

Sermon Series – Esther: times like these

#4 When the victory belongs to God

Esther ch 6

(Please get familiar with the whole story of Esther before reading on)



Intro – Never meet your heroes

They say you should never meet your heroes.

That's the premise of the Prime Video series called *The Boys*. In our time superhero stories are big business, but the key characters in *The Boys*, though endowed with powers, are flawed, morally compromised, and downright unlikeable.



You should never meet your heroes – you may be greatly disappointed.

I remember meeting an Australian Olympic superstar who I'd admired since I was young. She was the motivational speaker at a Carlton Football Club team meeting. I was excited to actually meet a hero of mine.



On arrival, she handed each of the Carlton players a wooden spoon (our team was bottom of the "ladder"). Her speech left every player and coach demoralized. She was my hero no more.



They say you should never meet your heroes.

1. Esther – the anti-hero?

If you grew up going Sunday School in my generation, Esther may have been introduced to you as a biblical hero. I did warn you that I would drop a bombshell in sermon # 4 - This is it: Esther is not all she's cracked up to be!

- Firstly, consider the moral ambiguity of both Esther and Mordecai. In this book we read of drunkenness, anger, extreme violence, sex-slavery, deceit, murder – some of which Esther and Mordecai readily take part in.
- Secondly, any Hebrew reader would be dismayed that Mordecai and Esther violate several of the commands of Moses. For instance,

- Jewish people were not supposed to intermarry with people of other nations – Esther did.
- They were not supposed to partake of “impure” foods – Esther even hosts feasts of this kind! And we could say more.

Any Hebrew reader should know this is not a morality tale. The Book of Esther doesn't endorse, condone, nor promote Esther's actions. She's not a hero.

So we are back to an earlier question in this series: What message *does* the Book of Esther intend to give? Why is God not explicitly mentioned? Should this book be in the Bible at all?¹

Before you go and rip certain pages out of your Bible and use them for your latest lockdown craft project, let's step back and take a look at the story as a whole. Let's see if we can't nut out these big questions once and for all.

2. The Pivot

The key is in the author's design. When Agatha Christie, the great crime writer, penned her novel *The Pale Horse* she wrote the foreword in the voice of her lead character, Mark Easterbrook. A writer himself, Easterbrook warns the reader at the outset, saying: “One cannot ‘Begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop.’ For where is the beginning?... At what point in history does one particular portion of history begin?” he says.

Many authors use literary devices of various kinds in their storytelling. And the unknown author of The Book of Esther is no exception.

Note, for example, what happens right in the middle of the “story” of Esther. It's the moment around which the whole story pivots.

From our readings in church today, from verse 1 of Esther chapter 6:

That night the king had trouble sleeping, so he ordered an attendant to bring the book of the chronicles of his reign so it could be read to him. 2 In those records he discovered an account of how Mordecai had exposed the plot of [of those] who guarded the door to the king's private quarters. They had plotted to assassinate King Xerxes.

¹ Do you know, for instance, that for the first 7 centuries of the Church not one commentary was written on The Book of Esther. Calvin never preached a sermon from Esther. Luther questioned its inclusion altogether. Think for a moment, have you ever heard this book preached in church?

Now I don't about you when I can't sleep (especially during lockdown) I don't ask my wife to wake up and read me my own life story! Although it would surely be a sedative!!

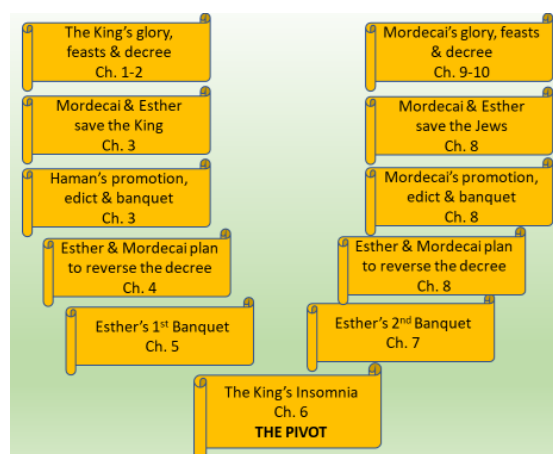


What a laugh! it just so happened (recurring words in this book) that the King was reminded of how Mordecai the Jew had once saved the king's life (Esther chs. 1&2). And it's here that the story pivots. The King asks his servants (v3):

“What reward or recognition did we ever give Mordecai for this?” ...His attendants replied, “Nothing has been done for him.” “Who is that in the outer court?” the king inquired. It just so happened that Haman had just arrived in the outer court of the palace to ask the king to impale Mordecai on the pole he had prepared. So, the attendants replied to the king, “Haman is out in the court.”

From this point, all the fortunes of the main characters take a turn. Literary experts describe this as peripety - a sudden and unexpected change of fortune or reverse of circumstances.² It was Aristotle's favourite storytelling tool.

Note when we step back and see the careful design of the whole story...



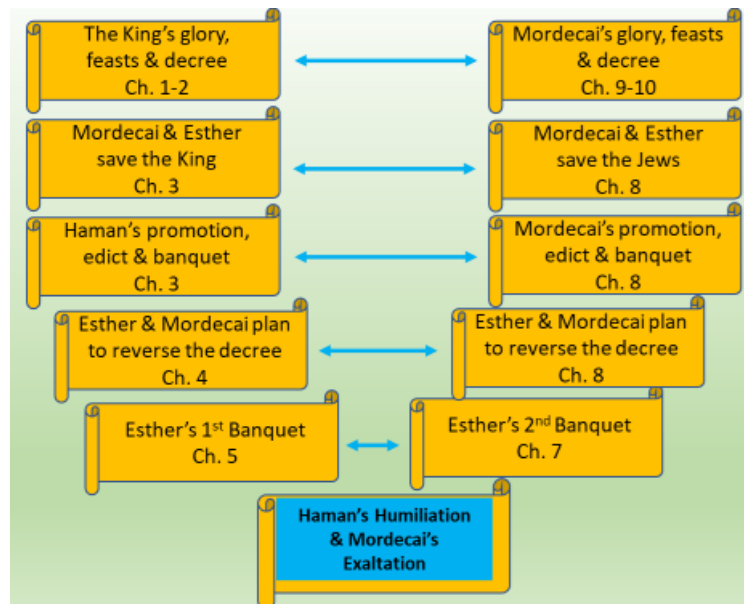
- before chapter 6 Mordecai, Esther and all the Jews of Persia are on a downward slide, and Haman the Agagite³ is on the rise.
- but, after the king's episode of insomnia, from chapter 6 to the end, ironic reversals occur in sequence.

² **peripety** - a sudden and unexpected change of fortune or reverse of circumstances. E.g. Sophocles – *Oedipus Rex*. Also common in Shakespeare.

³ Note that Haman was also not Persian. The fortunes of the two nationalities is contrasted as a sign of the age-old battle between God's people and the Amalekites

3. Ironic Reversal

As we look back in time, and forward in time around the pivot, we see the changing fortunes of Mordecai, Esther, and Haman. Each event in the first half is mirrored in the second half, and the outcomes in each pair is reversed...*



- A In chapters 1 & 2 there's the King's splendour, feasts and decrees
- A' They are mirrored by Mordecai's splendour, feasts and decrees in chapters 9-10 at the end
- B In chapter 3 Esther and Mordecai save the king from assassination
- B' Then near the end, in chapter 8, they save all of the Jewish people from being annihilated
- C Then you have Haman's elevation, and edict, and banquet in chapter 3
- C' ...mirrored by Mordecai's elevation, and edict, and banquet in chapter 8
- DD' Esther and Mordecai's planning scenes are also mirrored, and finally
- EE' Esther's two big banquets act as a frame around the greatest moment of ironic reversal in the story...
...Haman's humiliation and Mordecai's elevation

You can see the chiasmic pattern.⁴ There's a crossroad with many parallels.⁵

Having stepped back, we see that the *whole story* is ironic reversal.⁶

- Throughout the book God has seemed to be absent,
- God's people in Susa are far away from the Holy Land, and seem disconnected from a life of worship
- Not only that, Esther and Mordecai are unfaithful to some of the Laws of Moses, and
- More than that, they are morally compromised people in significant ways.

And yet, the outcomes of the story just happen to turn for the benefit of the one's who trace their relationship back to God's people of promise.

Karen Jobes says,

“Regardless of how circumstances appear, God is ruling history according to the ancient covenant... made with Israel in Sinai.”⁷

So, with eyes of faith the reader sees how God can, and God is at work, even in the real mess and moral ambiguity of human history.

And this point is delivered, dripping with irony. In the context of the Persian pantheon of gods and superheroes, this story makes you laugh! Karen Jobes continues her observations, saying...

“Any deity worth their salt can do a miracle now and then. This God (of Esther) is so great, so powerful, they can work without miracles through the ordinary events of billions of human lives through millennia of time to accomplish their eternal purposes and ancient promises. God saved an entire race of people in Persia because the king had a sleepless night, because a man would not bow to his superior, because a woman was made queen for a ruthless man's pleasure. How inscrutable are the ways of the Lord!”

⁴ The term chiasmic derives from the mid-17th century term *chiasmus*, which refers to a crosswise arrangement of concepts or words that are repeated in reverse order. *Chiasmus* derives from the Greek word *khiasmos*, a word that is *khiazain*, marked with the letter *khi*. From *khi* comes *chi*.

⁵ Often found in Scripture, e.g. Joshua 1:5-9; Eccl. 11:3 – 12:2; Matthew 13:1-52; Matthew 23:12

⁶ Not just an academic critique, but a common ancient means of oral transmission, sometimes not noticed by modern readers

⁷ In her commentary on Esther in the NIVAC series

4. The Greatest Ironic Reversal

When we step back from The Book of Esther a little further, we can read it in the context of the whole Bible.

As Christians, we can consider its message in the light of the Gospels and the teaching of the Apostles. Though Esther is not referred to directly in regard to Jesus, we can see with eyes of faith that the same God working behind the scenes in Esther's story is present in and through the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

They say you should never meet your heroes.

The apostle Paul knew this true in New Testament times in relation to those hoping to "meet" God. When people encountered Jesus of Nazareth, many were disappointed. Think about it!

- Jesus comes to town, people say he's Messiah, but he doesn't hang out with the righteous religious ones, but the outcasts and the "unclean"!
- He performs miracles like God but refuses to overthrow the Romans, instead calling people to love and humility.
- They claim Jesus is the sinless saviour from God, but he's overpowered by earthly authorities and dies the death of a criminal.⁸

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 Paul explained that his preaching about Jesus seemed...

22 ... foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. 23 So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

Many Jews in Paul's day found the idea of Christ crucified offensive. Many Greeks (or Gentiles⁹), found the claims that Jesus was a god a bunch of nonsense! Perhaps they were looking for a different god to the God of Esther.

You see, Jesus didn't stack up on the surface as the superhero god Jews and Greeks were respectively hoping for. His power was displayed in weakness. His glory was displayed on the cross - in his death for sins. Yet, those who knew the God we've "seen" in The Book of Esther would have recognised Jesus as

⁸ 22 It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. ²³ So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

⁹ A term used by Jews of the first century AD of people who were non-Jews,

one sent by God. Those who knew the God in the actual stories of Abraham, of Sarah and of Hagar, the God of Jacob and Joseph, the God of Moses and of Daniel were likely to find in Jesus Christ, the God they were hoping in.

How interesting, that in the Gospels, it's most often the marginalized, the outcasts and the lowly who were excited to meet Jesus. No wonder Jesus said,

“... I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners” (Matt. 9:13).

The Apostle Paul's own story of conversion is an ironic reversal (see Acts chapter 9). But even more interesting, Paul presents the life of Jesus as ironic reversal in Philippians chapter 2.

Philippians 2:6-11

A. Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

B. But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in human likeness:

C. And being found in fashion as human, he **humbled himself**, and became obedient **unto death**, even the death of the cross.

C'. Wherefore God also hath **highly exalted him**, and given him a name which is **above every name**:

B'. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

A'. And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father

See that we here another chiastic structure as we saw in the Book of Esther. This one tells of the fall and the rise of the key character - Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Notice that the pivot in this passage is the cross. It's the point in history around which all our “fortunes” turn - the atoning death of God's Son.

5. What's in it for us?

Well, after all this, what's in it for us?

1. Firstly, The story of Esther, as a whole challenges us, to reverse our natural presumption that if things get bad and God's seems absent, God must have

¹⁰ Some scholars think these verses might have formed an early Christian chant or hymn

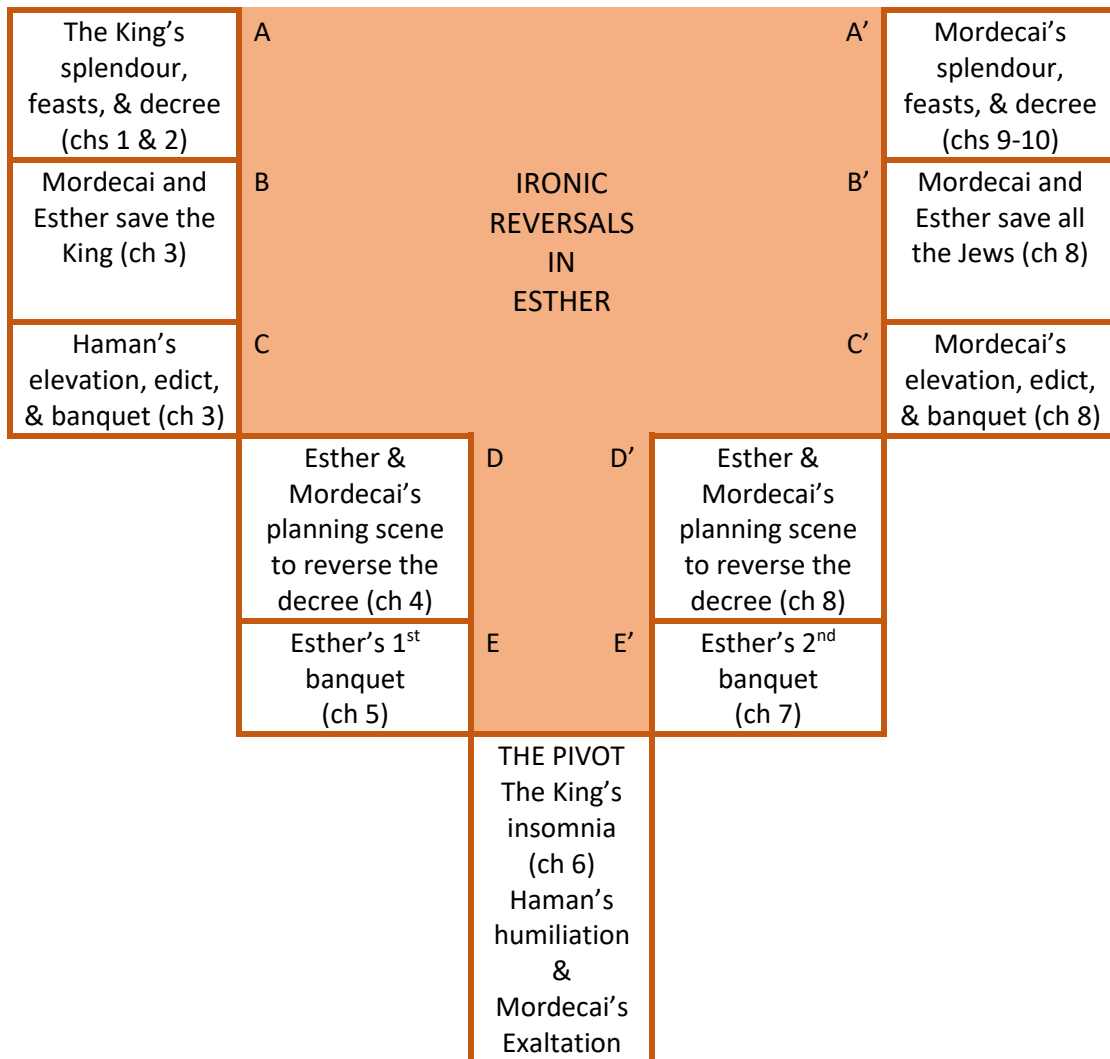
given up on us and on the world. This great reversal in The Book of Esther that leads to Haman's destruction and the elevation of Mordecai points to the greater reversal of spiritual fortunes offered to all through the atoning death of Christ. The New Testament presents the pivot in *our* story of salvation as the cross. By join our life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God, that is the starting point for our renewed life story as part of God's greater salvation story.

2. Secondly, The Book of Esther also warns us to be careful what you wish for when you pray. Don't fashion God in your mind as a superhero who at the click of a finger can fix your world? Be careful to check your presumptions about God before you set your expectations about what God might do. To be sure, the victory over evil *did* indeed belong to God in Esther's story. But, just as the Jews in exile often hoped for a superhero God, to exercise His might arm and restore them in a flash, so too we are sometimes tempted to pray to God as to a Marvel superhero when our circumstances get tough. Remember that in Christ, God's power over evil is exercised even in the mess of human frailty. God often acts in humility, sacrifice, love, in weakness; even in ironic reversals.

Conclusion

They say you should never meet your heroes. Yet, I have no hesitation in introducing people to the risen Lord Jesus through the Gospels. In Him, I believe, we meet the Living God, the God of Esther and all the ancestors of faith. And though you may have been looking for a superhero, meeting God in Christ will not ultimately disappoint you. In fact, the Gospels tell us, God came looking for you in Christ - in humility, with love, and grace and mercy. AMEN.

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