

CHAPTER 20, THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S PROVIDENCE INCLUDES BOTH JUSTICE AND LOVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY King Xerxes of Persia had reason to party. His vast empire was powerful and prosperous. His queen was lovely. His palace was ideal for a celebration befitting such a monarch. His merrymaking continued for six months when Xerxes summoned Queen Vashti so he could put her on display for the inebriated revelers. She refused. Kings do not like to be refused. With his advisers' support, he stripped Vashti of her crown and banished her from his presence.

Kings also do not like to be queenless. The king commissioned a kingdom-wide beauty pageant and young women from every province were whisked into the king's harem for a year-long visit at the royal spa. One such woman was a Jewish girl named Esther who had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Esther won everyone's heart, including the king's. He made her queen but did not know she was a Jew. Soon after, Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He passed the news to Esther; the king was rescued and the conspirators hanged. Xerxes' scribe recorded Mordecai's service in the annals of the king.

Haman was King Xerxes' right-hand man. Haman reveled in his high standing and enjoyed having all the royal officials kneel at his feet. Mordecai refused to pay such homage. Haman was enraged. To exact his revenge, Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to exterminate Mordecai and his people, the entire Jewish population of Persia. He cast a lot, or pur, and chose a single day of unfettered violence against the Jews.

Mordecai sent word to Esther asking her to beg the king for mercy. Queen Esther feared for her life because no one could legally go before the king without prior permission. Mordecai's immortal words persuaded her: "*Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?*" Her courageous response was, "*If I perish, I perish.*"

She and the Jews in Susa fasted, and Esther approached the king. Xerxes welcomed her and offered to grant her heart's desire. She invited the king and Haman to a private banquet. Haman was delighted. Esther invited them both to another fancy but ultimately fatal feast. Haman was elated to be the exclusive royal guest but still enraged over Mordecai's insolence. With all the satisfaction of a Cheshire cat, he erected a pole on which Mordecai could be impaled.

Kings with full stomachs must not sleep well, so Xerxes spent the midnight hours reading the royal records. He discovered the account of Mordecai's report that saved his own life and wondered how he might honor such a man. The king asked Haman for advice on how he might honor one of his favorites. Assuming that *he* was the king's favored, Haman dreamed up an elaborate ceremony. Within moments, a mortified Haman was giving his nemesis the king's robes, leading him through the streets and singing his praises. Haman later enjoyed the queen's second banquet until Esther exposed his plot to destroy her people. The king left the room in a fury only to return and discover Haman appearing to assault his queen. He ordered that Haman be impaled on the very pole intended for Mordecai.

The king could not repeal his original edict declaring the destruction of the Jews. But he enabled Mordecai to issue a counter-edict providing for the Jews to take up their own defense. The day planned for destruction became a day of deliverance. Though the lot was cast, God remains the author of the story. Even in exile, God protected His people, and in Esther, we see God's heart for saving us all.

The book of Esther teaches us of the dangers of anti-Semitism, the Divine providential protection of the nation of Israel and the consequences to those who attack the chosen people of God. There is something more profound than a normal racism against a people group when it comes to the Jews.

I. The History of Anti-Semitism

- A. From the Garden, man has been in need of a Savior. The separation caused by the sin of Adam would require a perfect, sinless man to restore the relationship between God and mankind. No sinful man could possibly bridge that gap. Man had listened to the creature (the serpent) rather than the Creator. Therefore God promised that one day a seed from the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). Satan has been attempting to defeat God and His redemptive purpose ever since by eliminating the line of the coming Redeemer.
1. *And another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.*
–Revelation 12:3-5
 2. Although this passage is full of imagery and its full interpretation is beyond the scope of this lesson, the dragon is clearly identified as Satan (Revelation 12:9). The child can be none other than Jesus who was caught up to the throne of God and is the King of Kings who is to rule all nations (Revelation 19:15-16).
 3. It is an epic battle fought through the ages through Satan's various henchmen.
- B. Moses' time (1526 B.C.): Pharaoh tried to destroy the Hebrews by killing all the male babies (Exodus 1:16). The Israelites celebrate this miraculous salvation with the Feast of Passover.
- C. Esther's time (474 B.C.): Evil Haman deceived King Xerxes into signing a genocide order to be carried out throughout every one of the king's 128 provinces to eradicate the Jews. Esther's courage saved her people and preserved the line of Messiah. The Israelites celebrate this miraculous salvation with the Feast of Purim.
- D. Jesus' time (3-4 B.C.): King Herod tried unsuccessfully to use genocidal means to eradicate the prophesied King of the Jews. He ordered all Hebrew baby boys killed. The gospel writer Matthew chronicles this atrocity (Matthew 2:13-18).
- E. Since Christ, there has been cruel persecution of the Jews from those professing to be Christians. Early Church leaders' writings and sermons fueled anti-Semitism.
1. These include the sermons of John Chrysostom who said that the Jews were "inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil" who "know only one thing, to satisfy their gullets, get drunk, kill and maim one another."¹
 2. The Crusades that were initiated in 1096 A.D. when Christians in Europe decided to liberate the Holy Land from Muslims but perpetrated heinous acts of anti-Semitic hate. These so-called Christians forced Jews along the way to either be baptized or face death. Then when they made it to Jerusalem they burned Jews alive in the great synagogue as they sang, "Christ, We Adore Thee."

¹ Michael Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000)

3. In 1492, Spain expelled all Jews. (Black Moors)
 4. The beloved Martin Luther whose reformations changed the course of Christendom cannot be given a free pass for his anti-Semitic writings. He recommended that synagogues be burned, Jewish homes be destroyed, and their rabbis forbidden to teach, among other things. Yet some of Luther's contemporary Christian colleagues repudiated them as inconsistent with the spirit of Christ and the New Testament.
- F. And of course, the very worst anti-Semitism was the systematic extermination by Hitler's Holocaust.

It must be noted here that true Christians around the world agonize over the despicable atrocities of the Holocaust and that believers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Corrie ten Boom stood for Christ as they risked and often lost their lives for the sake of the Jews in Europe.

II. The Hatred of All God's People

- A. In the Upper Room on the night that Jesus was betrayed, He warned His disciples (all Jewish, but it extends to all His then-future followers) that they/we would be hated. *If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.* (John 15:18)
1. Why? Because God's people are not of this world (John 15:19-23).
 2. Because haters do not know the Father who sent Christ.
 3. Yet His warning was borne out of love and seasoned with hope.
These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.
-John 16:33
- B. New Testament believers experienced persecution in nearly every city.
1. After the stoning of Steven, the persecution of believers in Jerusalem drove them out of the city and into various parts of the region. Contrary to its intention, this actually aided the spread of the gospel! As in Esther, God's providential hand will ensure His redemptive plan! *And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him (Steven) to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*
-Acts 8:1
 2. The church in Philippi experienced opposition.
In no way be alarmed by your opponents—which is a sign of destruction for the, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.
-Philippians 1:28-30
 3. The church in Thessalonica experienced trouble. *You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the world in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*
-1 Thessalonians 1:6-7
 4. Writing to the Jewish believers scattered beyond Judah, James warned of trials and tribulations.
Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.
-James 1:2-3

III. The Hope of the Persecuted

Our precious God did not leave us to suffer without hope. Rather He provided instructions and exhortations to help His followers endure the troubles of this world. The Upper Story perspective helps us to cope with the Lower Story trials.

A. The Bible leaves no room for racism of any kind.

B. Because we share a common ancestor, there is no room for racism.

He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.

–Acts 17:26a

C. In Christ, we enjoy equality of personhood regardless of our earthly experience.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

–Galatians 3:28

D. God's plan for the church is Jews and Gentiles in one body (Ephesians 2:11-22, 3:6).

E. Believers who exhibit racist behaviors, attitudes and speech need to be lovingly corrected.

1. Paul encouraged the church in Rome. The tribulations that Paul experienced resulted in the refinement of his Christlike character because the Holy Spirit works in us.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

–Romans 5:3-5

2. The hope of the persecuted can be found only in the eternal security of God.

3. Mordecai alluded to a confidence in God's deliverance with or without Esther's participation.

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.

–p. 282 The Story, Esther 4:14

F. The book of Esther teaches us that God can be trusted for deliverance even though He does not promise us that He will.

G. The book of Esther teaches us that anti-Semitism is intolerable to God.

Questions

- Analyze the positives and negatives of King Xerxes as a leader.**
- The book of Esther has been called the “godless book” because God’s name is never mentioned. Prayer, the Law, sacrifices, and temple worship are also conspicuously absent. Where can you find God’s supernatural blessings in the story anyway?**
- Look up Isaiah 48:20 and Jeremiah 29:10, 50:8, 51:6. What do these verses say about the Jews like Mordecai and Esther who stayed behind? What do you learn about God through His providential care of the Jews outside of the Promised Land?**

4. The book of Esther is full of irony, such as Queen Vashti who would not come before the king when requested and Queen Esther who came before the king when not requested. What other examples of irony can you find in this chapter?
5. What life lessons does Haman teach us about pride, self-centeredness, and hatred?
6. Review the correspondence between Mordecai and Esther concerning an appeal to the king (p. 281-282). What is the relationship between God's providence and our responsibility?
7. What risk was Queen Esther taking by approaching the king and how did she prepare for it (p. 282-283)? What factors do you suppose could account for Esther finding favor in the eyes of the king?
8. How does Esther story fit into the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)? How does it fit with God's Story of redemption?