

Lessons from the book of Esther

Eugene Merrill speaks of how the history of the Old Testament is biographical. He notes that although it is related from God's viewpoint, not humanity's, ironically it is relatively absent of any story about God. That God is the principle actor - the protagonist - but that God always tells the story about himself through the lives and lips of his people. So one learns about God primarily as one observes God in events and persons. Merrill puts it like this: "The theocentricity of the Bible is ultimately observable in His anthropocentricity". We see, hear and learn about God as we observe Him working in and through the lives of His people.

I see this portrayed so beautifully in the account of Esther and Mordecai in the Bible. The main character is never named, and His speech is not recorded per se, but He is obviously present and very active. Esther is an important and pivotal figure in this book. As is Mordecai, but the way I see it, God is the principal protagonist.

1. God is merciful

To highlight the incredible mercy of God I see in this book, we will need to back up a couple hundred years.

Jer 25:1-13 (NIV) The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. [2] So Jeremiah the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: [3] For twenty-three years—from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day—the word of the LORD has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened. [4] And though the LORD has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. [5] They said, "Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the LORD gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever. [6] Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you." [7] "But you did not listen to me," declares the LORD, "and you have aroused my anger with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves." [8] Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened

to my words, [9] I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. [10] I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. [11] This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Consequences for continued wilful disobedience.

[12] "But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will make it desolate forever. [13] I will bring on that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations.

Jer 29:1-14 (NIV) This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [2] (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) [3] He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: [4] This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: [5] "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. [6] Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. [7] Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

God was letting them know that they weren't going to get out of the consequences. They were going to serve the full 70 years. But guess what, Even though they had disobeyed Him and were experiencing the consequences, God in His goodness still

desired them to be blessed and prosperous. Even in captivity in a foreign land. And He gives them a clue to their blessing and prosperity there.

[8] Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. [9] They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD. [10] This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. [11] For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. [12] Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. [13] You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. [14] I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

He reveals His heart: He has good plans for them, even though they have been consistently disobedient. The way I read it, it's like God simply cannot help seeking their blessing, even whilst He is fathering them and discipling them.

And that is what happened, King Cyrus released them after 70 years, but many Jews remained in Persia, under the rule of a number of consecutive kings from Cyrus, to Darius and Cambyses and finally to Xerxes... Which is where we find the account of Esther and Mordecai.

2. Gift makes way for calling

The spotlight of biblical history falls upon Esther and Mordecai at the juncture of Persian history where King Xerxes had recently come into power. Three years prior to be precise. By the time Xerxes was ruler of Persia, it had grown into 127 provinces from Ethiopia to India. He lived in the Persian capital of Susa. The stage was set for Esther and Mordecai:

- Xerxes held a 6-month banquet for military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces in the third year of his reign, "to display

his wealth, splendor and glory of his majesty” (Est. 1:4). This guy was rich. He was powerful. His kingdom was vast. And he knew it!

- At the end of that banquet, the King threw another lavish banquet, in his garden. This one 7 days long and for everyone in the citadel of Susa. The king ordered that there be no restrictions on drinking (v8). I am sure drunkenness was the order of the day. At least for those 7 days anyway. If not the 6 months prior.
- On the seventh day of the feast, when Xerxes “was in high spirits from wine” (v10) I read “drunk”, he ordered his wife, queen Vashti, to come and display her beauty for the people and nobles.
- She refused. In the culture of the day, it was considered proper for the king’s harem and women to be covered and separate (hidden) from the general populace.
- The king became furious.
- Herodotus, A prominent Greek Historian known as the “father of history” characterized Xerxes as man with layers of complexity. He could be cruel and arrogant. But he could also be childishly petulant and become tear-eyed with sentimentality. He was said to be a tall and handsome but is regarded by history as cruel, weak and tyrannical.
- He consulted with his wise men and was advised that he should make an example of Vashti, banishing her from the king’s presence forever.
- They also recommended another beauty be sought to replace her.
- In every province of the realm, beauties were rounded up and brought into the harem of the King.
- **Enter Mordecai and Esther.** Esther had been orphaned and then adopted and raised by her cousin Mordecai. She “had a lovely figure and was beautiful” (Est 2:10).
- When all the beautiful women in the realm were taken into the King’s Harem, she was one of them. Although Esther and Mordecai were Jews, Mordecai did not reveal their nationality and forbade Esther from doing so.
- They were to be given 12 months of beauty treatments.
- Esther found favour with Hegai the head Eunuch. The young virgins could take anything with them from the harem to the palace when they went to the king.

Esther did not rely on her own wisdom or desires, but asked the eunuch what to take and took only that.

- In fact, "...Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her" (2:16).
- When she went into the King's chamber, "she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins" (2:18). She was made queen.

As I reflect on this, I cannot help but see how the gift of her beauty was merely the door opener for God's ultimate purpose for her. We use the word gift. We could use the word talent. Her beauty got her to be where she needed to be. Her gift helped to position her for her calling. We see God's hand of favour upon her, as evidenced by continued favour with all she met, this added to her gift of beauty set her up. She was called to so much more than just being a beautiful Queen. In fact, her calling was not linked to her gift. God called her for His people. To speak out with no regard for her own person, for his people. Her being queen was a nice extra, but that was not God's primary focus.

Think of David. He was a skilled musician. His gift and talent of musicianship got him into the King's palace and positioned him. It was his gift. It wasn't his primary calling.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our callings and our giftings... If we just stepped back and asked God to reveal His heart to us, our callings would likely become clearer. Inevitably the calling will involve a burden on God's heart, and inevitably it will involve people. directly or indirectly. And the calling is never for us to make our names great or build our kingdoms. It is for His kingdom purposes. Always. Think of Moses at the burning bush. God revealed Himself and His heart to Moses. In the revealing of what was burdening His heart, God revealed Moses calling. Moses' calling was to the people that God wanted delivered. Moses was called for the people's deliverance. Not for his own self-aggrandizement.

3. Speak out! Do not remain silent.

Est 2:5-7 (NLT) At that time there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair. He was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. [6] His family had been among those who, with King Jehoiachin of Judah, had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. [7] This man had a very beautiful and lovely young cousin, Hadassah,

who was also called Esther. When her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her into his family and raised her as his own daughter.

- Esther was an orphan in a foreign land. Although it is likely that she had been born and grown up in captivity and this is all she knew.
- She had been adopted by her cousin Mordecai who was older than her.
- She was very beautiful.

Est 2:21 (NLT) One day as Mordecai was on duty at the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthana and Teresh—who were guards at the door of the king's private quarters—became angry at King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him.

Mordecai held some office about the court in Susa. But his “being on duty at the king’s gate” does not necessarily imply that he was in the humble condition of a porter or something similar; for, according to an institute of Cyrus, all state officers were required to wait in the outer courts till they were summoned into the presence chamber. He might, therefore, have been a person of some official dignity.

- Apart from regularly checking up on Esther, we read about Mordecai overhearing a plot to assassinate King Xerxes whilst he was sitting at the king’s gate (likely on duty). He reported it to Esther who told the King, and the 2 guilty men were executed.
- **Enter Haman.** He was honoured by the king, and all subjects were required to kneel and give honour to him. The King had ordered this. Mordecai would not do either because of his beliefs as Jew. And made it clear why he wouldn’t. He spoke out. His belief wasn’t privatized or hidden.
- This enraged Haman who then sought to destroy all Jews. He got the king to pass an edict which was a law that all Jews in the Persian empire were to be annihilated, killed, destroyed on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the following year, and all their goods plundered.
- Mordecai in fasting and prayer, sent a message to Esther to explain to her what was planned for their people and to beg her to go before the king on their behalf.
- Esther responded saying that if she approached the king in his inner court uninvited, she would be put to death unless he extended the golden scepter.

- Mordecai responded: *Est 4:13-14 (NIV) "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. [14] For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"*

We find ourselves at a point in history where we as believers we must speak out.

John Stuart Mill, who delivered an 1867 inaugural address at the University of St. Andrews clearly stated: "Let not any one pacify his conscience by the delusion that he can do no harm if he takes no part, and forms no opinion. Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing..."

I have heard another quote which summarises these thoughts: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing".

There are multiple bills in parliament, a plethora of dangerous ideologies and ideas in our educational institutions and curriculae, never mind the daily onslaught of unbiblical ideas and attempts to silence biblical Christianity in the workplace and social media, even in churches at times by our own governments. Now is not the time to go quiet. Now is not the time to look on and agree with the idea of privatisation of Christianity. Christianity and its applications to all of life cannot be contained within the 4 walls of a church. And secular society will never be a vacuum when it comes to worldviews and religions. There will always be a predominant ideology present,- even if it is atheistic. That is still a worldview and belief system! I am currently going through a book which is a clarion call to the church to wake up and speak out! The author draws lessons from the church in Germany in the 1930s before the terrible slaughter of millions of Jews. The church was noticeably silent. Church leaders were silent. They did not realise the fruit of the ideas and ideologies espoused, and horrors resulted.

Viktor Frankl: "If we present man with a concept of man which is not true, we may well corrupt him when we present him as an automation of reflexes, as a mind machine, as a bundle of instincts, as a pawn of drives and reactions, as a mere product of heredity and environment. Then we feed the nihilism to which modern man is in any case prone. I became acquainted with the last stage of corruption in the human heart in my second concentration camp in Auschwitz. The gas chambers of Auschwitz were the ultimate

consequence of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment, or as the Nazis liked to say, 'of blood and soil'. I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry of defence or some such portfolio or other in Berlin, but rather at the desks and lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers.”

What a strong warning that ideas and belief systems have major implications.

Do we think through what we believe and why and the practical out-workings ramifications thereof?

How we answer basic questions of life is critical:

- Who am I and whose am I?
- Where did I come from?
- Where am I going?
- Why am I here?
- How do I know what I know?
- What is of ultimate value?

I want to encourage you to make sure you know what you believe and why and what you don't believe and why and engage in dialogue around these things.

4. God orders the steps of those whose hearts are submitted to Him

- In the account of Esther, we are familiar with what happens. In summary, Esther fasts and prays with the nation for 3 days and nights and then goes into the king's inner court. He holds the sceptre out to her. Asks her what she wants. She invites him to a feast with Haman. (Remember, Haman got an edict passed to annihilate all the Jews in Persia).
- At that feast, he asks her what she wants, she invites him to a second feast with Haman the following night.
- Before the second feast, the king couldn't sleep (hello... who likely orchestrated that?) and called for the chronicles of his kingdom to be read. He is reminded of the plot to assassinate him that was revealed by Mordecai and decides to honour Mordecai.
- In the meantime, Xerxes is more enraged by Mordecai who will not bow to him, despite his inflated self-importance by being invited to dine with the queen and king twice in a

row, and makes a huge pole 50 cubits high (a cubit is just less than half a metre so it would have been a pole 24m high)... and decides to ask the king to impale Mordecai upon it the next day.

- As he walks into the Kings presence the next, the king asks him what should be done to honour a man the king desires to honour. Of course, Haman in his sense of self-importance assumes that the king would like to honour him. And describes many things the king should do and before Haman has a chance to ask the king for Mordecai's life, the King informs Haman, that it is Mordecai he wishes to honour.
- This can only be God's timing and providence. I still firmly believe that God does work things out for the good of those who love Him even as we have prayed it so.
- At the second banquet, the king once again asked Esther's request. *Est 7:3-4 (NIV)*
Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. [4] For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."
- The King asks who would do such a thing, and discovers it was Haman. The king exits into his garden, furious. Haman, scared for his life falls upon Esther to beg for her mercy, at which point the king enters only to find his wife beneath the desperate Haman. God's timing again. Well, Haman was impaled on the very pole he set up for Mordecai.

Pro 26:27 (NLT) If you set a trap for others, you will get caught in it yourself. If you roll a boulder down on others, it will crush you instead.

- The challenge was that once a law was enacted by the king, it could not be revoked. So, the king sent a decree out that all Jews everywhere on the day they were set to be annihilated, could defend themselves and kill their enemies and plunder their goods. Which they did. And the Jews in Persia were saved.
- Mordecai was promoted:
Est 10:1-3 (NLT) King Xerxes imposed a tribute throughout his empire, even to the distant coastlands. [2] His great achievements and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whom the king had promoted, are recorded in The Book of the History of the Kings of Media and Persia. [3] Mordecai the Jew became the prime minister, with authority next to that of King Xerxes himself. He was very

great among the Jews, who held him in high esteem, because he continued to work for the good of his people and to speak up for the welfare of all their descendants.

There are scriptures which speak of God ordering our steps; having works prepared for us to do. Some of my favourites are:

Psa 139:15-16 (NKJV) My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. [16] Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book, they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.

Eph 2:8-10 (NKJV) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, [9] not of works, lest anyone should boast. [10] For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Pro 3:5-6 (NKJV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; [6] In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

Psa 37:23-24 (NKJV) The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. [24] Though he falls, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds him with His hand.

At times we may not see how things will work out. At times we may be tempted to make our own plan, or jump off God's path for our lives onto our own path... But the reality is that we don't see 20/20. Only hindsight is that clear and we will never have that before the fact. So, either we choose God and His way, or we choose our way. I think we have seen that it's better to choose God's way. That He does lead and guide and have His way. He is merciful and kind and is aware of His people. His ways may not look like our ways. They aren't. We need to trust Him.

This alone can encourage us in our daily lives. There are times where we do not see God or hear His speech directly, and yet He is at work and active, we need only to avail ourselves to be used by Him, how HE desires.

It reminds me of a portion of the poem written by James Russell Lowell entitled This Present Crisis:

*Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.*

Studying this book I learn so much about God, even though I don't hear or see him specifically. I see His mercy and heart towards His people. I see this even in where Esther and Mordecai are located geographically and in the timeline of history. God positioned them for His purposes. They still had to obey and walk in humility before God. They did. God's purposes were fulfilled.

I see God in His goodness giving gifts for callings that are linked to His purposes. The giftings are not given for self-aggrandizement and the reason for their existence is not the one who has been given the gift to steward. I see an example of where the gift made way for the calling. The calling had to do with God's people and self-sacrificial surrender to God's will. It didn't require to gift to function.

I am reminded how we must speak out. That evil triumphing requires little more than righteous men and women remaining silent.

I am reminded of the power of trusting in God with all my heart. That God still orders the steps of those whose hearts are fully submitted to Him. I am reminded how powerful this type of person is in the purposes of God. God only requires one of these types of men and women to change to very course of history. Will you be one?