

Esther (Part One)

Hidden in an Ungodly World

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Among the ancient nations that the Bible is concerned about, there was a peculiar and widespread religious belief. Simply stated, this belief is that the gods were thought to be deities of certain *places*. I have mentioned this before in other sermons. Each god or goddess had power and sovereignty in a certain limited geographical area and outside of that area, if you were to invoke that god or if that god should somehow cross over into someone else's territory, he or she (if it was a goddess), was thought to be significantly weaker. So if, let us say, Baal in Canaan, tried to go into Syria where some other god, Hadad or whatever it happened to be was the god there, he would surely be defeated because he was not on his own territory. So a god in his own territory had significant advantages in strength and power and will over any other god who would dare try to expand into his area or her area.

I think I gave this kind of similar teaching in a sermon not long ago. I cannot remember even which sermon it was right now, but I want to quickly review this so you can see it out of the Scriptures and understand that it plays a part in some of the stories, some of the records that come down to us. So if you will, please go to II Kings, the fifth chapter. Maybe you will remember the illustration rather than necessarily what I said about this particular pagan belief, and this is the story of Naaman.

Remember, Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army. The Syrian army was the enemy of the Israelites at the time and they were wreaking havoc across the country. But Naaman, despite his very high position, had leprosy and it was a problem and he wanted it solved. He heard that in Israel there was a prophet who could heal. Of course they were talking about Elisha, the prophet at the time. And he happened to have a Hebrew slave who told him about this God in Israel who would heal through His prophet. So he figured he would go and beseech this prophet to heal him.

We are going to pick this up in verse 15 because Elisha did this and told him go "dip yourself in the Jordan River seven times and you will be healed." And Naaman was like, "What's the Jordan River? How is that going to heal me? It's just this little piddling stream. Our Euphrates is far greater than your little Jordan is." And so he finally decided, "Okay, I'll go ahead and do it." He dipped himself into the river seven times and his flesh, it says at the end of verse 14, "was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." Obviously Naaman is ecstatic he is healed. His flesh looks like a little kid's.

II Kings 5:15-17 And he returned to the man of God, he and all his aides, and came and stood before him; and he said, "Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel; now therefore, please take a gift from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing [this is Elisha speaking]." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. [He would not take any payment for what he had done because he did not do it, God had done it.] So Naaman and said, "Then, if not, please let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to the other gods, but to the Lord."

This is where this pagan idea comes out in this story. Notice in verse 15, he mentions that he knows that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Basically what he is saying here is that the God who is in the geographic area of Israel is the true God. And all these other gods are not worth spit. They are just nothing. Only this God heals. He had seen it in his own flesh. So he says this God of Israel is the great God, there is no other.

But then, he says in verse 17, if you are not going to let me give you anything, let me take two loads of earth that I can carry on some donkey's back to my residence, back to Syria, and there I can build an altar and I can worship this God of Israel on Israelite soil in my own country. Like he is taking a bit of that God's territory and transferring it to Syria so he could have his altar and live on Israelite soil. It is almost like these days if you go to a foreign embassy, that soil where the foreign embassy is, is considered

the soil of the land that sent the ambassador. He is doing a similar thing here with this pagan idea that he wants to take this soil back to Syria so that the god's power, our God's power, could be manifested there in Syria.

So, both of these statements, the one in verse 15 and one verse 17, agree with this pagan belief in a god's power being confined to a particular place. He believed that no god could be worshipped in a proper and acceptable manner except on his own soil. And he took it literally and had the soil moved to Syria. That is just one way it worked out in this particular story. Let us stay in II Kings and go to chapter 17. We will see another example of this. Chapter 17 is where Israel is sent out of the land into captivity. Of course, we know that the land did not remain empty. It did for a short while, but the Assyrians brought people in from Babylon. It says here the places which we will read in a few minutes. But they brought foreign people onto Israelite soil and these foreign people, of course, had their own gods and they brought them there into Israel.

II Kings 17:24-33 Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Aav, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities. And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they did not fear the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, "The nations whom you have removed and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the rituals of the God of the land; therefore He has sent lions among them, and indeed, they are killing them because they do not know the rituals of the God of the land." Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Send there one of the priests whom you brought from there; let him go and dwell there, and let him teach them the rituals of the God of the land."

Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel [Notice this was not a true priest of God, a Levite. This was an Israelite priest, the ones who worshipped Baal and Yahweh, worshipped the calves in Dan and Beersheba and such.], and taught them how they should fear the Lord. However every nation [talking about all those people from

Babylon] continued to make gods of its own, and put them in the houses of the high places which the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities where they dwelt. The men of Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. So they feared the Lord, and from every class they appointed for themselves priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away.

They believed in the same idea that there was a god of this particular territory where they had been removed and put into exile and so they thought, well, if we are going to live in this land for any length of time, then we had better figure out how this god wants to be worshipped because he is here and we cannot deny that. We had better get a priest to tell us what to do so that he will be appeased. So that is what they did at the recommendation of the king of Assyria and so they worshipped their own gods just as much or more than they did in their own lands. But they also gave lip service to the God of Israel because it was His territory in which they were living and they felt that they owed Him at least a little bit of obeisance, a little bit of ritual and ceremony so that He would not get angry and send the lions again.

But it is the same idea that there is a god of a geographical area, a certain place at a certain location, and within those bounds that god was powerful and they had better at least mention him, say "hi" every once in a while with some some kind of worship.

And I am sure this is what happened with the Israelites as well. That when they left Israel, they were pretty much pagan. They did not worship God. They were at the very best syncretic, where they had melded a couple of different religions together, but they were carried off to Babylon and other parts of the ancient Middle East and they, I am sure, did the same thing as the Samaritans. That they worshipped those other local gods and then *maybe* worshipped the God of Israel. Maybe not. But it was not very long before they forgot the God of Israel, they forgot the covenant, they forgot the

Sabbath, and they forgot who they were, and thus they were dispersed throughout the world and essentially disappeared from history. Now, it takes an exhaustive study and maybe a PhD or a master's degree in history to figure out where they are.

But the Jews were different. We know that the Jews have always been different and they were different back then. Even though they were carried into Babylon and to other places like Persia and Medea, they retained their worship of God, they retained the keeping of the Sabbath, and of course, they retained their identity as Jews. People knew who they were, *they* knew who they were, and after 70 years of exile when God said enough is enough, some of them returned to the land of Israel and they built the Temple and then they built the wall and then they finished up in the city.

But a lot more of them than returned to Israel remained in the Diaspora. They remained in Babylon, they remained in Persia, they remained in Medea, they remained wherever they had gone in those 70 years and they continued to worship God, they continued to build synagogues and keep the Sabbath. They continued to be known as Jews and that Diaspora continues to this day. The land of Israel, how many Jews does it have now? Is it five or six million, or something like that. I do not know what the exact figure is. But there is at least that many or more Jews all around the world who have not gone back and so they are there even now.

Let us stay in II Kings and go forward a few chapters to chapter 24. We are going to backtrack just a little bit because I want to speak about some of these Jews that were sent off to Babylon, particularly these ones that were sent off during the time of King Jehoiachin, also known as Jeconiah. This takes place in 597 BC. This is after Nebuchadnezzar had come into Jerusalem in 604 and destroyed the city and he took a bunch of people away with him then. But there was another time that he came back because of trouble in Jerusalem and so he came back in strength and he took away a whole lot more people.

II Kings 24:8-13 Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. [A little rebel.] His mother's name was Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to

all that his father had done. At that time the servants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came against the city, as his servants were besieging it. Then Jehoiachin king of Judah, his mother [notice all these people], his servants, his princes, and his officers went out to the king of Babylon; and the king of Babylon, in the eighth year of his reign took him prisoner.

They gave themselves up. They knew the Babylonian army was far superior to what they had and would starve them out. So they decided to give up. This was not the main destruction of Jerusalem. I should have gone back. In 604 it was not the last destruction of Jerusalem. It was bad enough that it happened then. But here in 597, it is another level of destruction here, more because of the siege. And of course it would be totally destroyed in 585-586 BC. But this was the second time he came to Jerusalem and he did some destruction here.

II Kings 24:13-16 And he carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king's house, and he cut in pieces all the articles of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord, as the Lord had said. Also he carried into captivity all Jerusalem [notice he was very specific here about what he took]: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land. And he carried Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. The king's mother, the king's wives, his officers, and the mighty of the land he carried into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the valiant men, seven thousand, craftsmen and smiths, one thousand, all who were strong and fit for war, these the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon.

What we see here is Nebuchadnezzar of having had enough. These Jews were not going to stop rebelling and so he decided to cut the head off the snake, as it were. He would take the cream of Judah. He took the king and the king's mother, the king's wives, got all his officers, most of his relatives, took all the skilled people, all the artisans, all the craftsmen, all the smiths, anybody who could be either brought into a rebellion or help it along by making weapons or being smart and planning things out or building or doing

this or that, whatever it was that that had to be done. Plus he took all the top military men. He took all the officers and the captains. He took many of the mighty men, the ones who were good fighters and warriors, and he brought them all back to Babylon at this time in 597 BC.

What he did was he just said, "Okay if you're going to be this way, if you're going to continue to rebel, I'm going to take your best people away from you to make it all that much harder for you to rebel in the future." Of course, that kind of backfired on him because he left Mattaniah, who became Zedekiah, when he installed him as king and he rebelled just eleven years later.

But Nebuchadnezzar was pretty smart in that he tried to take away all the skilled people who could be beneficial to a rebellion and put them to work for him. Because these people, when he brought them back to Babylon, did not get put into a cage or into a pen or into a concentration camp. That is not how it happened. Nebuchadnezzar was much smarter than that. What he did was when he brought these people back to Babylon, he installed them in various places in the Babylonian Empire. He split them up into various cities and various places and he forced the Jews to work for him.

So, what did he do? First of all, he put the aristocrats in Babylon, many of them in his own palace, and he made them hostages. What that did was it gave the rest of the Jews who had just been brought back to Babylon a reason not to rebel, because if they rebelled, then their king and their aristocrats would be killed. So he kind of held them over their heads and said, "Okay, if you work for me, these people, your king and your queen and your queen mother and all his buddies and helps and officers and whatnot, they will be fine as long as you cooperate."

So the soldiers and the officers that he brought back, 7,000 of those valiant men, he put them in his own army and made them soldier for him. The craftsman, the artisans, and the smiths worked on various things that they were good at, like building projects to build his palaces or build fortifications. They made weapons and other kinds of military gear. They built roads, became engineers, whatever, for his army. And they made things—whatever it is that kings need to do their their jobs. But they had all these very skilled Jews to do his work and so he put them to that. The scribes, the accountants, the clerks, they went into the imperial bureaucracy

so that the function of government can continue. The intelligentsia, the ones that he saw that were very smart, quick, like Daniel and his three friends, they went in to government. They filled government positions, each wherever his talents lay.

Nebuchadnezzar is a smart man. He took a bad situation, a rebellion of these Jews, and turned it into his own benefit. Because he was getting the cream of another nation—God's nation. The Jews whom God said were those who he would use to do all these things, very skilled people, and put them to work for him.

Now, what were they supposed to do then as Jews, as God's people, living in another land? Not the land of Israel, a land where, according to the widespread belief, God was not strong because He was the God of Israel, that God of that little land there nestled next to the Mediterranean Sea, and not the God of Babylon, not the God of Susa, not the God of Nimrud, or any of those other places there in the Middle East where they were taken.

What were they to do? Did God want them to complain? Did God want them to resist? Did He want them to sabotage the empire? Because they were now in really key places where they could have done some really horrible things to bring the empire to a halt or at least to slow it down. Were they to plan insurrection, make alliances with nations that were not quite under the Babylonian heel as yet? Or maybe ones who wanted to get out from under the heel of Babylon. Were they to rebel? Not even close. God tells us what they were to do in the land of their exile. Let us go to Jeremiah the 29th chapter. This letter comes just after 597 and we will see how we know that.

Jeremiah 29:1-4 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This happened after Jeconiah [that is Jehoiachin] the king, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.) [So now we get our setting here. We know that this is taking place just after 597.] The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah, the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah,

whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon:

Notice that. That God had caused *these* specific people to be carried away to Babylon. This was a special exile, a special group of people sent into exile by Him. This was not Nebuchadnezzar's great idea. It came out looking like Nebuchadnezzar's great idea, but God had worked this out to send *this* cream of Jewish society to Babylon. His instruction:

Jeremiah 29:5-13 Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then [at that time when seventy years are done and the times after that] you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.

Now, to those who had this belief that God was only powerful in His own land, in His own specific geography, His own little place there, this would be an astounding thing to consider here. God is saying, "I'm sending you to a far away land, a land where I am not as people would think very powerful. And I want you to stay there and I want you to live there. I want you to get nice and settled in, buy houses, build them, plant a garden, have children, find husbands and wives for your children. They're going to have children

because this is going to take 70 years and that's three generations or so. So you're going to stay there for a while. So get comfy. Do what you can, find work, work hard, have peace with those who are your neighbors. Don't rebel. Just do what you can to be good members of society and make sure that you don't do anything to break the peace. And during that time I'm going to be making My plans."

He says He has thoughts that He is thinking about them. He is thinking them toward them. It is very interesting. The construction of verse 11 because it really means "that I know the plans," He says, "that I make for you." "Plans of peace," He says, "and not of evil." So during this time, during the 70 years, God is telling them, when you go into this land, that is, the land of your exile, and you kind of settle in and you are living there in peace, doing your best to do good works, where you are trying to do the best for your boss that you can, and whatnot, He says, "I'm going to be working on your behalf. I have plans, I'm going to be working things out so that when the time comes, when the 70 years are over, then you will call upon Me and say, 'Hey God' (We can find that Daniel the 9th chapter, where Daniel himself calls upon Him and says, "Hey, the 70 years are up, let's go." And God heard him and things started moving in that first year of Cyrus.)

So He says, "I'll hear you in that far away land, even though you're hundreds of miles away, I'll hear you. And you know what? Not only will I hear you but when you seek Me, you'll find Me in that far away land. The gods of those lands will be powerless against Me and I will do what I planned to do for you all this time."

It is really a very encouraging letter that Jeremiah sends to these people because it takes a great burden off them that they do not have to resist. They do not have to do anything that is going to get them into trouble. They could just go into this far away land in Babylon and wherever else they were in Mesopotamia, and they could just kind of be at peace and wait. They had to be patient. They knew if they were faithful, that God was working and that He would bless them and prosper them, because He said here, "I want you to increase while you're there. Have more kids, grow in number, enjoy this time because it's 70 years in which I am going to be doing something for you. And at the end of 70 years, there will be wonderful thing."

Now, this does not mean that their lives in Babylon were perfect. I do not want you to think that. But this was the mindset that they were supposed to have. "We're in it for the long haul. We're going to just stay here and do the best we can in this situation until God moves and works to make things better for us and better for our people."

What we see in what Jeremiah says here, as well as in II Kings, is that God caused this particular captivity to occur, this particular part of the exile to occur, because He wanted those people specifically. This was the same exile that included Daniel. And so He put them into positions where they had either a certain amount of power or influence that they could help their people, and make things so that when He worked, when He moved, things would work out properly. Now, I just want you to note here between verses 15 and 19, this is kind of a further proof that this was kind of a special captivity.

Jeremiah 29:15-19 Because you have said, "The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon"—therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king who sits on the throne of David [this is a Zedekiah], concerning all the people who dwell in this city [meaning Jerusalem], and concerning your brethren who have not gone out with you into captivity—thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will send on them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like rotten figs that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. And I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, and I will deliver them to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth—to be a curse, an astonishment, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, because they have not heeded My words, says the Lord, which I sent to them by My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them; neither would you heed, says the Lord.

What we get from this is that He took away this one captivity under Jehoiachin to protect them and He left the ones in Jerusalem that He wanted punished. So, in a sense, He sent them to Babylon into exile to preserve them. He had a certain idea, a certain group of people in mind that He wanted to preserve. And even though it looks like a punishment that they

were sent away from Jerusalem, it was really a blessing because He protected them right within the evil, carnal, warlike Babylonian Empire. Instead of being at the sword tip of those soldiers, *they were the soldiers*, instead of being at the mercy of the administration that was making the empire run, *they were the empire, they were the administration*.

So God put these people right into places of power and influence and into places of safety so that they would be preserved for whatever would happen at the end of 70 years. So the scattering, which the Greeks called Diaspora, was to further God's ends. This particular scattering. The other one, the one that came later, was a punishment. But this particular one was to further God's ends because He had in mind plans. And those plans included return of some of them to Jerusalem to build the Temple. And among those there were going to be a good many that were David's descendants and He needed those descendants of David to come back to Jerusalem and to Bethlehem and eventually from them came Jesus Christ.

He had to have those there back in the land because, remember, here in the letter in Jeremiah 29, He is telling them, "Wait, I've got these plans for you." Part of the plans was, it says there in verse 10, He was to "cause them to return to this place." And then, of course, He also wanted some of these people to stay where they were in Babylon and Susa, in various cities of the Medes and the Persians and the Syrians and such, because He wanted Jews to go all over the earth. He wanted them spread out over the earth.

Why? Because about 500 years later, Jesus Christ was going to send His apostles to the ends of the earth and he needed places where Jews were for them to go. Because remember what Paul says, that he would go first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. That is Romans 1:16, if you are interested. He also says something similar in Acts 13:46. God was making these plans for good, far out into the future, and He needed a people, the Jews, to be out there in the world, in these various cities of the Gentiles, so that He could send His Word, His gospel to the world. But just note the approach that they were supposed to take living in the world as they were: they were to settle in, carry on their lives as usual, as well as they could, marry, have children, establish themselves to stay, as I said, for generations, and of course they were to grow in numbers, He said.

They were also to seek the peace of the city where they lived, they were to get along with their captors and they were to get along with their neighbors and help where they could. And we see Daniel and his friends, Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were to help, they were to do their jobs wherever they were. They were to do what they could to make their cities or their nations or whatever it was, peaceful and prosperous. And God says right in verse 7 that this would be the best thing for them that would keep conflict to a minimum. And in this way, in verse 11, they would be around to perceive the peaceful future and the hope that He had planned for them.

I do want to mention here once again that what we see here is that it is this pagan religious idea that there is a god of a particular place being turned on its head in Jeremiah 29. He is telling them, it does not matter if you are not in Jerusalem or even on Israelite soil. It does not matter if you cannot go to the Temple to worship Me. He says, "I'm going to be there. If you pray to Me, I'll hear you wherever you are in Babylon or wherever, if you seek My face, you'll find Me because I'm not confined to that one little area right next to the Mediterranean Sea." He is a God of the whole earth. Please turn with me to Psalm 24. I think it is interesting the way it is stated here and what comes after this idea of God being over the whole earth.

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, . . .

Clearly, this is a psalm of David. This idea was already around. The Israelites should not have had an idea that God was confined only to Israel because they had seen Him work in Egypt, obviously. He had done great miracles there and the gods of Egypt had no power over Him. So they already knew this. But what is said in Jeremiah 29 is reassurance to the Jews that went out of the land that this was so.

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.

It is not just the territory, it is the people. God owns *everything*, not just the animals, not just the stone and soil, but everything, including the foreign people that are on those other places.

Psalm 24:2 For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters [using creation as a basis for this understanding here].

Then the psalm seems to switch, but it is interesting what it says. It is not really a switch. It is, okay, what do we take out of this, the idea that God owns the world?

Psalm 24:3-6 Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face. Selah

What is he saying here? He says, because God is the God of all the world and He is the God of all the people in the world, or He should be, but He owns everything, He is sovereign over everything, then it does not matter where you are. All it takes to ascend into the hill of the Lord; these are metaphors for going up and seeing or being with God, to being in His holy place. In the New Testament, in our theology, we say, going before the throne of God. All that matters is what is inside. Do you have clean hands, it says, and a pure heart? If you have not worshipped other gods, if you have not lied and sworn deceitfully, it says here, those are the people who, when they seek His face, are going to find Him.

So it does not matter where. What matters is the character of the person and his loyalty or faithfulness to the true God. And so this plays out in the exile after the fall of Jerusalem with those Jews who went to Babylon.

You are probably wondering where I am going with all this? Well, this is the introductory sermon to a series I am going to be giving on the book of Esther. Of course, Esther takes place in Persia during this post-exilic period of time. The story fits into the early parts of the exile, the post-exile period, because it is after the time that many of the Jews returned to Jerusalem to build the Temple. As a matter of fact, if you want to mark it in your Bible or

put it in your notes, it fits between the end of Ezra 6 and the beginning of Ezra 7. It fits between the time of the completion of the Temple and its dedication, and the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem.

Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in about 458 or 457 BC. The Temple was finished in 515. It is between 515 BC and 458 BC. So it is right there between Zerubbabel on the one hand and Ezra and Nehemiah on the other. So post-exilic period of time and it takes place fully in Persia. None of it takes place anywhere else. All of it takes place in the empire of Persia and not in Jerusalem.

Esther and Mordecai, her cousin, lived and died, as far as we know in Persia in where the Bible calls Shushan. It can also be translated as Susa, which was a capital city of the Persian Empire, one of I think three that they used their as their capitals. One of the lessons then, which we have just touched on in this very long introduction, is how God's people should function while living, not in His kingdom, not in His territory, as it were, not in His state of Israel, but in an ungodly world. How Christians should function while living in an ungodly world, away from the Holy Land, let us say, or for us, not yet in God's Kingdom.

Now, before we leave this idea about living in an ungodly world (because we are going to touch on some other things a little bit later), I would like to go back to three places in the letters of Paul and I want to show you how the apostle took the essence of Jeremiah's letter in Jeremiah 29 and distilled it for us in the New Testament times for Christians living in a scattered Gentile world. Or we could put it, living scattered in a ungodly world. So Paul tells the members of the church how they should live among the Gentiles.

I Thessalonians 4:9-12 But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you should aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we have commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.

He is telling these Thessalonians here that he wants them to do like the Jews had to do in Babylon: live a quiet and peaceable life, he says. Mind your own business. In other words, stay out of the affairs of other people and those other governments and such. You do not need to be getting involved in that sort of thing. Keep your nose to the grindstone, do what God wants you to do, and to work with your own hands. Be resourceful, get the education that you need to do what you need to do to make a career, whatever it is that you are going to set your hands to do, and have a good work ethic. And then, of course, walk properly towards those who are outside. If you do this, you will be provided for. You will lack nothing that you need.

I Timothy 2:1-6 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

What he is telling here is pray for those who are in government, pray for those who have authority over you, so that you can lead that good and peaceable life among the Gentiles and in an ungodly world. And then when you do this, when you lead this good life, it is going to be noticed. You will be making a witness, because Christ came to die for all men, and your witness in the world may be what it takes to bring that person into the church, or at least give him a witness for when he comes up in the resurrection. Because Christ had His mind, not just on us, but on *everybody*. And so we, as Christians, are to live as much as we can like Christ in the world. This includes all these things about living at peace among those people who are our neighbors.

On to Titus 3, a few more pages over. Paul tells Titus to,

Titus 3:1-2 Remind them [people in his church] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men.

Titus 3:8 This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.

So, here in Titus, he basically says the same things that he said in Thessalonians and Timothy. This is the way Christians are to live in an ungodly world. One of the big things that comes up here is that we are to be quiet and peaceable, we are to work hard, we are to do good works, we are to pray for those who are in authority so that we can maintain a peaceful life in this world, and that the things that are happening in the world do not affect us too severely. This is what God wants us to do. That we are not supposed to be making a nuisance of ourselves.

I think it is actually very interesting to think about what is not said here; what Paul leaves out of this list, that a lot of people think should be in this list, especially a lot of Protestants. I hate to point the finger at them, but they seem to, especially the evangelical Protestants because they do what he left out here. And that is, he does not say anything like wear your religion on your sleeve. He does not say proselytize your neighbors. In fact, he says, let your works witness for you, do not be a nuisance, pushing your religion on other people. It is not there. Most of the time, that sort of thing turns people off rather than turns them to the truth.

More and more, as I think about things and study, I am convinced that most of the preaching of the gospel has to be done by apostles and evangelists. That that was their job to do. He calls certain ones to do that. Obviously the church as a whole does it as well. But in order for us to live peaceably in this world, especially in times like this in the first century where everybody was against the Christian church, especially the Romans themselves, it was necessary to keep a low profile but to be good citizens, to do what you could

to be peaceful and helpful and good workers in the society. You have to remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:16. Many of us probably have this as a kind of a memory scripture, but He says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." This is the kind of thing that Paul was thinking about when he was telling us what to do here.

Also in Matthew 13 there is another very interesting parable that has something to do with this. It says,

Matthew 13:44 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

What is interesting here is that Christ teaches in this parable that Christ finds us hidden in the world and then He redeems us and hides us again in the world. It is important that we do not, in a sense, blow our cover before the time when God is going to reveal it and show the world that we are His children. It is called the revealing of the sons of God, is it not, when He returns? I think we will see this in the book of Esther and that is why I am talking about this now, because the book of Esther emphasizes a lot of these same ideas, especially this idea that they are hidden amongst the enemy in this ungodly world.

So, we are going to get to Esther and if you would, turn back to Esther the second chapter. Let us introduce the two main characters of the story. I think it is important that we understand this theme of hiddenness. It is shown here in the Jews of Esther, and it is shown in the first century church, and it should also be shown in our own lives that we have been hidden by Christ in the world. Now here in Esther 2 we are going to read verses five through seven and see how Mordecai and Esther are introduced.

Esther 2:5-7 Now in Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite. Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah [or Jehoiachin] king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. And Mordecai had brought up

Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter [or his cousin], for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. [So, she was doubly lovely.] When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

There is some very important things, several significant details that we need to mine from these three verses, because they will definitely have bearing on later themes and events.

The first thing we need to understand here is the way that Mordecai is introduced. Here it says, a certain Jew. "There was a certain Jew." Now in Hebrew, if you want to emphasize something in a list or in a description, you put it first, most of the time, and here the fact that, even before his name, he is called "a certain Jew." The writer wants us to know this man, Mordecai, in one of two ways: He is either a typical Jew of the Diaspora, which I do not think is as likely. Or the second one is, that the writer wants us to understand Mordecai as the *ideal* Jew of the Diaspora.

So, here Mordecai is brought out front and center and it like it is saying, "Look, *this* is a Jew." A Jew, as God would say, that I would like you all to be like. He is a paragon of Jewry, you might say. He is the Jew that everybody else should model themselves on at this point in time. It also says that this Jew named Mordecai lived in Shushan, or Susa, in Persia. And so we have here that he is one of God's people and lives as one of God's people *should* live in a foreign land. So, not only is he one of God's people, but he is a good example of how people should live when they are not in Jerusalem. Really, when they should live anywhere, but he is pointing out that he lives in Shushan, or in Susa, and so he is living in a foreign land, He is not in power, not at this point at least. And so this is how one like him should behave.

The second big thing is that his genealogy identifies him not as a Jew from Judah, not as a Judahite, you would say, but as a Benjamite. In fact, he is not just any old Benjamite, he is one from the line of Saul. Now, how do we know this? Well, in I Samuel 9 but first I will read back in Esther 2: "Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

I Samuel 9:1-2 There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish the son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Bechorath, the son of Aphiah, a Benjamite, a mighty man of power. He had a choice and handsome son whose name was Saul.

We could also go to II Samuel 16, where if you remember what happened during Absalom's rebellion when David was hightailing it out of Jerusalem. He went by the town where Shimei lived. Shimei was of the house of Saul and Shimei cursed David as he was going past and threw stones at him. And David, instead of killing him, said maybe God wanted him to do this. And then later, when Solomon took over, David said, Do not allow Shimei to die nicely. So Solomon later executed him.

So we have these names—Kish, Jair, Shimei—and they are all common Benjamite names in connection with the house of Saul. But we have the idea that, well, Mordecai was just introduced as the ideal Jew. But Saul and Shimei do not have very good reputations. They have a checkered record in the Bible. Because Saul failed as the king of Israel and Shimei cursed David and was later executed. But despite these black marks on his ancestry, Mordecai rises above all that as a model Jew.

The third thing that we need to understand from all this is that Mordecai is descended from those who were exiled during the revolt of Jeconiah or Jehoiachin. Remember we talked about these, these were all the upper classes—the skilled, the powerful, the educated, the military men. The author is signaling here that Mordecai is not average by any means. He was a descendant of one of those special people that was taken from Jerusalem. God has a plan for him. And that he is also somebody who is probably well educated, came from a bit of money, that he was skilled in whatever it was that he did. Maybe he was an aristocrat of some sort and that he is accustomed to dealing in the highest circles of the land, dealing with people of high rank. He knows the ins and outs of government and high society. So this man that were introduced to is no slouch.

The fourth one of the interesting things, of course, is his name, Mordecai. While we are at quite a bit of remove as in terms of time and we speak an

entirely different language, we can maybe think of Mordecai as a typical Hebrew name. It is not. In fact, it is not just a Babylonian or Persian name, a regular name, it is a pagan name. It is the Hebrew equivalent of Babylonian Marduk. Marduk is the name of the patron deity of Babylon, their chief god. He was the top of their pantheon. He is equivalent to the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter. He was also later called Bel, which is Babylonian for Lord. In Hebrew or Canaanite he would have been Baal. Interestingly, the animal that is associated with Marduk is the snake dragon and his name, Marduk, may go back to Sumerian for calf of the sun. He was their calf god originally, perhaps.

So Mordecai has all this paganness on the outside. We do not know what his Hebrew name actually was, what he went by, because Mordecai is not a Hebrew name. We were never given what it was. We just do not know. But all these associations make us raise our eyebrows and take a step back and say, how could this righteous man Mordecai be named after this god of the Babylonians? But the author is again signaling that Mordecai, although he seems to be totally immersed in the pagan world, his heart is true.

Remember, he is the ideal Jew. He is the one that is being set up for us to emulate in the way he acts towards Esther. He may seem to be covered in all the negatives of this world, even being named after a pagan god, but he was good where it counted. Go back to Psalm 24. It is the person with the good heart that can come before God and seek His face. Of course we immediately see in the very next verse that he was a good man because he took in his cousin Esther and raised her to be such a wonderful young woman.

Now, I should mention here just very quickly that the use of pagan names is not unusual during the exile, before or after as well. Many of the heroes of that time in the Bible had Babylonian or Persian god names *and* Hebrew names. Daniel was Belteshazzar, Hananiah was Shadrack, Mishael was Shadrack, and Azariah was Abednego. Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are also Babylonian names. And there were others. This was done because the various peoples, even though they lived in a fairly compact area there in the Middle East, had trouble pronouncing each other's names because they were foreign to them. They did not speak or have the vow or consonant sounds that the other ones had. So when they would meet they would give a common name of their own to the foreigner just so they could pronounce it.

Even if it were a king, they would give him another name that they found pronounceable.

The main royal character in this book is, in the New Kings James and English versions, is called a Ahasuerus. Now that is a Hebrew name. But it is not a Hebrew name, it is actually an English name for a Hebrew name, because we did the same thing. We could not pronounce the Hebrew name normally, which is Akashverush. But we do not want to say all that so we say Ahasuerus. But he had another name in Greek. They called him Xerxes because they could not handle that name either. And the name that they could not handle was Khshayarsha, which was actually this king's Persian name. The Greeks thought, "Oh my, let's call him Xerxes." And then Hebrews said, "Oh my, let's call him Akashverush," and we say Ahasuerus.

It could be that, rather than having a pagan association with some of these names, that these were names that, even though they had pagan deities linked to them, they were so common that people did not think about them being pagan anymore or their being named after the gods. We do this with our weekdays. How many of you every Thursday think you are worshipping Thor or giving any honor to Thor? Or Friday to Freya or Saturday to Saturn or any of those? We do not think of them that way anymore. Those are just the names and so we do not think that they have any association. Or even Spanish, Mexican, whatever people, calling their sons Jesus or Americans or whatever calling their sons Joshua. They are God names, the name of our God, Jesus. We do not think of them that way though. They are just common names in use.

I will give you one more and that is, since we are here in Esther 2, the name Esther. That is the Hebrew form of the goddess Ishtar. If you did not know, she was the goddess of love. It is equivalent to Venus or Aphrodite, depending on whether you are Latin or Greek. Her real name is Hadassah which means "myrtle" in Hebrew. And by the way, the myrtle tree has connotations in its various usages throughout the Bible of peace and restoration and festivity. It was one of the branches that was carried in the Feast of Tabernacles and used on the succoths, on the booths. And of course, the Feast of Tabernacles is a joyous feast.

But she also has a dual identity, just like Mordecai has, even though he seems like he is all in the world, he is thoroughly Persian, he even has a name of a Babylonian god. Well, she is the same way. She has the name of a Babylonian god as well, Ishtar, but she is both seen as a Jewess and a Persian, but she keeps her Jewishness secret. If you look at verse 10, it says Esther had not revealed her people or kindred for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it. And then in verse 20, "Now, Esther had not yet revealed her kindred and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her, for Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up with him."

What we see here is that she went by Esther. This in verse 7 is the only time we find out that her real name was Hadassah, but she kept that part of her life secret. She kept it hidden because Mordecai had told her not to let it be known. Here is the paragon of Jewry in a foreign land telling her to keep her identity secret. And then what we find out, this becomes very interesting, the word Esther, even though it is the Hebrew equivalent of the goddess Ishtar, is derived from a Hebrew root S T R. Remember they have three consonants, and the root S T R means "to hide" or "to conceal."

So even in her pagan name out comes this idea of hiddenness, of concealment, and that she should be particularly concealed in the world, and her true identity kept from the one whom she married even, because it was not God's purpose for her to be revealed as yet. He had plans for her and He would reveal them in time.