

“ESTHER: GOD IN THE SHADOWS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Esther 1:1-9

Introduction.

Allow me to tell you the story of King William IV who unexpectedly became monarch of the England in 1830 as written by a pastor from South Africa.

“With two older brothers William IV had not anticipated ascending to the throne. When they both died, William was shouldered with the burden of leadership he had hitherto evaded. Instead of the requisite stately life of a public figure, he had enjoyed a prodigal lifestyle of hedonistic indulgence and profligate spending.

He drank like a sailor, swore like a sailor, and fathered ten children out of wedlock. Staring down the barrel of life as a broke bachelor William set himself to scouring the landscape of Europe for a princess who would deign to marry a fifty-something, lecherous, alcoholic philanderer who had ten illegitimate children. Unsurprisingly, the pickings were slim.

His reputation of debauchery was so notorious that despite being the king, he couldn't find a woman of royal blood willing to debase her own reputation by marrying him. Several proposals—issued in rapid succession—were declined.

However, as providence would have it, there was one unmarried German princess, who was twenty-seven years his junior, who was courageous enough to try her hand at reforming the future king, for the sake of the British nation.

Her name was Adelaide. The couple met once, a week before the wedding. William was surprised at how pretty and friendly she was. Unlike her irreligious fiancé, Adelaide was known widely for being deeply devout in her faith, chaste, kind, sensible with money, and extremely dignified in her demeanor.

After the wedding, Adelaide soon endeared herself to her subjects and become one of the most beloved and respected queens in British history. She was loved for her kindness to the poor, her modesty, and her genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Not only was Adelaide able to put up with William, but slowly people began to notice her influence on him.

The queen effectively curbed her husband's spending, decreased his drinking, and even stopped his swearing. Against all odds, the couple enjoyed a happy marriage.

Sadly, the queen suffered multiple miscarriages and never produced an heir for the throne. But her grace, dignity, and faith in God's providence shone through that series of dark trials. Adelaide's legacy is marked by how liberally her name was used in memoriam: the capital of South Australia is named for her, as well as countless roads, parks, rivers, towns, and forts in all corners of the commonwealth.

But this courageous queen was not the first to marry a licentious man, only to model character and exert godly influence over the king for the sake of her nation.

Queen Esther was noticed for her supermodel attractiveness, but she was remembered as a model of courage and character who saved a nation" (<http://thecripplegate.com/a-model-of-courage-the-pluck-of-esther/> A Model of Courage: The Pluck of Esther, by Clint Archer).

Historical setting.

We are thrust once again into a world very different from ours, a world of kings and queens, nobles and governors, a world of great riches and lavish displays of wealth that make even Mr. Trump's wealth pale by comparison.

This is a world of vast empires, great armies, political intrigue, swift changes of fortune.

Who doesn't love a good story? Esther is a true story, a well told story, filled with twist and turns, with good and evil, with good guys and bad guys.

It is to this day one of the favorite stories to Jews and is read every year in Jewish homes during the feast of Purim (March).

It's a story that's both old and relevant, ancient and still true. It is about a young girl, but more to the point it is about a great God.

Much is made of the fact that the word God never occurs in this book of the Bible and it's never quoted in the NT. Martin Luther felt Esther should not be in the Bible.

Esther, along with the book of Daniel, takes place completely outside of the Promised Land, and doesn't even make any reference to the Promised Land or Jerusalem or the temple.

There is no mention of religion or religious things other than fasting. There are no visions or dreams, no miracles or supernatural rescues. No signs and wonders, no charismatic prophets, no voices from heaven or angelic visits. No "thus saith the Lord."

This is a strange and wonderful book, so different from our world in many ways and yet there are ways Esther is more like ours than many of the other books of the Bible.

God's people lived as foreigners in a pagan culture that was increasingly hostile to the people of God. The culture was filled with seductions and temptations, living for pleasure. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may die.

We live in a foreign culture that doesn't believe what we believe and seeks satisfaction and pleasure in temporal things. We follow a different king; our loyalties and allegiances lie elsewhere.

Esther takes place after Daniel, after the fall of Babylon and the rise of Persia. The first couple of waves of Jews have returned from exile back to Jerusalem where there are in the midst of rebuilding Jerusalem and the walls and the temple. Those events are written of in Ezra and Nehemiah.

But many Jews also stayed in Persia. Perhaps life and business had gone well, they were established, rooted. Just as today there are many Jews who have returned to Israel and many have stayed in the culture where they live and work. They face the constant temptations of assimilation or suffering.

Esther begins with a historically verifiable reference to King Ahasuerus (ay-Has-eeoo-HER-uhs), also known in history as King Xerxes I of Persia, reigning after Darius I, from 485-465 BC.

His history was foretold to Daniel in his vision in Daniel 11.

After Cyrus, there would be three more Persian kings and then a fourth one, far richer and more powerful, will arise and he will take on Greece. This fourth king is known to be Xerxes I (486-465 BC), the husband of Esther.

Persia reached the pinnacle of greatness under him, becoming the largest empire ever up to that time in history, stretching from India to north Africa.

Christological Significance.

Esther as the redeemer of her people.

There is a pattern in Esther of God's deliverance of which Christ is the ultimate embodiment.

A royal figure personally takes up the plight of her people, faces a life-threatening situation on their behalf and because of her faithfulness saves her people. The result is victory and joy as evil and death are triumphed over. Esther will end with a great feast of the Jews.

In the same way, Jesus is a royal figure, the King of kings, who comes to the aid of His sinful and fallen people, puts His life on the line and even gives up His life on our behalf, and because of His victory gains our salvation and our joy. He destroys the enemy and defeats evil and death that is meant for us. And in the end, there is a great feast, the Lord's Supper here on earth, and the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven.

Furthermore, as the Jews faced death because of one man (Haman) so do we (Adam). The Jews were saved by the faithfulness of one person (Esther) so are we (Jesus) (see Romans 5:12-19).

What a picture of God's grace set on display in the OT, giving hope for an even greater display yet to be revealed. Esther points us to the person and work of Jesus.

This theme of redemption through the great reversal of destiny is not just the theme of Esther, it is the theme of the Bible. It's first announced in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of woman would crush the seed of the serpent.

The cross of Jesus stands at the center of history as the pinnacle and pivot point on which all of history turns. The resurrection is the ultimate reversal (peripety). In the face of certain and deserved death, we receive life.

As He did in Esther, God continues every day to work through seemingly insignificant human events to bring redemption to individuals.

How did God bring redemption to you? How did God providential guide and control and influence events and circumstances and time and place and family of origin and birth? What reversals did He bring about in your ancestry or in your journey? God's will is worked out in the day by day unfolding of normal, routine, ordinary events.

Contemporary Relevance. Practical Application.

Along with some of the unique features already mentioned, Esther is also unique in that we don't know what God is doing ahead of time, but only in hindsight. So, this story is closer to our story. We don't usually know what God is doing ahead of time or even in the moment, but can look back and see His hand.

In some ways, Esther is the most true to our lives of any story in the Bible precisely because God seems absent. He is not present in prophets, visions, temples, holy cities. Susa is a very pagan corner of the world

Many people find Esther the closest book to their own experience. Most of us have never experienced a dramatic miracle or vision. No fiery furnaces or lion's dens or belly of a

whale. Most of our lives seem pretty ordinary and God seems mostly silent or absent. We go on about our daily lives as if God were not really involved.

The world seems to run along according to the laws of nature and science and politics. We live in a world where everything is pretty much explained apart from God.

Even Christians end up living like functional or practical atheists or at least deists. God is up there somewhere, but pretty much keeps to Himself.

Esther is a gift to us to remind us that even when God seems most silent and most absent, He is present and at work. Esther reminds us to trust God even when, especially when He is not seen.

This is a practical picture of what the providence of God looks like in real life. The *providence of God* refers to the invisible and unknown ways He governs and controls all of creation, all the actions and circumstances of everything, all the normal and ordinary events of human life, and doing so without the intervention of the miraculous or supernatural.

Again, as we have often seen, there is presented here a contrast between two conflicting world views, two competing ideas of how the world works, represented in the lives of two major characters, Mordecai and Haman.

We are humbled to be reminded again of the place of divine providence and sovereignty. God is ruling and over ruling, guiding every *coincidence*. God is the God of all coincidences.

This book encourages all of us to look for and watch for evidence of God's work and guiding in our lives and in our family and church. Grace sightings.

This is what makes Esther so true to life, we think we are in control when we really aren't.

Esther had no vision, no prophetic word, no angelic visitor, no word from God to guide her, she had to make decisions and take risks, just like us. We all face difficult ethical and spiritual questions in a pagan world hostile to our faith convictions. We see only dimly, our motives at best are mixed.

Phama and I saw the movie *Dunkirk* Thursday night. What a stunning turn of events against overwhelming odds. An extraordinary deliverance by God. The British called the evacuation the "Miracle of Dunkirk." The Germans stopped advancing for three days, the seas were calm, there was a high mist that hindered the German bombers. The hidden hand of God.

Do we see God's hand in history?

God is not named in Esther but we see Him through all the coincidences. God who is never named or spoke of, is never absent.

Christ shows us how when God seems most absent, it is then that He is most present. It is true in Esther, it is true on the cross and it is true in our lives today.

Jesus is the personal embodiment of God and the revelation of God's hidden presence in our world and in our lives. Present now in us and the church by His Holy Spirit.

Just as in Esther they believed God's presence by faith, so we perceive God present by faith with the testimony of the past as our confidence.

Jesus said, "Surely I am with you even to the end of the age" and then He left. Even when He is conspicuously absent, He is omnipotently present.

Esther will challenge our faith and strengthen our faith.

Is God guiding history? Is God guiding our story? Esther will ask us to consider every aspect of our daily lives and ask, is God present or absent, is God involved or does He not care?

What would life be like if God was not in control, if God was not influencing things for His glory and for our good?

Does God seem absent from your life, does He seem silent to your prayers?
How do you make sense of God's perceived absence?

Esther will ask us to reflect on whether or not we see ourselves as God's covenant children, is God our God and are we His children? Esther will help us to see God in the shadows and will call us to live faithfully by faith and not by sight.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.