

Sermon Series – Esther: times like these

#2 When a foe is a friend – Esther 2:5 - 3:15

(Please read chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Esther before reading on)



Ancestry tells so much



“Did you ever notice” said Jerry Seinfeld, comedian, “a lot of butlers are named Jeeves? I think when you name a baby Jeeves; you've pretty much mapped out that child’s future.”

Funny as that may sound, it’s truer to say that a person’s family history greatly impacts their course in life – who they are and what they become.

Ancestry searches are a growing industry today... but what if *your* ancestry search revealed something profoundly disturbing and unchangeable about your family line?



My own ancestry on both sides is 3rd generation settlers from England¹. In my extended family, I have one who’s lineage disappears from behind the Berlin wall, and another who has aboriginal heritage. Each storyline impacts the shape of our lives in very different ways.

- What if *you* found that you come from a long line of persecuted people?
- What if *your* ancestors were perpetrators of crimes over centuries?

How might this affect *your* sense of identity and purpose today?

The Book of Esther and Ancestry

Bring these thoughts with you into the study of God’s Word today. We’ll look at the ancestry of three characters in The Book of Esther to unlock it’s meaning and encouragement.

Mordecai

Let’s begin with Mordecai. Usually ancient stories introduce a character as a wise person or of a certain title or role. Yet in Esther chapter 2 we read...

¹ More recently I’ve considered the debt owed because my forebears were part of the displacement of aboriginal people in Australia long ago, even if only indirectly. Both they, and now I, have benefited immensely from the mistreatment of others.

⁵ 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...

He did have a job, working for the King of Persia (3:2). He lived in the citadel or fortress, in this 5th century BC city of Susa. But it's his ancestry, his friends and enemies that the writer wants us to note. This sets up the unfolding drama...

2 ²¹ One day as Mordecai was on duty at the king's gate, two of the king's... guards at the door of the king's private quarters became angry at King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. ²² But Mordecai heard about the plot and gave the information to Queen Esther. She then told the king about it and gave Mordecai credit for the report.

3 ⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down or show him respect, he was filled with rage.

- We note that Mordecai is a Jewish man, one who remained as a resident and employee in the Persian nation. Many others chose to leave this land when King Cyrus allowed exiled Jews to return to Palestine and rebuild Judaism after 70 years away from the Holy Land.²
- We are drawn to ask, "Why is Mordecai, a Jew, acting like a friend to the king of a foreign superpower?", especially a king who is notoriously immoral, egotistical, and capricious. And, "Why does he then act as an enemy toward Haman, the king's high official?"
- Lastly, we should note that Mordecai was born of the family line of King Saul, the first King over the Israelites (son of Kish).

We'll return to these factors after looking at two other characters.

Esther

Let's briefly look at Esther.³ She is a young woman blessed with physical, outward beauty (2:7), but also an impressive manner and presence (2:8). It's important to note that she is a victim of gross objectification, commodification,

² 2 Chron. 36:22,23 - See Haggai and Zechariah for that era, and Ezra and Nehemiah for accounts in Palestine after Esther's time

³ We will study her in more depth in the next sermon of the series

and subjugation by men of power. She is, by chance it appears to the reader, chosen to be Xerxes new queen (2:17). Later we will learn of her courage and resourcefulness too. For now, the writer wants us to note *her* ancestry as a key to the story. In Esther 2 we read...

⁷ [Mordecai] 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...

¹⁰ Esther had not told anyone of her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had directed her not to do so... ¹⁵ Esther was the daughter of Abihail, who was Mordecai's uncle.

- Esther too is Jewish. She too chose to remain in Persia, a long way from Jerusalem and the land of God's promises and the symbol of God's presence (the temple).
- She conceals her family background from public knowledge on her cousin's advice, only using her Persian name (2:10).⁴
- She is also Mordecai's cousin, of the same family lineage.

Let's hold on to these notes and return to them after studying one more character.

We all know that good stories have three main characters, one of which turns on the other two at some point. Enter Haman...



Haman

He completes the ancestry puzzle, giving us the key to why The Book of Esther is in our Bibles and what encouragement it gives. We read in chapter 3...

³ Some time later King Xerxes promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite over all the other nobles, making him the most powerful official in the empire.

In the normal course of events, someone who averted an assassination attempt (Mordecai) might be rewarded⁵, but to the shock of the reader, Haman, a man who is driven, ruthless, conniving, bloodthirsty, bigoted,

⁴ which no doubt why ay she goes by her Persian name in public (2:7)

⁵ The record of Mordecai's actions (2:22,23) becomes important later in the drama (6:1-3)

egotistical and even genocidal, is “elevated” to 2IC in the kingdom. What’s the deal? The devil is in the detail. The writer tells us...

- Haman is an Agagite
- His family background places him in the line Amalek’s
- This aligns Haman with the long-standing arch-enemy of Israel

Amalekites

If you were to stare evil in the eye, what do you think it would look like? What would be its character traits?

- Dante’s devil?
- Emperor Palpatine?



For the ancient Israelites, it was the face of Amalek.⁶

Amalek and his descendants relentlessly pursued Israel to rid the world of them and were their archenemies from the time of Moses to the time of Hezekiah.⁷ Some would say it was in their blood. Amalek traces his ancestry traces back to Esau, who



himself had a pathological death-wish for his brother with the blessing.⁸ “Amalekite” is still a synonym for Satan (adversary of God and God’s people) among some Jewish people today.

With this ancestry in mind, now we can make more sense of Haman’s dramatic reaction to Mordecai. We read in Esther 3:6...

⁶ [Haman] had learned of Mordecai’s nationality, so he decided it was not enough to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Instead, he looked for a way to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire empire of Xerxes.

- Mordecai’s ancestor, King Saul of Israel, had forfeited his kingship by failing to eliminate the Amalekite King Agag⁹ long ago.

⁶ Exod 17:8 – Amalek first attacked the Israelites just as they were free from slavery in Egypt

⁷ A span of approximately 1000 years

⁸ See Esau and Jacob’s story in Genesis 25 - 36

⁹ 1 Sam. 15:9

- Haman, the descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites, represents a continuing clear and present threat to God's chosen people.

Haman's genocidal intent isn't merely borne of racial tensions.¹⁰ Instead, we are invited to zoom out from this Susa soap opera and consider the Bible's bigger salvation story. God promised to make Abram's offspring and those with faith like his, a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3; Romans 4; Galatians 3:8-14). Amalek and his descendants represent extreme opposition towards God's plan to renew and restore the world from sin and strife.

The reader is drawn to ask, "Is God still with His people?", "Will God's blessing continue, far from Jerusalem, under foreign rule, in dire circumstances?", "Will God fulfil the promise to Abram?" "Will God keep the promise to restore the Jews?".¹¹

The Future in God's hands

Therefore, although the name of God appears nowhere in the Book of Esther, Peter Adam suggests in his commentary, that like a good crime scene investigator might say, "God's fingerprints are all over it!"

Take the casting of lots (the *Purim*) in Esther 3:7 for example...



⁷ So in the month of April, during the twelfth year of King Xerxes' reign, lots were cast in Haman's presence (the lots were called *purim*)¹² to determine the best day and month to take action. And the day selected was March 7, nearly a year later.

The discerning reader sees that even instruments of fate (a *pur* was an ancient type of dice) seem subject to God's sovereignty in the story:

¹⁰ Nor should we think that God prefers Israel as a race over other nationalities - Abram had no merit of his own to warrant being "chosen" (Gen. 12:1), it was an act of grace. Peter declares in Acts 10:34 that God is "no respecter of persons"

¹¹ Jeremiah 29:10-14

¹² The name of the ceremony Jews keep to remember these events

- The dice were cast in the month of Nisan, a time all Jews know is time for Passover when one thinks of the God freed Israel from 400 years of slavery in Egypt - to whom they owe their very lives.¹³
- Secondly, the date the *purim* “determined” for Haman’s heinous act of genocide to take place fell almost a whole year away.¹⁴ This bought time for Mordecai to be proved a friend, not a foe, to the King.

It seems then, that God is in charge of the future of his people and promise, even in His apparent absence.

What’s in it for us?

I know that during this pandemic you might have asked God to give your life a better storyline. When times are tough, when the wicked prosper, or when the future looks dim, it’s easy to think:

- i. God is absent, or
- ii. God is in every circumstance, so depending on what happens next, I’ll know if God’s for me or against me.

Both these beliefs lead to great anxiety in life!

Instead, the story of Esther draws our eyes above our own story to consider God’s greater salvation storyline.

We should look beyond our circumstances and see through the lens of the promises of Scripture what God might be doing in these days. Galatians chapter 3 tells us...

⁸ ... the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would make the nations right in his sight because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, “All nations will be blessed through you.”⁹ So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith...¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the nations with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.”

¹³ Exod. 12:17; Deut. 4:37

¹⁴ Haman thought he was putting the event in the hands of the fates, or gods of his nation

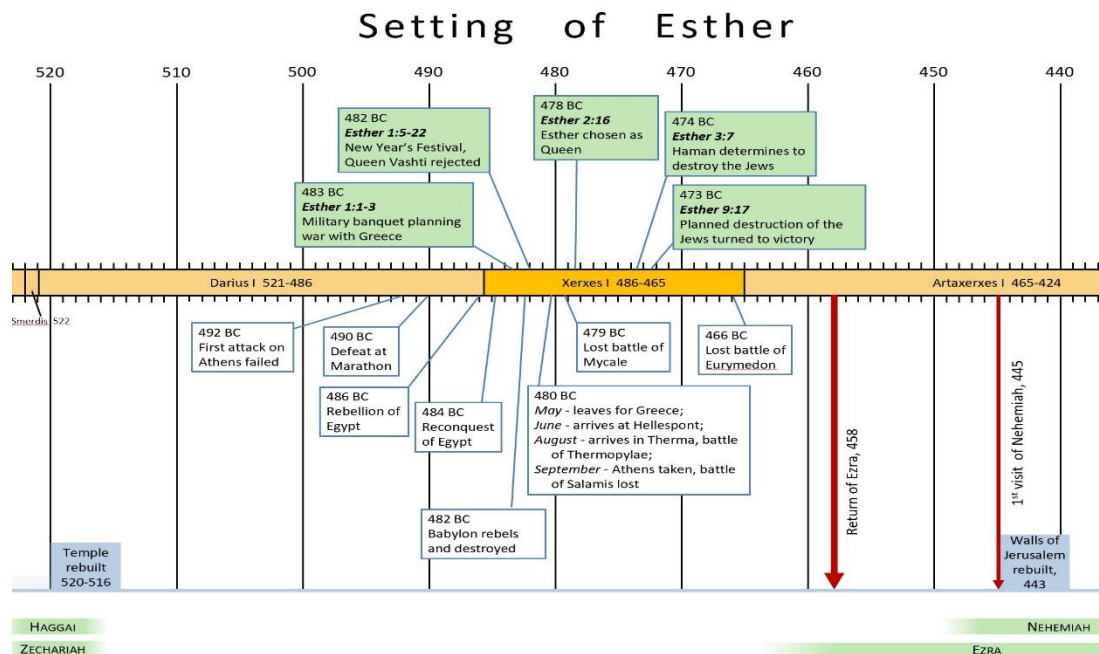
The Apostle reminds us that Jesus Christ fulfilled the great promise of old to Abram. God’s Spirit is now writing people like you and me into God’s greater salvation storyline.

When God seems absent in dire circumstances, consider how your life is part of that salvation storyline. Like Mordecai, who sought the welfare of the city¹⁵, and sought the welfare of Esther, ask God to use your life to prosper others; to be a blessing to others, and seek the strength of God’s Spirit.

When *you* pray for your future...

- be sure to remember how God redeems your past through Christ,
- give thanks that you are part of *God’s* family through faith in Jesus, and
- ask God to use your storyline to serve the welfare of others.

Steve Webster, St Michael’s North Carlton, Sept. 2020



¹⁵ A command God had given the Jewish exiles (Jer. 29:10-11)