 40 years after the temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel. Now, Zerubbabel led a bunch of Jewish people back from the captivity to Jerusalem to rebuild Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple, as I say, about 40 years before this story. About 50,000 Jews came back from Babylon, from the captivity, to do this.

They all should have. If they all had the zeal for God that the remnant had, they all would have relocated from Babylon, which was obviously a pagan environment, to Jerusalem where they could worship God in his temple as they're supposed to do according to their law and where they'd be surrounded by people of the same faith. However, in the years that they were in Babylon, many of the Jews had become somewhat comfortable.

They had acquired property. They probably started businesses. They had children and

grandchildren, maybe some of whom were not as eager to go back as even maybe the older generation would have been.

Those who had left, been taken out of Jerusalem, possibly would be more eager to go back to their own home. Those who were born in Babylon, perhaps not so much, especially if they're comfortable. What happened was only a small remnant of the Jews in Babylon at the time when Cyrus, the king of Persia, allowed the Jews, any who wished to, to return and build the temple and so forth, a generation earlier than Esther.

Only a small number of them went. And so the majority of Jews have lived outside of Israel from that time to this. By the way, there's never been a time since the Babylonian exile where the majority of Jews lived in Israel.

To this day, far more Jews live outside of Israel than other countries. Probably the majority of them live in the United States, although a lot of them are still in Europe and other parts of the world too. And they have not all gone back to Israel, even to this day.

They could have then, they could now, but most Jews don't want to because most Jews do not have the same passion for their religion that the remnant had. And God blessed the remnant who went back. But we find in this story, he even blessed those who didn't go back, even though their zeal, we might say, was a little deficient.

Now Mordecai was a devout Jew and Esther apparently too. We don't know how observant they were or were not, but they believed in Yahweh and they didn't mention him, but they actually acted in accord with the Jewish beliefs. Especially in the fact that Mordecai did not bow down to Naaman, which was a very important act on his part, risked his life.

So there was some piety on the part of many of the Jews who are still in Babylon, but they simply, I think inexcusably had remained. And by remaining, they put themselves in danger, as we shall see. On the other hand, it's because they remained that Esther was able to intervene as the queen of Persia and save her people.

Now this is definitely a story about God delivering his people. Though interestingly, the word God or any reference to God is not found in the book of Esther. We'll have more to say about that and perhaps why that is.

But it is nonetheless clearly a book about God intervening. You cannot read the book without, you almost don't realize that God is not mentioned by name because he is seen in the activities so much. So again, we'll comment more about that.

The events of the story took place in what is referred to as Shushan, the palace in Persia. Shushan is what we know as Suza in Persia. It's about 200 miles east of the city of Babylon.

And this was where the kings of Persia resided in the wintertime. It was a warmer climate than Babylon. And therefore they housed themselves there some parts of the year.

One of the reasons for writing the book of Esther, no doubt, was to tell the Jews how the Feast of Purim began. Because that really is how the book really climaxes after the Jews have been rescued from the threat to their existence. There is a celebration of that in the Feast of Purim, which the Jews still celebrate every year.

They did not before this time. Purim, like Hanukkah, are feasts that the Jews celebrate to this day, though God never commanded it. We don't find Moses commanding these feasts.

These are feasts that the Jews chose to observe based on later deliverances. Hanukkah, of course, is the deliverance of the Jews from the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes in about 167 BC. And then Purim, much earlier, when the Jews were delivered on this occasion from the Persian assault and threat to their existence.

So Purim and Hanukkah both are feasts that are not really commanded in the law, not commanded in scripture. But Purim came to be observed from the time of Esther onward and still is. Now, some of the historical information in the background would, of course, focus on the reign of the king, who's called Ahasuerus in this book, who is Esther's husband.

Not at the beginning. She marries him in the second chapter, but she becomes the queen in Persia, though she's a Jewish girl. Her race is not known to the nation until later.

She is a Jew, but she doesn't mention her race and does not let it be known until somewhat late in the story. So this beautiful Jewish girl marries the Persian king and she becomes the queen of Persia. Her influence may have been a factor in Artaxerxes giving both Ezra and Nehemiah permission to go back and do the repairs on the Jewish society and on the walls of the city that they later did.

This story takes place before the latter part of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah. When we were going through Ezra and Nehemiah, I mentioned that the first six chapters of Ezra happened before the story of Esther. But then there's a 60-year gap between the first part of Ezra and the second part of Ezra, and this story of Esther falls within that gap.

So after her time, Ezra and then later Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, and that was under the reign of Artaxerxes, who was the son of Xerxes. Not the son of Esther, but he'd be the stepson of Esther, since she was married to the king. So she may have had some influence on Artaxerxes being favorably disposed toward Ezra and Nehemiah.

There is a great feast in chapter 1. We're not told what is being celebrated there, but scholars believe it was a feast held in anticipation of Xerxes' expedition against the

Greek forces at Thermopylae and Salamis, which took place in 480 BC. So it's probably around 480 BC that the story begins. King Xerxes ruled from 485 to 465.

He actually died 13 years after he married Esther. Vashti is the queen at the beginning of the story, and she displeases her husband sufficiently that he puts her away. He divorces her.

And then he seeks another queen, and this is where Esther comes to fill the vacancy. And she becomes the queen in the place of Vashti, who was somewhat unsubmitive to her husband and was put aside because of that. Vashti apparently was deposed before this military expedition.

And it was probably after the expedition that Esther was chosen to replace her. Now, in 473, this would be essentially when Esther saved her people from extinction. And if you've already read the book of Esther, you know something about how they happened to be threatened.

If you haven't read it yet, we'll talk about that tonight. But her position as the queen in Persia is what allowed her to save her people when they might otherwise have been annihilated. As I said, this took place 40 years after Zerubbabel built the temple, but 30 years before Nehemiah built the wall.

So she's almost in the middle of that period of time. There's about 70 years between the building of the temple and the repairs of the wall that Nehemiah did. Now, it's interesting that although it is in the Bible, it is written like a secular story.

There's no mention of God. There's no mention of religion. There's no mention of prayer.

There's no mention of anything about the religious life of Israel or the Jews directly, not spoken of directly as religious subjects. For example, Mordecai, though we're told he's a Jew, he won't bow down to Haman. And yet it doesn't say why he won't.

Now, we know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to the statue that Nebuchadnezzar built because they would not disobey God. And they were willing to be thrown into the fiery furnace rather than that. And it's almost certain that Mordecai wouldn't bow down to Haman for the same reason, because he wouldn't bow to a man because he's a worshiper of Yahweh.

Though it doesn't say that's why. It doesn't say at all why. It just says he seemed to be described as someone who's merely insubordinate.

Everybody else bows to this high government official, but Mordecai won't. And it's interesting that it doesn't give any religious motivation or anything on his part for not doing so, though it could easily have mentioned it. Also, it's very clear that there's a divine purpose behind Esther's rise to power and her saving her people, though God is

not mentioned as bringing her into that position, not specifically.

There's an interesting place where the story almost mentions God, but it almost unnaturally avoids doing so. You would think that this is the place where it would not only be natural, but almost difficult to avoid mentioning God. And yet God is not mentioned.

In chapter 4, verse 14, when Mordecai is trying to convince Esther to risk her life in order to save her people, she's showing some reluctance and a little bit of fear. But he says to her in verse 14 of chapter 4, Now, to say that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this suggests there's purpose in it, even a divine purpose. But at the place where it would be most natural to say, perhaps God has put you in this position, it gives this information without referring to God.

It's almost like the author is bending over backward not to mention God. Esther actually asks the people before she goes and addresses the king to fast for three days. Now, almost always in the Bible when people fast, they also pray.

But there's only mention of fasting. There's no mention of praying. Prayer is a distinctly religious activity.

And so it doesn't mention prayer. In verse 16, she says in verse 16, Now, again, fast for me, much more natural to say pray for me. And even pray and fast for me.

But fasting is mentioned without prayer being mentioned. Again, it's like the studied secularness of the way the story is being told. Also, they have a great victory and they are rescued from extinction in chapter 9. And the whole chapter celebrates their rescue without a single mention of God being the one who delivered them.

So unlike other stories in the Old Testament, where when they're rescued from some particular invasion or when they throw off some of pressure, almost always it says, therefore, the Lord delivered Israel or the Lord fought for Israel or the Lord, you know, chased off the enemies or whatever. I mean, this is the way that the Bible usually talks about these things. And here there's this this great celebration of victory.

And it certainly is as significant as almost any of the wars that God rescued Israel through. And yet no mention of God in it. So we can see that the secular way it's told is deliberate.

It's obviously written by a religious Jew. Now, the Jews did have some misgivings about including it in the canon of their Old Testament scripture because it didn't mention God. But you think I think it's deliberate.

I think there's a good reason for it. I think that the purpose of leaving out any reference to God is to convey the idea that even when God is not acknowledged, he clearly is

involved. In the affairs of history, because there's no way to miss the fact that God is involved.

There is no story in the Bible that I know of that has so many what we would have to say are amazing coincidences in it. Things that if they're not divine providence, they're just unrealistic because things just wouldn't align the way they did without God orchestrating it. Now, God is not mentioned as orchestrating it.

But the coincidental nature of all these things, I mean, it speaks volumes to the reader that, hey, God is making all this happen because it wouldn't happen this way naturally. I mean, think about it. First of all, that Vashti would be removed from power, though she's the most beautiful woman.

The king is proud of her. He wants to show her off to everyone. But she displeases him.

He gets rid of her and creates a vacuum, a vacancy for Esther, who happens to be chosen from among all the most beautiful women in the kingdom who were brought to the king. She, a Jew, is chosen without anyone knowing she's a Jew. And she becomes the queen.

That could happen coincidentally. But the fact that she ends up playing such an important role of deliverance makes it certainly fortuitous, certainly advantageous that she's there. And of all the beautiful women who could have been chosen, and that, by the way, is the criterion that was being used to select the candidates called all the most beautiful women in the kingdom.

She apparently was either the most beautiful or ranked highly enough in that category and had other traits that charmed the king that she was chosen of all the women in the kingdom. That's not necessarily a coincidence. She could simply have been truly the most stunning and charming woman in the whole nation.

But it's clear from the way things worked out that this is something that is being worked out by God. Secondly, and significantly, in chapter 2, verses 21 and 22, Mordecai happens to be in a position to overhear a plot, a conspiracy against the king to kill Xerxes. Now, usually when people are making conspiracies to kill kings, they're doing so in private places, in hushed tones, and making sure no one's around.

It just so happens Mordecai was nearby and overheard them. Where this conspiracy was being hatched and why Mordecai happened to be nearby, we don't know. But the likelihood of him being there was not great without some kind of divine providence.

It certainly would be a huge coincidence that he and he alone, who is actually Esther's uncle or cousin, it's not entirely clear, that he's the one who overheard the plot. And he exposed it to the king. He was not known to the king.

He was not a well-known guy. But he happened to reveal the plot. It was investigated.

The conspirators were arrested. And it was written down in the annals of the king that Mordecai had done this. Quite coincidentally, he did this.

Quite coincidentally, it was written down. Quite coincidentally, he wasn't rewarded immediately for it, which is significant in the story later. You'd think if he's going to be rewarded for that, it would have been right away.

But it was written down in the histories, but somehow he fell through the cracks. And rewarding him just didn't occur. And that's significant later on.

Then there's the night when King Xerxes finds out. And it would apparently be weeks, months, or who knows how long later. It was not immediately afterward.

The king has insomnia. Now this is a great night to have insomnia from the Jewish point of view. Because the man who wanted to destroy the Jews was on his way over that very night to meet with Xerxes and get his permission to wipe out the Jews.

Haman. And before he gets to the king's chambers, the king just can't sleep. So he calls for one of his aides to bring in the chronicles of the king.

Just to read him his own court history. Assuming that would put him to sleep, if anything. And as they chose a passage, they just coincidentally chose the passage that tells about how Mordecai exposed a plot to kill the king and save the king's life by that.

And the king said to the reader, he said, well what was done for this man Mordecai to reward him? And they said nothing. He's never been rewarded. And so at that very moment, for the first time, the king realized his indebtedness to Mordecai and wished to do something for him.

And that's just as Haman comes into the room. Or into the courtyard. And when he comes in, we know the king is thinking about Mordecai.

And he says to Haman, who's his chief minister, he says, what should be done for the man in whom the king delights to honor? Haman thinks he's talking about himself. So he says, well, you should do such and such. You have to ride your horse and have a parade and have a footman running ahead saying this is how it will be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

He's thinking he's writing his own ticket. And then the king says, great idea. Get my horse and put Mordecai on it.

And you run in front of him and say this is how the king treats those whom he delights to honor. So this utter humiliation of Haman, it's just icing on the cake. I mean, that Haman was, his plot was spoiled is one thing.

That he had to run in front of Mordecai and make this announcement was just infuriating to him. In fact, he was so infuriated he set up a gallows. Now, I think you'll read about a gallows in your version of the book.

The Persians did not hang people on gallows such as we think of. They didn't hang them with a rope by the neck until dead. They impaled them on stakes like a shish kebab.

That's how the Persians are known to have killed people. And what he set up was this huge stake. It was probably not such a large stake so much as it was on a high platform, very high up.

I think it was 75 feet high if I'm not mistaken. And Haman set this up to impale Mordecai on. Although his chances of success didn't seem very great after the king had decided to honor Mordecai.

But still Haman was a guy who could almost ask anything he wanted from the king and get it. So he was going to ask to impale Mordecai. So Mordecai was still in danger.

But the fact that the king had insomnia that night, that very night. And that very passage was read to him when he called for some sleep inducing reading material. And that it happened to be the very night that he learned that he was indebted to Mordecai.

All that is much too coincidental. And the timing as it was when Haman was on his way there. And as soon as the king had inquired about rewarding Mordecai, Haman appears with his request.

And the king of course ends up not realizing the degree to which he's doing so, humiliating Haman. But those are the main coincidences. I mean, let's face it, those are amazing coincidences.

And anyone who has not been told that the book doesn't mention God could probably read through it and not realize that the book didn't mention God. Because you're seeing the hand of God in everything. And the fact that the book so graphically depicts the hand of God in the events of history without mentioning God, simply to my mind underscores the fact, and this may be perhaps one of the main lessons intended by the book, that God is involved in the affairs of history, at least those that involve his people.

Even though unacknowledged, even though unmentioned, even though no one's talking about him. He's working behind the scenes. He certainly was working behind the scenes in this story.

Now, Mordecai and Esther, by the end of the book, are elevated to tremendous greatness. In fact, it's almost an anti-climax for us in the story. We read about the battle where the outcome is that the Jews are spared from being wiped out.

But then the story doesn't end quickly there. It goes on to talk about the institution of Purim, the feast, and also some other things. But mainly it focuses, especially in the closing verses, on how great Mordecai was regarded to be.

If you look at chapter 10, it's only really, what, three verses. This is the last verses in the book. It says, And King Ahasuerus, which is Xerxes, imposed tribute on the land and on the islands of the sea.

Now all the acts of his power and his might, and the account of the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persian? If you ever have insomnia, you might want to read those. Although we don't read that it worked. We don't read that the king fell asleep.

For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews as well, and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen. Now, the book ends with showing how great Mordecai was, and of course Esther also. By this time they had revealed their identity as Jews.

And so the Jews also received some favor. In fact, earlier in the book it says many of the Persians became Jews. They actually became proselytes because knowing that the king was favorable toward his queen and that she was a Jew, and also that there was going to be a war where the king was on the side of the Jews and the others were going to come against them, many people took the side of the Jews who were not Jewish.

But the greatness of Mordecai and Esther is comparable in the land of Persia with the greatness that Joseph had in Egypt, or that Daniel had in Babylon. These pagan nations, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, these are very pagan nations. And yet we find in the case of Joseph, he was second only to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Mordecai was second only to Xerxes in Persia. Daniel wasn't second only to Nebuchadnezzar in his day in Babylon, but he was elevated above the other persons in the government to a very great degree. And what this shows is that God, although his people were centered for the most part in Palestine or Israel, he was very present with them when they were far from there.

He was, even when they were surrounded by pagan culture and pagan life, God was very much with them in elevating them and taking care of them. Now, the fact that there were such influential Jews in the court of Pharaoh, in the person of Joseph, or in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, in the person of Daniel, or in the court of Xerxes, in the form of Esther and Mordecai, is sort of the foretaste of the general theme of God's promise to Abraham that through his seed, all the nations would be blessed. Now, the Jews in most of their history did not bless the pagan nations much, but they sometimes did almost

accidentally.

Joseph, an Israelite young man, before he was a leader in Egypt, he was sold into slavery, and his master Potiphar was blessed and became prosperous because Joseph was there. Then he was put in prison because of false charges made against him, and God blessed him in prison. He was placed above all the other prisoners.

Then finally he was brought into Pharaoh's court, and Pharaoh placed him above everyone else there. It's like God's blessing was on his people, even in the midst of pagan lands. He used them, in each case, to bless the nation that they were in.

Now, of course, the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise would be in Jesus, and the gospel of Jesus going to all the nations, so that all the nations of the world receive blessing through Jesus and through his gospel. But the stories in the Old Testament where God actually has inserted, planted, in high places in these pagan governments, key faithful witnesses to him is perhaps a foreshadowing of the fact that the church would be among the nations, that God's people would someday be primarily among the pagan nations, inserted to be faithful witnesses there, as Joseph and Daniel and Mordecai and Esther were. The fact that Esther is in this list makes it very clear that God is not a sexist.

He doesn't just use men, though there were fewer things in the ancient world that women, that were open for women to do. Most women had a domestic calling, but occasionally you get someone who's a queen, or has some other, even a military function, like Deborah. But, I mean, God did use women as well as men, though obviously in the places of political authority, it was more natural to have men in those positions, and we do find more of that than of the women.

So what are some of the lessons we find from the book? Well, one is that Haman's pride destroyed him. In Proverbs it says, a haughty spirit goes before destruction. Or we say, pride goes before a fall.

That's actually a paraphrase of a proverb. And Haman was an arrogant man. In the early part of the story, he's a favorite of the king.

We don't know what it is about him that makes him a favorite of the king, but something about him. Maybe he was a war hero. Maybe he was recognized as a brilliant counselor that the king couldn't do without.

But he was elevated to a position, before Mordecai was there, as second only to the king, and having almost unlimited power. All the people of Persia had to bow down to him when he walked by, and that's what set Mordecai in a position to be noticed negatively by him, because Mordecai was the only one who didn't bow. And that's something that Haman could not tolerate.

It just shows how pride is. I mean, if you've got, you know, three million people bowing down to you, and one guy who isn't, you ought to be satisfied with that. If he'd been satisfied with that, he would have lived to be probably a ripe old age.

As it turns out, the man gets himself impaled on his own torture stick that he set up for Mordecai, just because he couldn't leave well enough alone. You've got everybody bowing down to you, but this one guy, I just can't be happy when that one guy isn't bowing down to me. It reminds me of human nature exhibited in the Garden of Eden.

God's given Adam and Eve all the trees of the garden, almost infinite variety of food, but there's just that one. He said, don't eat that one. And being deprived of just one made it not okay.

You know, they couldn't leave well enough alone and say, hey, at least we got more fruit than we'll ever be able to eat. Let's just let God have his tree, and we won't bother with it. And that's kind of how, I don't know, covetousness is in pride.

It's like, well, I ought to have it all. I shouldn't have all minus this one thing. I should have it all.

I need everyone bowing to me. This one man, I just, I will not tolerate. And it was because of his plots to kill Mordecai and the Jews that Haman himself came to a gruesome and early end himself.

That's the story he picks. So how pride can destroy a man. Certainly it's seen in many other cases in scripture and frankly in history or in probably people, you know, people who just so proud it ruins them.

They overreach because they feel entitled or they feel like they should have more privilege. They feel like they should be, you know, have a higher position or more money or something, and they pursue it to their own destruction. Another lesson in the book that you could find is that God rewarded Mordecai's civil disobedience.

That is when he would not bow down to Haman. That was civil disobedience. Everyone's supposed to do that.

He wouldn't. It was against his convictions. Now, what civil disobedience is, is when you break a civil law, but for conscience sake, not just because you want to be a rebel.

Not just because you reject authority, but because what you're being asked to do is simply against your conscience as a godly person. That's civil disobedience. We find it throughout the scripture.

It's always rewarded. In the time of Moses birth, the Pharaoh at the time wanted to kill all the baby Jew, Jewish males when they were born. And he commanded the two midwives,

Shifra and Pua were their names, to kill the infant boys born among the Jews at the time of their birth.

And to do it in a clandestine manner that is probably without the parents noticing, just kind of strangle the baby as they're pulling it out so that it seems to be born dead. Well, they didn't do it. They feared God, the Bible says, and they refused to do that.

And it says God rewarded them. God built them houses. God even honors them by telling us their names.

We don't even know who the Pharaoh's name was or the Pharaoh's daughter who raised Moses. Their names are left out of the record. But these two slave midwives, they're remembered by name and were sold specifically.

God built them houses, which means household families. They must have had significant children themselves and built families that God built for them. We know that Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego all were civil disobedient guys.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to bow to the statute. Daniel refusing Darius's order to pray to no one except him for 30 days. Both of them were blessed and protected.

The disciples themselves, the apostles, were told by the Sanhedrin not to preach anymore in the name of Jesus. They refused to obey that order. And they were protected up to a point.

Peter was put in prison for his disobedience, but an angel opened the prison doors and he got out. Of course, many of these men eventually did die for their faith. And these stories about God delivering people are not intended to give us the impression that if you disobey man in favor of obedience to God, that God will miraculously deliver you.

The stories are exceptional. Both in the Old Testament and the New, most of the people who, for God's sake, disobeyed rulers suffered and died for it. And the book of Hebrews actually kind of catalogs that whole history from the Old Testament.

And we know there's a lot of it in the New Testament and early church too of Christians dying as martyrs. In Hebrews chapter 11, talking about the Old Testament saints, it says, Others, this is in the middle of verse 35, Hebrews 11, 35. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two.

They were tempted. They were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins being destitute, afflicted, tormented, of whom the world was not worthy.

That's a really great thing for God to say about somebody. I hope God looks at us and says, the world is not worthy of them. Why? Well, they obviously were otherworldly.

They belong to another world. They belong to another kingdom. And this world wasn't worthy to have such as them.

I'm afraid that can't be said about Christians as often as I wish it could be. I think many times the world is very much worthy of the kinds of Christians that are found in it. Because they're not otherworldly.

They're quite insinuated into the culture and the values of the world in too many cases. But you see, these people were killed for their convictions. So the Bible is not telling us, if you keep a good conscience in the face of government persecution, and you disobey the government when you have to do so to keep your conscience pure, well then God will stand up for you and supernaturally deliver you from all harm.

That's not what the Bible teaches. We do have cases of it, which are God's way of saying, this shows that I approve. This shows that this is the right thing to do.

The fact that I spared a man like Daniel or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego or the midwives or Peter. Those are not there to say that everyone's going to be spared. But if God could spare them, he could spare anyone.

It does tell us that whether he spares you or not, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we're not sure whether God's going to spare them or not. When they were threatened with a fire furnace, they said, oh, king, you know, if you're going to do that, then so be it. If he wants to, our God can deliver us from your fiery furnace.

But if not, we're still not going to bow down. So it remained to be seen, as far as they were concerned, whether God would deliver them. But they were going to do the right thing anyway.

The fact that God has been known to deliver such people is his way of putting a stamp of approval on their behavior. For us, who read after him, this is something God liked. He liked that.

He likes it even when he doesn't deliver you supernaturally. In this case, God rewarded Mordecai in a big way. Though he was disobedient to the government in a way, when he wouldn't bow.

We also have a wonderful example in the woman Esther herself. It's probable that the main feature of Esther that we know anything about, besides that she ranked above all the other beautiful women in the kingdom for beauty, was that she was submissive. She submitted to her uncle Mordecai.

She submitted to her husband. In fact, the woman that she replaced, Vashti, was excluded simply because she wouldn't submit. It starts out with Xerxes at a feast with all his nobles and all his buddies.

And he wants them to see how beautiful his wife is. So he sends a message to her where she's in the ladies chamber and says, hey, come out here. I want my friends to see how beautiful you are.

She said, I'm not coming. And she couldn't be persuaded. She wouldn't submit to him.

And that's how she ended up getting divorced and replaced. Now, Esther, we see only submissiveness in her. Count the times in the book that she says, if it please the king, if it please the king, the king saying, listen, ask for anything, even up to half the kingdom, I'll give it to you.

She says, well, if it pleases the king, I would like to ask you to come to my feast I'm having here. And then he comes to that feast and he says, now I'll give you anything up to half the kingdom. She says, if it pleases the king, if it pleases the king.

And when she makes requests, she's always saying, if it please the king. Now, of course, that's the way people talked to kings, but she was the wife after all. And there have been queens who, well, including Vashti, who didn't exhibit that kind of submissiveness to the kings.

They could usually get away with it. A lot of women can get away with it, with their husbands. I mean, their husbands wouldn't take it from anyone else, but they'll often take it from their wives.

And the kings often would take a bit of feistiness from their wives who are the queen. But Esther didn't take advantage of that. She was always, if it pleased the king.

And I've always, for many, many years, it was not original, it's been a preacher I heard challenged a group of listeners, which included me, to observe how often she said, if it please the king, and think that is the attitude of a Christian toward Christ. He is our king. And all of our petitions, all of our thoughts, all of our plans should be conditioned by if it pleases the king.

I remember there was, I won't go into detail, but back in the, back when I was in my 20s, there was something that looked like it was within my grasp, and it was something I really desired for my life. And I prayed about it, and it looked like there was no reason not to have it. It was something that would be good, it was not a bad thing, it wasn't a selfish thing particularly.

It was something I thought would be good for the ministry, good for me, good for everything, good for the kingdom. And it looked like it was very reasonable, accessible.

And I prayed and prayed for it, and it slipped through my fingers.

It didn't happen. And I remember saying, I was very upset, I remember saying, God, why, why, why didn't you let this materialize? And I felt like he spoke to me. And the words I thought I heard him say is, it didn't please the king.

And that was all I needed to hear. Oh, I forgot about that. So we do forget so quickly.

Nothing matters unless, except whether it pleases the king or not. We have a king after all. And for us to take that submissive attitude about everything, about every request, about every hope, every agenda, every dream that we hope to, you know, achieve, everything should be conditioned by, well, if it pleases the king.

And if it doesn't materialize because it doesn't please the king, that should be just fine with us. We're not here for anything except the pleasure of the king. And Esther is such a good example of that particular attitude.

And of course, one of the lessons, and I've already mentioned this, is that God's still with his people, looking after his people, even in pagan lands. God isn't confined to Israel. You know, when Stephen was on trial in Acts chapter 6 and 7, at the end of chapter 6, he was accused of saying, of blaspheming against Moses and against the temple.

That's what they accused Stephen of. This man's blasphemed against Moses and against this holy place, the temple. And of course, this reflected an attitude that many of the Jews had about the temple, almost like they idolized it.

Like God lives there. And it was there, they almost idolized it more than they idolized God. So Stephen gives his sermon in Acts chapter 7. And what does he underscore again and again? When God was elsewhere than the temple.

It says, God appeared to our father, Abraham, when he was in Ur of the Chaldees. Well, that's pretty far from the temple. And God was there, appearing to Abraham.

Later on, it talks about how Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. But it says, but the Lord was with him. Well, he was pretty far from Israel then, too, in Egypt.

But the Lord was with them there, too. It goes on to talk about how Moses led the people out of the land of Egypt and in the desert and said, and the Lord was with him. In the wilderness.

Again and again, Stephen points out, you know, you think the temple is where God lives? One of the final statements in Stephen's sermon is, God does not live in temples made with hands. And God is wherever his people are. You could be Abraham in Babylon.

You could be Joseph in Egypt. You could be Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. You're not in Israel, but you are with God because you are one of God's people.

He is with them. And that's certainly seen in this story. And the final lesson I've got written down here is one that I've made earlier.

And that is that the book shows us. And I think it's one of its main intentions. That God is tinkering with the affairs of men.

Even with kings. It says in Proverbs chapter 21, verse 1, The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. As the river is of water, he turns it whithersoever he will.

That is the heart of the king. That is the mind of the king. What the king decides.

What choices are made officially by the government. That heart of the king is in the hands of God. And he turns it like he turns the rivers of water.

Proverbs 21, verse 1 says. Now, some people think, notably Calvinists, would say, Well, this is one of those things that tells us that God micromanages everything that goes on in the world. Well, he might.

He certainly has the right to. But it doesn't say that. To say that he turns the river of water wherever he wants to.

Doesn't mean he's turning rivers of water every day to new directions. If God wants a river to run a different direction, he can certainly turn it. But how often does he really do it? Same thing with the heart of the king.

We're not told that God, everything a king decides, God is putting it on his mind. But he can. And he does when he wants to.

The idea here is that God is sovereign over the kings of the earth. He's the king of the kings and the Lord of the lords. The ruler of the kings of the earth.

Jesus is referred to as Revelation chapter 1. And so he does guide rulers. We have known in our lifetime, probably instances where God raised up rulers. Or even if whether he we see him as raising up or not, he has influenced rulers to make decisions that were for the good of his people.

I personally think that some of the things going on in the United States government right now are good for the people of God. And I have no reason to doubt that this is God turning the heart of rulers. Not all of them.

And the Bible doesn't say he directs all of them. But he does what he has to do when he wants it done. In other words, we're not going to be saved by politicians.

If the nation's going wrong, our best hope is to get God on our side because it doesn't matter who the politicians are. God can turn him. He's more likely to turn them in a good way if they're good men.

But God can harden the heart of a Pharaoh who's not a good man. He can put it in the heart of a pagan like Cyrus to let the people go back and build the temple. He can give favor to Esther and Mordecai in the mind of Xerxes, a pagan.

And many other cases are known. So God works through politicians, through rulers, as well as in other ways. Let me just outline the whole story.

We're going to take this quickly here. The story is only 10 chapters long. As you saw, the 10th chapter only has three verses.

So it's not a really very long story. In chapter 1, there's this party. The king calls for his beautiful wife, Vashti, to show off her beauty to his friends.

She doesn't come. This makes him embarrassed. And his friends, who are also in high positions in the government, say, This can't be tolerated.

Because if she gets away with this, all of our wives are going to act that way. News will get out that Vashti refused to obey the king. And now our wives are going to say, If she can disobey the king, we can disobey you.

And so basically, Xerxes is under pressure from his subordinates, who are concerned about how their wives are going to take this lesson. And so they say, Why don't you put her away and make a search of all the most beautiful women in the kingdom, have them all come to you, and you pick another queen to replace her. That will send the message to the wives that they cannot just be uppity and insubordinate to their husbands.

So Xerxes agrees to this. And in chapter 2, we have Esther selected from the bunch. Now, we don't read that the girls applied for the position.

In all likelihood, Esther did not apply for the position. The king's servants were out. We could think they were talent scouts, but they were actually just looking for beautiful women.

And she was apparently spotted and brought in. Now, you have to understand that she was, I think we're supposed to understand she had to sleep with him. He had a night with each of these women to decide which one he wanted to keep on.

And she was not really in power. But remember, if it seems like she was perhaps compromised in doing this, first of all, I don't know that she had any choice in the matter. When a king hauls you in and sleeps with you, it could be seen more as a rape than anything if you're resisting it.

But she didn't even necessarily have to morally resist it. She could be a concubine. And all the women that the king slept with that he didn't make his queen became permanent concubines.

And there was nothing in the Old Testament to forbid concubinage. A man could have concubines. And so it was not an immoral thing for a woman to be a concubine.

At least it was never revealed to be such. We would see it as wrong with our somewhat more enlightened understanding of God's purposes for sex and marriage and things like that. But in the Old Testament, there was no revelation about that specifically that would condemn it.

And so she ends up pleasing the king more than the others. And she becomes the queen. At the end of Chapter 2, that's when Mordecai happens to overhear these officials plotting to kill the king.

And he reports them and they're arrested and put to death. And that's how Chapter 2 ends. In Chapter 3, we see Haman elevated to a high position, second only to the king.

And he exploits that position to require everyone to bow down to him. And we find that Mordecai won't. And so Haman gets very upset with Mordecai, finds out that he's a Jew, and decides to teach him a lesson by killing all the Jews.

He doesn't know Esther's a Jew. And that, of course, is his undoing. Chapter 4, Mordecai hears a decree that there's a certain day set by Haman when all the Jews are to be executed.

And they're to be executed by the citizenry. They're not only to be brought into gas chambers, but Haman is seen by the Jews as sort of a Hitler. Or Hitler is actually seen as sort of a second Haman.

Many Jews remember Hitler as sort of another Haman character. There were no gas chambers. The government didn't execute them.

But a decree was made that every citizen should lift up his sword against the Jews in his neighborhood and kill them. And there was a certain day that that was to be executed. Mordecai became aware of the decree in advance, and he informs Esther about it.

And he basically says, you're going to have to go and intercede for us with your husband. Because I don't think he knows what Haman's up to. And Esther says, well, the problem is, it's been quite a while since the king has called for me.

And when he's in his chambers, no one is allowed to come to him. And if someone approaches him unbidden, they will be put to death. The only exception is if he extends his scepter, when he sees them coming, if he extends his scepter, that's an indication of his approval, and their life will be spared.

She said, if he doesn't extend the scepter to me, I'll be put to death. And that's when Mordecai said, well, if you don't do it, God will raise up deliverance some other way. And

you and your household will come to nothing.

But he said, I think you should be seen, you're in this position for a purpose. That's for this very situation that you've been raised up to this position. So Esther said, okay, I will do it.

You guys fast for me for three days, and I will approach the king in three days. And if I perish, I perish. She says, you know, if he doesn't extend the scepter to me, I'm going to die.

But that's just the way it goes. So in the next chapter, Esther approaches the king, he does extend the scepter toward her. So she is invited to come and speak to him.

And she simply invites him to a banquet. In the first eight verses, she says, I just bring Haman and you to a banquet I'm going to put on tomorrow. And so he agrees to that.

And in the latter part of the chapter five, Haman is all puffed up because, hey, he and the king alone have been invited to this special banquet that the queen, she invited me. I'm on the short list. Like there's two people in this, the king and me.

And it made him feel pretty important. And he wanted to go home and boast to his friends about it. But as he was walking home, he saw Mordecai standing there, not bowing.

And again, Haman was just fuming with anger. And he goes back and tells his family, you know, the king is honoring me. Everything's going great for me.

I just can't be at peace or happy as long as the Mordecai, the Jew, is refusing to bow to me. And so his wife or friends or someone say, well, why don't you just kill Mordecai? Why don't you just build a big old gallows and impale him on it? And so Haman does that. He sets up the gallows.

He orders it to be done that very day. Chapter 6 then is the night when the king can't sleep. Now, Haman is so eager to hang Mordecai on this thing that he goes to the king in the middle of the night to get his approval on the plan.

And he's going to actually ask the king for permission to kill Mordecai for his insubordination. The only problem is that before Haman gets there, God gets to the king by him hearing read to him these chronicles about what Mordecai did and the king's resolve then to honor Mordecai. Of course, humiliates Haman.

He says in the morning, you go take Mordecai on my horse that I ride and you have all the retinue of the king and you run before him and say, thus shall a man treat the man whom the king delights to honor. So Haman does that. Of course, he's totally humiliated.

The Bible says he covered his head in humiliation so he wouldn't be recognized as he, as

he skulked home after that. And it was, you know, it was absolutely mortifying, not Mordecai, but mortifying to Haman. And then chapter 7 is the feast when Haman and the king show up.

Now, again, the king doesn't know why she's thrown this feast or why she's invited him. So he says, ask whatever you want up to half the kingdom. Now, notice she's got this king wrapped around her little finger.

He'll give her half the kingdom. He's wild about her. And all we know about her is he's she's not a rebel.

All we know is that she's submissive. Unlike his previous wife, she's beautiful and submissive. But, you know, a woman who's submissive to her husband often will get her way more easily by her husband.

If he feels like his wife is not his adversary, but is on his team, a man will, if he's not an idiot, will want to move heaven and earth to keep his wife on his team. I mean, the king finally has a wife who's cooperative and who's worth something to him. And he says, listen, I'll give you anything you want.

And she says, well, I just want you to know, husband, that there's an evil man who wants to destroy me and all my people. And the king says, who is this villain? She says, it's this man, Haman, right here. And Haman's suddenly shocked.

He didn't know that she was a Jew. He didn't know that it was even him. But suddenly he realizes he's in a real bad way.

And the king, when he hears it, is just furious. And he doesn't know what to do. So he goes out onto his palace balcony to think about it, to cool off.

In the meantime, Haman decides to beg for mercy from Esther. And she's laying on the couch. And he kind of throws himself over her, petitioning her to have mercy.

And the king comes in and says, what is he, assaulting the queen now, too? And so he called servants in and they put a bag over his head and dragged him out. And they said, what are we going to do with him? And someone said, well, you know, there's a big old gallows there, about 70 feet high, just down the road. Why don't you hang him on that? And so Mordecai gets impaled on his own stake.

And that's chapter 7. Chapter 8, Mordecai is advanced to a government position, which he did not have before. And he and Esther intercede to the king for the Jews. Now, the problem is, even though Mordecai is dead, there is a decree made under the authority of, I said Mordecai is dead, Haman is dead.

There's a decree that Haman made. And by the way, the laws of the Medes and the

Persians cannot be changed. Now, by the way, it's interesting how knowledgeable of this fact biblical writers were.

Daniel, for example, knows that Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar can change his laws because he's Babylonian. And in Babylon, the kings could change the laws, but the Persians cannot. So when Nebuchadnezzar, anyone who doesn't bow down to this statute, is going to be burned.

Well, he changes his mind. And after Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are spared, he says everyone has to worship him. He doesn't have to throw people in the fire furnace from now on if they don't do this.

But Darius, who's the Persian king, makes a decree that no one can pray to him or anyone except him for 30 days. Daniel doesn't obey. And Darius wants to spare him, but can't because the laws of the Medes and the Persians cannot be changed.

So this law that Haman made is a law of the Medes and Persians that can't be changed. That means there's still a date coming up when all the citizens are authorized to take their weapons and kill the Jews in their neighborhood. And so Mordecai and Esther asked the king, could we offer a second decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves? And the king said, yes, draft that decree.

So that was drafted. Now there's two decrees. One that the pagans should kill the Jews and the others that the Jews can defend themselves.

Now, suddenly news gets around that the king's wife, the queen he is so fond of, is Jewish. And so is the prime minister, Mordecai. And now there's this decree to kill the Jews or to take the side of the Jews.

And it says that many of the Persians became Jews so that they could fight against those that were going to kill them. And there was a bloody, a bloody battle that day. It's a sad thing.

Haman just caused a lot of bloodshed because people who were ordinarily not against the Jews were now had been ordered to now kill them. And in the course of trying to do so, a lot of them got themselves killed and the Jews prevailed and survived that what would have been a Holocaust. Chapter 9 verses 1 through 17, we have their survival through that crisis.

And then in the latter part of chapter 9, we have the decree that the Jews should celebrate this victory every year at the Feast of Purim. Now, why the Feast of Purim? Why is it called Purim? Purim refers to lots, casting lots, like throwing dice. And it's called that because Haman had chosen that particular day to kill the Jews by casting lots to decide on it.

So for some reason, they took the casting of lots on that occasion as giving the name to the Feast, the Feast of Purim. And as I said, the Jews still celebrate it today. Now, just as we close and we are essentially done except for this, I want to talk about some possible typology in this.

Now, when we look at the Old Testament, we should be suspicious that there may be types and shadows. Because Jesus says in Psalm 40, in the volume of the book, it is written of me, meaning the Old Testament. Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 24, all things that are written in the law of Moses and the Psalms and the prophets concerning me had to be fulfilled.

There's a lot of Old Testament stuff that's about Jesus. And the New Testament identifies a lot of types in the Old Testament, types of Christ. It doesn't identify all of them.

And when we have the Old New Testament telling us that a particular thing in the Old Testament is a type of Christ, then we have, of course, divine authority for making that statement. When we don't have the New Testament telling us that, then we can only speculate. But there are good reasons to speculate that this story is preserved partly to foreshadow some things about Christ.

Xerxes the king could be a type of God himself. And therefore, Vashti, his first wife, who is rebellious, is like Israel. God's first wife, whom he wed at Mount Sinai through covenant, rebelled against him and was divorced as Vashti was.

Esther, then the new wife by a new covenant, would be the church. And she delivers her people. She is the agent of salvation to her people.

Haman would be like Satan himself, the destroyer, the robber who wants to kill and rob and destroy. He wants to destroy God's people. But Esther, like the church, intercedes for her people and becomes, in a sense, the savior for people.

Mordecai, however, would be more like the Messiah because he's exalted to power second only to King Xerxes, which is like Jesus is at the right hand of God the Father. Xerxes could be seen as a type of God. Mordecai, who is at his right hand, would be a type of Christ.

Esther, a type of the church. Haman, a type of Satan. Vashti, a type of rebellious Israel.

And Mordecai's decree, which was good news to God's people, is like the gospel. It caused rejoicing. It says that in chapter 8, verses 15 through 17, when the decree was made that the Jews could defend themselves, it says, Now, that's good news.

That's good tidings. Everywhere the command, everywhere the decree came, caused good tidings, joy and gladness, rejoicing. And that's what the gospel is.

It's the decree of... There's a decree of the king, of salvation, a decree of defense of his people against their enemies, a decree of salvation. And so it causes great rejoicing, too. And so there is, in the book, virtually every major character, if seen in this life, fits into the overall historic story of the Bible.

God had a rebellious wife. She had to be dismissed. God has a new wife.

And she becomes the salvation of her people. Mordecai is elevated to the right hand of the king, as Jesus is elevated to the right hand of God. And the decree that Mordecai issues is good news of salvation to his people.

And so, although the New Testament does not ever really mention Esther, the book or the individual, and therefore does not identify these particular features of the story as types of Christ, yet there are types of Christ, no doubt, that the New Testament does not identify for us. And I think there's a good chance that we should see the book of Esther that way as well.