

## Esther (Part Two)

Mordecai, Esther, Ahasuerus

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 17-Dec-16; Sermon #1355

It has probably been a long while since most of you, at least the adults in the room and listening in, had to read a novel for anything other than for pleasure. Some of us are avid readers of both fiction and nonfiction alike so we like to pick up a book and read it.

But when we were in school, like in high school or in college, when we had to go to an English or literature class we were assigned various well-regarded novels to read and we are supposed to dissect them for their literary value that they may possess, and not all of them do. Of course the teacher or professor usually wants us to write an essay about that particular book and maybe even take a test. Oftentimes it is a long-answer test where we had to actually put out a little effort so that the teacher knows that we have actually read the thing and thought about it a bit, and it reveals how much we understand what the author tried to relate. Or maybe the way it works out a lot of times is we have to tell the teacher what she actually had gotten out of it and had spit out to us and we spit right back at her. That is usually the way it works, especially in high school.

Now in my time, and I am thinking mostly about middle school and high school, we had to read such books as *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Once and Future King*, *The Hobbit*, *Beowulf*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Heart of Darkness*, 1984, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter* (Oh, by the way, 1984 was great because I graduated from high school in 1984 and that was one of the books we had to read that year, so it was pretty poignant.), *Lord of the Flies*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke. And of course, you always had one or two or three or six Shakespearean plays that you had to read and dissect.

Today, kids read different books. They read some of those books that we read. But today's kids read lot more modern novels and a lot more novels

that are about other things other than what those other novels were about. And many of them are non-American or non-British novels because of course these kids do not need the American stuff or the British stuff. They need to learn about people and various other places around the world. So the curriculum has changed. So they read, works like *The Kite Runner*, *Speak*, which I have no idea what that one is about, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Awakening*, *The House on Mango Street*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Stranger*, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, *The Light in the Forest*, and *Ransom*. Any of you know any of those books? Well, I like my list better.

In those English and literature classes most of us flailed about as our teachers tried to teach us things like plot structure, point of view, protagonist and antagonist, types of conflict, inciting incident, three-act structure, denouement, realism, Romanticism, Classicism, postmodernism and modernism, allegory, symbolism, metaphor. But, most of all, they were trying to get us to think about the book's relevance to the modern world. What impact that writer, even though he or she may have been dead for hundreds of years, has on how we think today. To be honest, most of us did not care about any of that stuff. Really, what all we wanted were the answers to two questions. Is it a good story? And will I like the characters? In other words, we, as young students, were fixated on plot and characterization. And I will admit that I have not grown very far from that point in my own reading, that I am still fixated on plot and characterization.

Most normal people, and I am talking about all of you, do not pick up a book to parse its every word and to plumb the depths (and sometimes its deaths) of the author's hidden meanings. It is just not why we read books, especially novels. We just want to read a good story with interesting characters. We want to see how the plot works out in the end. A book, a novel especially, is a kind of escape from a chaotic world to a place and a time within certain parameters where the plot threads get tied up in a neat bow at the end. Now that does not always happen, but we hope it happens, especially after we get through like a 12 part novel series, and we want everything to be tied up neatly at the end. And we say that if we glean anything of any kind of principle or meaning at the end of it, well, that is just a cherry on top, something we figure out just through osmosis most of the time.

Now, granted when we talk about the Bible, God does not want us to read it quite that way. He does not want us to read it just for plot and its characters. He wants us to read it with understanding so that we learn wisdom, especially about Him and about His plan for mankind and how we fit into it. He wants us to study it in depth to make connections between its contents and the lives that we lead today 2,000 years later. He wants us to understand the symbols, He wants us to understand the connections, He wants us to see things from His point of view. And He wants us, like we read novels, to yearn and to strive for His happy ending.

But at least one book of the Bible, the book of Esther, elevates plot and characterization to major factors in how we read and understand that particular book. Commentators have tried to figure out for centuries just what literary genre the book of Esther belongs to and they tie themselves into knots. They say, well, is it a historical chronicle? Chronicles are mentioned in the book of Esther. Mordecai's good deed was written in the Chronicles. They say, is it a fictional drama based on history, like a historical novel? Maybe. Is it a comedy? Because there are comedic elements in it. Is it a parable? The Bible is full of parables.

Is it a morality play? Something we see, a story that is developed in front of us, and we have to think about what morals come out of it in the end. What does it teach? Is an allegory with one person and one thing standing for something else, some particular character trait or some sort of thing we are supposed to get out of it? Is it something else? I did not read what the liberal scholars think about it. I tend to think that they trash it and say it is ahistorical and there is nothing to it.

But conservative scholars tend to quibble about what genre it is part of. They call it something like, a purposefully crafted teaching story based on quasi-historical roots. That is taking a stand, is it not? Because what they just did is put all those different kinds of genres together and say it is all of them. And maybe they have a point. For us, its genre does not matter very much. We know that it is part of the Bible. That is what matters. That it is canonical. Esther was included in the canon of the Old Testament and the New Testament says nothing against it. Well, that does not mean a whole lot because the New Testament does not say anything at all about the book of

Esther. It never mentions one of its characters, it makes one quote from it, and it does not even make an allusion to the book of Esther.

The New Testament is totally silent on the book of Esther, but that really does not mean a whole lot either. Because, did you know, that the New Testament does not quote the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah either. So whether the New Testament quotes it or not, does not make a great deal of difference in terms of whether it is canonical, but it was accepted and nothing was said against it. Also, it is just, for us, enough to know that it is part of the Word of God and there are things that we can learn from the book.

But, like I said, plot and characterization are vital and integral parts of the book of Esther and how we understand it. If we do not understand how this book is put together and how it presents the characters that are in it, we are going to likely miss a great deal of what the author is trying to tell us. We need to understand those characters and we need to understand the organization of the book. So we are going to concentrate on these two facets of the book of Esther today: on plot and characterization. But we are going to start with the characters which we ended with last time. I do not know if you remember when we were when I was finishing. I was rushing to go through Mordecai and Esther right there at the end and I am going to review some of that about those two because I want you to see both Mordecai and Esther, along with the bad guys, so that we can see them all as a group and see how they work together a little bit.

If you would please go to Esther the second chapter, we are going to reread verses 5-7 where Mordecai is introduced and then Esther, but first Mordecai. Let us read this whole thing.

**Esther 2:5-7** 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 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, for she had neither father nor mother. [They are cousins although Mordecai seems to have been quite a bit older.]

The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

This introduces the two main characters for us, Mordecai and Esther. Now remember what I said last time. (This is part of the review.) Mordecai is identified chiefly as Mordecai, the Jew. That is how the author wants us to approach him and to see him that he is a *certain* Jew. It is an emphasis there. There is this one particular Jew and that he lived in Shushan, which nowadays is called Susa in Persia, part of the Persian Empire, and it was one of three capital cities of the Persians and evidently this is where Xerxes, Ahasuerus, or whatever his name was, spent a great deal of his time.

What we are told here in these details that were given about Mordecai is that the author wants us to know us to him—that he is either a *typical* Jew of the Diaspora or he is the *ideal* Jew of the Diaspora. He is one of God's people, that is, one of those sent away in exile. He was one of those that God had said, "You go with Jeconiah too." He is descended from those people and so he still is known as a Jew. And when we go through and look at what Mordecai does, he lives and behaves as a man of God *should*. So when we look at it from the whole of Esther it comes down on the side of that the author wants us to understand him as the *ideal* Jew. He was an *ideal* example of one of the people who had been exiled from Judah, but living in a foreign country, still living in the land of his exile.

The second thing that we need to understand in his identification here, is that he is identified as a Benjamite, not from Judah necessarily. He is called a Jew, but because he is said to be a Benjamite, we are seeing here is that he is one who follows the religion or that he is an ethnic Jew. Either one of the two ways. So he is identified as a Benjamite and he is specifically linked with Saul. The word Saul is not in there. But the other names that are there, Jair, Shimei, Kish, they are all names that are also interlocked with Saul. So what we are seeing here is that the idea of Saul comes up without being said directly.

Now Benjamites in the Bible, think about the Benjamites that you can remember from the Bible. Except for Paul the apostle, who was also was named Saul, and Mordecai, all the other Benjamites in the Bible have a very checkered history. Saul, Shimei, whose name is mentioned here who is a

descendant of his, and also if you just want to write this down and look at it later, in Judges 19 through 21, the entire tribe is criticized for some very terrible things that they did, and they got down to, what was it, 600 men or something like that, before they stopped the fighting. But Benjamin does not have a good reputation among the tribes of Israel, at least in terms of the Bible.

But Mordecai is different. Even though he is part of the tribe of Benjamin and descended from some of these bad guys, people with bad reputations in the Bible, he is different. He is a paragon of virtue. He does what is right, he does what God wants him to do, unlike these other Benjamites.

The third thing that we need to understand about Mordecai is that, as we saw here and when reading through it, he descends from those who were exiled with Jeconiah or Jehoiachin, also called Koniah in the Bible. Now remember from what we went through last time, these people were the upper classes that Nebuchadnezzar took away. They were the skilled, the craftsman, the powerful, the educated, people who were from the upper crust, and what is being told to us here by the author, is that Mordecai is not average by any means.

We are getting a good view of a man who is quite above average in every respect. He is educated. He is quite skilled at what he does. He may be an aristocrat of some sort and he is accustomed to dealing with people who are aristocrats or who have high positions in government. So he can navigate government and he can get along in high society quite well. He knows what to do, he knows how to act, he knows how to talk to these people. And so he is in a good place and he has been prepared for that place. Even though God is not mentioned in this book, we should assume that the things that Mordecai had in himself were gifts or blessings from God, that he was prepared for this particular job that he needed to do. He was put in a position where he could help Esther in what she needed to do.

But as we go through this, we find that Mordecai has a lot to do himself. He is not just helping Esther. He takes a front and center position as we get towards the end of the book. And so all told, we are seeing Mordecai as being an exceptional person.

Fourth, we do see though that Mordecai has a name that is not Hebrew, but Babylonian, and worse, this Babylonian name that he has, Mordecai, is from the god of Babylon named Marduk, who is the patron deity of Babylon and its chief god, which I said last time is the equivalent of Zeus or the equivalent of Jupiter. Now I want to mention something here that I thought was kind of interesting and we will just put this in the tumbler here in all the facts about Mordecai, is that in Hebrew the word Mordecai you may think just means "belonging to Marduk" or something like that, which would be a good guess. There are some places where you look that up in a lexicon or whatever and that is what they would say, "belonging to Marduk." But when you split it up, as I saw one book, they say actually you should split the word apart into "mor" and then "dec." Mordecai with the "ai" ending being just like a personal ending for a name.

But they say that when you put these two roots together or these two parts of words together, that Mordecai means "strong or bitter crushing" or "strong or bitter oppression." Which, when you think about it, that may be how the Jews looked on their exile, which makes the idea that Mordecai is the ideal Jew of the exile very interesting, that here he was thriving and being such a good person and such a great man, exceptional, even though they were suffering strong or bitter oppression. And so he was rising above his name here.

That is what we have to see in the fact that he is named Mordecai. Even though he looks like, from the outside, that he is totally immersed in a pagan world, because even his name refers to a Babylonian god, that inside his heart is true. From the outside, he seems steeped in this world. He even seems to be part of it and he is able to navigate himself through the world with seeming ease. But his heart and his mind are right. All the externals would say one thing, but his internals, what God saw, were quite different. And we get proof immediately in this story, in these three verses that we have just read, because it says twice in verse 7 that Mordecai had taken in Hadassah and adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.

So this is the first indication we have really of Mordecai's real worth. That even though he had all of these things seemingly against him, first of all, being his name and that he was in this crushing oppression, and he was an exile and a Jew of all people in this particular problem, particular situation

that he had, he was kind enough to sacrifice his own life to bringing up this woman, this young woman who was not even his own. That what we see here is that he was a kind-hearted person and he was a very giving person. He opened up his home to this girl and brought her up.

Let us see, what else do I have about Mordecai? Oftentimes when you are reviewing a novel or you are reading what others have said about this novel, they will talk about character growth. How does a person change within the story? How does he or she grow from the initial times when they are introduced to when the book finally ends. And sad to say, although I cannot really be sad about it, but we cannot see any character growth from Mordecai.

You want to know why? Because he did not have very far to go. He was a pretty good man from the very beginning. From the time he is introduced to the end, Mordecai is rock solid, he is steady, he is steadfast, he never wavers, he always does the right thing. So he has little room to grow in character. He is already close to perfect. Not saying that he is perfect, but he is such an exceptional person that his character and personality does not have very far to grow within the situation here.

And that is why we need to understand character because that is very integral to the story here. In a book, the book of Esther here, that does not mention God, Mordecai is the standard and he is the standard because the people who read this book know what God has said is right and good. They have read other parts of the Bible and so they know, they know the Ten Commandments. They know the things that God has said about how people are to conduct themselves. So when they see Mordecai doing the things that are right, it is a good assumption that Mordecai is doing what God wants him to do.

But God is never mentioned. And so Mordecai then becomes the standard by which all the other characters are judged in the book. And nobody really comes close to the character of Mordecai except for Esther. So he is the yardstick in the book because God is not mentioned and there is a reason for that. I will get to that in a few minutes. But Mordecai then becomes a kind of type of God in this book. When Mordecai comes on the scene, this is what God would do. That is what we can think as we are going through this.

Now remember he is this "certain Jew," he is *the* Jew. So we can see here that he has become very much the *ideal* Jew. Let us look at a little bit about Mordecai in chapter 3 and then we will go to chapter 10. We are going to read the first six verses of chapter 3.

**Esther 3:1-6** After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were within the king's gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage. Then the king's servants who were within the king's gates said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" Now it happened, when they spoke to him daily and he would not listen to them, that they told it to Haman to see whether Mordecai's words would stand; for Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai.

Here we see Mordecai standing as the standard here, as a kind of type of God. As we saw there in the last few words there in verse 6, the Jews were called "the people of Mordecai" rather than the people of God or even the people of Judah. They were his people, like he was the one that was their leader, that he was the one who they followed.

Now we see here that Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. There have been lots and lots of speculation about why he would not do this because God allows a certain amount of obeisance to people of high rank. You can bow before the king or take a knee before a king or whatever it is, He does not mind that, it is just being respectful and honorable in a situation. So why did he not bow to Haman? Well, you have got to remember that Mordecai is standing in for God in this and we will get to that later. But let me tell you just so you have a bit of an answer now. Haman was an Agagite and God had a perpetual hatred against his people. And so Haman was not worthy of this honor.

Let me just give you another clue here. If we would go back to chapter 2 we would find that Mordecai had found out a plot to kill the king and he had told Esther and Esther had told the king. The plot was uncovered and the men were killed, executed for their plot. But Mordecai does not get any reward for it. But Haman, soon thereafter, gets promoted. Now, what we are seeing here is that there is a rivalry between Mordecai and Haman, and the position probably should have gone to Mordecai rather than to Haman. Well, some have speculated, and I will just tell it to you as speculation, is that Mordecai knew that Haman was involved in the plot to kill the king, but he could not prove it. And so that was another reason he would not bow to Haman. Even though the king had made him his First Minister, he would not give him the honor of that office because he was a power-seeking schemer that was not deserving of the place. So just a few little tidbits there.

Here we see Mordecai knowing a lot more than what an ordinary person probably would know, which gives the idea that he is in the place of God. He has certain knowledge and information about the situation that no one else does and he acts accordingly. He does not bow to Haman.

Let us go to chapter 10 to see a little bit more about Mordecai. We will see what happens in the end of the book. We will read the first three verses, which is the whole chapter.

**Esther 10:1-3** And King Ahasuerus 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 Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews and well received by the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen.

What a guy. Now, he had not grown in character all that much, but he was *elevated* certainly from the place where he was when we first saw him in chapter 2. So by the time we get to the end of the book, Mordecai has all kinds of honor and position put on him. And from what we see here that he became quite powerful in the kingdom and was mentioned there in the

chronicles of Persia. So we see that Mordecai is an exceptional character and we need to understand those qualities—that he is like God, he is steady, he is rock solid, he never veers one way or the other. He is the wise one in the book. He is the one that Esther can lean upon to give her the right answers and the help she needs.

Now on to Esther. Esther is the chief character in the book, not Mordecai. This is the book of Esther, even though Mordecai is the one who is perhaps the best character in terms of character in the book. But we saw that, like Mordecai, Esther has a Babylonian name, and it comes from Ishtar who is the goddess of love, equivalent to Venus and to Aphrodite. We see that her real name, her Hebrew name, is Hadassah, which is the word for their myrtle bush in Hebrew. One thing I need to mention about the myrtle bush. It is just a typical bush, but it is a very pretty bush, at least the ones that they have there in the Middle East. They have a white flower that when it blooms they say emits a perfume more exquisite than that of the rose. They could even eat the fruit. They used it as a kind of condiment.

**Esther 2:7** Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful.

First thing we are told about Esther other than her names is that she was an orphan. And then the thing that really stands out is the description that she is "lovely and beautiful." Everything that we see and read about Esther is beautiful. She even smells good. Her name is beautiful, like she is this beautiful little plant that even smells good. What we are to see from this is, that even though she has a pagan name, even though she comes from low circumstances as an orphan, that everything about her—inside and out—is lovely. It is beautiful.

Now we have to understand that the real author of this book is God. And Esther in this, just like Mordecai stands in for God, Esther stands in for one of two things: either Israel or the church on the one hand, or the individual Christian. That she is the virgin daughter of Israel, if you will. She is the virgin that the people of the church are supposed to be, a spiritual virgin. And God, of course, looking down and seeing this one He has chosen, sees her as lovely. That is how God perceived Israel back in Ezekiel 16 when He

first called her. He said she was the daughter of an Amorite or however He put it there, but He saw her in her blood, He says, but He cleaned her up and made her a beautiful woman. And that is how He sees the church. That is how He sees Israel, that is how He sees us. So think of that in terms of the spiritual meaning you can get out of this book. That Esther is a stand-in for us, what we should be doing in a situation like this.

Remember too, I mentioned just in passing, that in the Bible the myrtle plant has the connotation of peace and restoration and festivity and joy. I do want to go to a couple of scriptures that talk about the myrtle. The first one we will go to is Isaiah 55. This is a millennial passage.

**Isaiah 55:12-13** [It says] "For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

So the myrtle here is compared to the brier and what God is saying here in this passage is that in the Millennium things will be reversed. And remember that as we go through this, that even though things were very bad, they are going to be flipped over and turned into something very good. And Esther is, by her name Hadassah, representative of the very good side. She is the beautiful thing. She is not a thorn or a brier, any of the bad things. She is one of the beautiful things and God delights in her and this is the kind of thing He wants to see in His Kingdom, which it says in the Millennium will happen.

Let us go back to Nehemiah 8. This is where we bring in the joy part of things. Let us start in verse 14 just to pick up the flow here.

**Nehemiah 8:14-15** And they found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem,

saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."

**Nehemiah 8:17** So the whole assembly of those who returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until the day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness.

I wanted to connect that to the idea of the booths and particularly the myrtle branches, that there is an idea of festivity, of gladness, of joy that are seen here in the myrtle.

So we are seeing with Esther, as with Mordecai, that all good things are associated with her, that she is the beautiful young virgin that God expects of His people.

We are also told back in Esther 2 that she had two names, as we saw. But we are told there, we are given the hint that she is a Jewess, definitely, meaning she is also Benjamite like Mordecai was. But she was a Persian outwardly, just like Mordecai seemed to be. She had a Persian last name but then when we go down to verse 10, we find here,

**Esther 2:10** Esther had not revealed her people or family, for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it.

**Esther 2:20** Esther had not yet revealed her family and her people, just as Mordecai had charged her, for Esther obeyed the command of Mordecai as when she was brought up by him.

We see here that even though she was a Jewess, she was known by everyone but Mordecai as a Persian. They did not know, they could not tell that she was a Jewess. She keeps her Jewishness hidden as a protection. She is a foreigner, living in a land, and remember the name of Mordecai, "the crushing oppression." If she stepped the wrong way, things could go very badly for her so she kept that part of her identity secret. And remember, I mentioned that the Hebrew word Esther is derived from the root, the triad

root S.T.R. which means "to hide or conceal." This is very important to the book. It is a major theme of the book that Esther's true identity is hidden. It is concealed.

This is a theme throughout the Bible actually, the idea that God conceals His people, He hides His people. Let us start in Psalm 17. We are going to read several verses here. We will begin in verse 8. You all know this one. You probably have heard it, if you do not have it memorized. David says here,

**Psalm 17:8** Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings.

He is in trouble. He needs help. And the best thing that could happen is that God would look on him very closely and hide him. He would be with him and then the wicked would not have any way to get at him. Let us jump over to chapter 27. Another psalm of David.

**Psalm 27:5** For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.

Here we see that in a time of trouble God hides His people in a place that is inaccessible. He hides them in His Tabernacle, which is interesting to think of it in terms of the church. He hides them within the church. Let us go to another one. Chapter 31, just a page over.

**Psalm 31:20** You shall hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the plots of man; You shall keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues.

So here He is hiding them from plots and from things that are being done out there, conspiracies against them. Go to chapter 83. This is Asaph writing.

**Psalm 83:3** They have taken crafty counsel against Your people, and consulted together against Your sheltered ones [Your hidden ones].

People are always trying to undermine the people of God. This later goes on and it talks about quite a big conspiracy against the people of Israel.

Next is chapter 91, a psalm of Moses.

**Psalms 91:1** He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Here we abide in the secret place of God and we are under His shadow, like under the shadow of His wings. He is there to protect us and keep us from harm.

Let us do one more in Isaiah 49, the first two verses. This is actually a Messianic prophecy about Him, about the Messiah.

**Isaiah 49:1-2** "Listen, O coastlands, to Me, and take heed, you peoples from afar! The Lord has called Me from the womb; from the matrix of My mother He has made mention of My name. And He has made My mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of His hand He has hidden Me, and made Me a polished shaft; in His quiver He has hidden Me."

So even Christ, when He was on this earth had to be concealed. He had to be hidden. And there were many times in His ministry that He had to hide, He had to get away, He had to leave the crowd and go somewhere else for a time to be hidden so that things would not get too bad against Him.

And so we are seeing then that Esther follows this theme and it is particularly her who has to be hidden. She is the hidden one. The virgin daughter has to be hidden. She has to conceal her identity until the time is right for her to act, until she needs to do what she needs to do to save her people, to do the righteous thing. And so until that time, even though she is right in the midst of the enemy, right within the very harem of the king, God hides her. That is, Mordecai hides her by telling her to keep her identity secret. Do not let anybody know you are a Jewess or the props are going to come out from under. You just find a way to do it because we know the way things work in this world, Satan knows who we are, and he will work with people to undermine us and to bring us down.

So hiddenness or concealment is a major theme of the book. And it is not just Esther who is hidden. More than that, Someone greater is hidden. And that is God Himself. This is one of those things that everybody brings up, that God is not in this book, that His name is not mentioned. Even when they pray, they do not say they pray to God or they are fasting to God or they are doing anything in relation to God. So it looks like God is not here. But it is not that He is hidden, truly concealed. It is just that He is invisible.

Let us go back to Deuteronomy 31 and chase this out just a little bit. Why was He invisible? Well, we are told in this prophecy in Deuteronomy 31 why. It had been foreseen by God, prophesied by God.

**Deuteronomy 31:16-19** And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you will rest with your fathers; and this people will rise and play the harlot with the gods of the foreigners of the land, where they go to be among them, and they will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be aroused against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured. And many evils and troubles shall befall them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?' And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, in that they have turned to other gods. Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel."

What had happened? The Israelites went into the land. They did exactly what God said after Joshua died and those that were with him. They began to forsake Him pretty quickly and it really never got all that much better. They had cycles of when they were partially following God at least. Then they would fall down and there would be a time of apostasy. And it was just a cycle that we find in the book of Judges in those first few chapters, it was just on and on and on and on until God said, "I've had enough." and Israel was conquered and sent into a foreign land. Then 150 years later, the people

of Judah were too. So what did God say, when that would happen, what He would do? He would hide His face from them because of their sins, because they had gone after foreign gods.

And so here we are in the book of Esther and it is post-exile. They are in a foreign land. They have been forsaken by God and He is still hidden. He is still hidden from the majority of the people. But we see Mordecai and Esther know that He is still there. He is not hidden from them even though they never mention Him. But we know that they know He is there because of the way they are, the way they act. You cannot come up with any other conclusion. They know that He is there with them, invisible, working behind the scenes. Xerxes and Haman, they cannot see Him maneuvering events to bring about the deliverance of the Jews, but Mordecai and Esther know that He is guiding and directing and backing them if they just continue to do what is right and good for their people. So they act in faith to do what they can do to bring about good out of evil. And that is what God wants us to do.

Let us go to I Peter the second chapter. Here is Peter the apostle years after being given his commission. He spent many, many years among the Jews in Babylon and in various places around the globe, wherever he was sent. And this is the kind of advice that he gives the people in the church. He says,

**I Peter 2:13-17** Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using your liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

**I Peter 3:10-12** [more advice] For "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

It is exactly what happened in the book of Esther. But this is advice to us living in a similar situation, living out of our homeland, because our homeland is heavenly, our true citizenship is in heaven. So we are living in a place of exile and we have to follow what Peter said in these two passages. That we have to seek peace and pursue it so that we can live in peace in this time and not get caught up into the ways of this world. So we are to do good, we are to seek peace, and keep our eyes on God because His eyes are on us and His ears are open to our prayers. So we have to be Esthers in this world.

Now, as we did for Mordecai, we have to think about how much or whether Esther grew in the course of the book. And the answer there is directly opposite to Mordecai's. Esther, of all the characters, grows the most. When she is introduced there in Esther 2, verse 8, we see her as an orphan, a beautiful orphan, but an orphan nonetheless. She is the lowest of the low in terms of power and she is controlled by everyone. First of all by Mordecai. Mordecai took her as his own daughter and he brought her up. But one thing is interesting about this particular chapter 2, is that just about every case where Esther is seen doing something, she is actually having something done to her. Let us go through a few of these.

**Esther 2:8** So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king's palace.

Notice that that is in the passive voice, that Esther was *taken*. It says in verse 9, she *obtained* favor. The maidservants *were provided* for her. We go down to verse 15.

**Esther 2:15-17** When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go to the king, she requested [this is one place where she actually does something] nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her. [All these things are given to her. She allows other people to take care of her.] So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, . . . The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in

his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

We see here that these things are being done to her, all the treatments that she is given and everything, all of this is done *to* her. She is not taking an active role in what is going on except that she has to do it because she is one of the candidates. So, we see that she is very passive to begin. We can say that she is a little more than a pawn, a piece on the board to be used by others. This often happens in situations like this where in high government, all the intrigue that goes on, people are just pawns on a chessboard to be moved about. And that is how she is at the beginning. She is just someone that other people use. But even before we get out of chapter 2, she is beginning to grow.

**Esther 2:19-22** When virgins were gathered together a second time, Mordecai sat within the king's gate. 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 by him. [So we see she has not progressed all that much further from at least verse 10 and maybe even from back in verse 7 when she was in his care.] In those days, while Mordecai sat within the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. So the matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.

So we begin to see a slight movement here. Now she is queen and she begins to act. She does something good here, she does something positive, and she does it actively. Mordecai comes to her and tells her a piece of information and she goes directly to the king. She now uses her position as queen to rat out these these two guys, Bigthan and Teresh, and they get sent to the gallows or actually they probably get impaled, which was the Persian method of execution at the time. So she is beginning to work. She informs the king in Mordecai's name. She is not completely functioning on her own quite yet. But she is taking an active part.

Now, let us go to chapter 4. Here we see the evolution of Esther. Now, despite being queen, we see her in this chapter still as a distressed daughter.

Just so we do not have to read quite so much, Mordecai finds out that things are going bad against him; that Haman wants his head. So he goes and he weeps in sackcloth and ashes out in the king's gate.

**Esther 4:4-17** So Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her, and the queen was deeply distressed. Then she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and take his sackcloth away from him, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs whom he had appointed to attend her, and she gave him a command concerning Mordecai, to learn what and why this was. So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square that was in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries to destroy the Jews.

He also gave him a copy of the written decree for their destruction, which was given at Shushan, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her, that he might command her to go to the king to make supplication to him and plead before him for her people. [So Mordecai is here still working things out. But we are already beginning to see that Esther is giving commands to these eunuchs and trying to figure out what is going on here.] So Hathach returned and told Esther the words of Mordecai. Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and gave him a command for Mordecai: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, who has not been called, he has but one law: put all to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter, that he may live. Yet I myself have not been called to go into the king these thirty days." So they told Mordecai Esther's words.

Then Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to this kingdom for such a time as this?" [One of the great lines in the whole book.] Then Esther told them to reply to

Mordecai: "Go [What is she doing now? She is in charge. Just in this one chapter we have seen her go from, as I said, a distressed daughter looking at her cousin out there saying, "Oh my! What's happened to him?" to commanding the eunuchs, to then taking charge of the situation.], gather all the Jews [She is not just saying this to Mordecai, but she is now commanding all the Jews.] who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!" [now listen to Mordecai's response] So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther commanded him.

Now things have turned upside down. She is the one commanding (of course she is queen), but you can see her growth through this whole chapter in terms of her authority and what she takes upon herself to do. And so she goes from pawn on the chessboard to being the most powerful piece in the game, just like a queen in chess is. And this is the kind of growth in faith and devotion to His way that God wants to see in us. He wants us to go from orphan who has been called and given a new family, to one who was able to make the decisions of a king or a queen.

Let us go on to Ahasuerus or Xerxes, which is the next major character. We know that he is king, he is emperor of great Persia which stretches from India to Egypt and knocks on the door of Greece. He is a powerful man, ruthless, dominant as any king at that time would be, a Gentile ruler. One word from him and it is "off with his head!" because he had that kind of power. His word was law.

**Esther 1:1** Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned from over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia)

So we assume in the very first verse of the book that this is a very powerful man. But the author of Esther *tweaks* our assumptions in the character of Ahasuerus. The Ahasuerus that he presents is a mockery of all of that we assume. He is almost a comic figure in the book, which is why a lot of people think that this may be a comedy in the classic sense.

Now, the Greek historian Herodotus tells us that the real Xerxes (Ahasuerus), was tall and handsome. He was a good looking guy. He was very powerful, but he was also quite prickly about his honor and would fly into a rage when he felt that his pride had been violated somehow. And we see this in this book.

**Esther 1:10-12** On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Sethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the palace of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command brought by his eunuchs; therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him.

Immediately we are given the same idea that Herodotus gave, that he was indeed a man of rages and that he would fly into them any time he felt that he was being crossed. Let us go to chapter 7. We see the same thing. This is at the banquet that Queen Esther did for Haman and the king. She said that her people are going to be destroyed and she is one of them.

**Esther 7:5-8** So King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, "Who is he [who is the person who is doing this?], and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?" And Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!" So Haman was terrified before the king and queen. Then the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went to the palace garden [probably to calm himself down]; but Haman stood before Queen Esther, pleading for his life, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king. When the king returned from the palace garden to the place of the banquet of wine, Haman had fallen across the couch where Esther was. [uh oh!] Then the king said, "Will he also assault the queen while I am in the house?" As the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

**Esther 7:10** So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's wrath subsided.

This is the kind of man we are talking about here. He flew into furious rages that were only appeased by extreme action against the offender. Like with Vashti, "You're out, woman!" That is what happened with her. But we need to see another side of him. Despite his outward power and his furious rages that he would get into, which was a mark of his power and his place, Ahasuerus was a very weak person. Now, the author shows this in two ways in the book. First, he introduces the king as a partier and not only as a guy who loved party, but who allowed alcohol to make him stupid. We can go to a few places.

**Proverbs 20:1** Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

**Proverbs 31:4-5** It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink; lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted.

**Ecclesiastes 10:17** Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness!

**Isaiah 5:22-23** [in the woes here] Woe to men mighty at drinking wine, woe to men valiant for mixing intoxicating drink, who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take justice from the righteous man.

So, anybody familiar with what God said in His Word about kings and drinking wine and how it affects your judgment, would know right away that this Xerxes had a problem—that he was not to be trusted, and that he was easily manipulated, actually, once he got a few drinks in him. Because, if we would go to Esther 1, we would find out that right after Vashti came in, of course he was intoxicated at that point, his advisers say, do this, do this, do this, and the king says okay, and Vashti's out.

Which is the second reason why he was weak. He was easily manipulated by his advisors, by anybody who was in a position right then, right now, to tell him what to do. He did not seem to know his own mind, he could not figure out what was best for him or for Persia or the person who was under judgment. So he always allowed his advisers to make suggestions to him and then he just rubber stamped them. "Okay, that's what we will do that. Haman, you want to kill a whole bunch of people, sure, go ahead. Here's my signet ring."

That is what he did. It was basically that he was a king who was susceptible to the power of suggestion. Whoever was his favorite at the moment could get him to do anything, pretty much, by giving him a drink.

There is a few of these in Esther, but Esther uses it herself. Esther figures this out about her husband and so she decides to do two drinking feasts. We went through that, they were wine feasts where she got him good and lathered up in terms of a little bit of liquor and he was amenable to her suggestions. "Hey, Xerxes, come on back tomorrow and we'll have another one of these." And so he says, "Ok, that sounds great. Bring Haman with you." "Okay, that's fine. Haman will come too." And so they come the next night and she does the same thing, liquors him up and says, "He's the man!" and she gets her way.

Everybody knows, who is in that inner circle, that that is what you have to do. And Ahasuerus is not strong enough to resist. So he is a weak character.