

FINDING OUR WAY HOME

Esther 3–4 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! If it's your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know we are spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. This morning, we are picking back up our series The Story of Faithfulness as we consider the time in Israel's history when they were in exile in Babylon and eventually Medo-Persia. Today we are looking at the Book of Esther.

Esther is a beautifully written story—it almost reads like a Shakespearean play. It is a tale of sensuality and brutality. You have subtle Esther, resolute Mordecai, the fumbling drunk fool of a king—Xerxes—and finally the menacing villain, Haman the Agagite, descended from the great enemy of Israel, the Amalekites. It's tragedy, it's comedy, and even a fairytale.

During the Jewish Festival of Purim, the Book of Esther is read in the commemoration of the saving of the Jewish people from Haman (the antagonist and descendant of Agag—the Amalekite King). On the basis of Exodus 17:14, where the LORD promised to “blot out the name” of Amalek, it is customary for the audience to participate by making noises, to boo and shout whenever “Haman” is mentioned in order to desecrate and “blot out” his name.

The word Purim comes from the Hebrew word for dice. It's ironically named after the lot cast to determine the date the Jews would be executed by the story's antagonist—Haman. Even to this day, when the Jews celebrate Purim, they read this story out loud while participants dress up as characters and even perform skits from the story. The feast of Purim has a carnival-esque atmosphere to it. Food and drink are given as gifts, and charity is given to the poor in recognition and celebration of the Jewish people's preservation.

Historical Context

The story takes place in the city of Susa (modern-day Iran), the capital city of the Persian Empire. In 539 BC, Cyrus the Great (the king of the Medo-Persian Empire) conquered Babylon and brought it and its conquered peoples (including the Jewish captives) under his rule (200-year rule of Medo-Persia). Under Cyrus' reign, the Jews had been allowed to go back to Jerusalem and had been given permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple. The year of our story is around 486–480 BC. Xerxes is the king of the Persian Empire at this time and a main character in our story.

The Difficulty with Esther

There is nothing particularly Jewish about this book—at least in a religious sense. God is not mentioned once—not his personal name, *YHWH*, nor the generic title for God, *Elohim*. Interesting facts—the standard Jewish household forbade reading the Book of Esther before the age of 30. The Essenes, the first century Jewish sect that wrote and preserved what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls, did not include Esther in their writings because they considered it totally pagan and vulgar. The Book of Esther was considered so vulgar and confusing, as to why it was in Scripture, that the Christian church did not write any commentaries on the Book of Esther for the first seven centuries. John Calvin never commented or taught from it, and Martin Luther said—

“I wish [it] had never come to us at all, for [it has] too many heathen unnaturalities.”

And it's not surprising that they thought this way, Esther's (the Heroine) name is not Jewish; it is a derivative of the name Ishtar—a Babylonian fertility goddess. Esther is chosen to take part in a kind of beauty pageant to see who will become the next queen of Xerxes. She is taken into the king's harem and then spends a whole night with the king (we can assume that they slept together). She is picked to be queen because of her physical beauty and connection compared with all the other virgins that the king slept with. She is not chosen because of her purity, inner beauty, or distinct piety as a Jew. Esther is compromised and not distinct in any spiritual or religious sense.

Mordecai, her elder cousin, doesn't fare much better. His name is a derivative of Marduk—the highest god of the Babylonians. He is the one who puts Esther up to the whole thing and encourages her to conceal her Jewishness while doing it. In the end, and with a strange turn of events, these two Jews outwit their enemy and orchestrate the preservation of the people of God and the destruction of all the enemies of the Jews in the Persian Empire. The story is bloody, horrific (a lot of impaling happens), and a bit fantastic!

In this book, there is no mention of Torah, Temple, prayer; there are no visions, no prophetic denunciations, or encouragements, and no miracles. You think, *what is this book doing in the Bible?* These characters are not portrayed as God-fearing, covenant-witnessing, law-keeping Jews—quite the opposite. They are nothing like what we saw with their contemporaries, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the faithful Jewish youths in Babylonian captivity. I heard someone once compare Daniel and his crew to New Yorkers—“This is how I talk, this is what I eat, this is my God, this is my lifestyle. You don't like it? Burn me ...” Mordecai and Esther are more like college students on spring break—Down for Whatever! They are compromised, no distinction, no faithful witness.

Yet, I believe the Book of Esther has a powerful message for us. It feels a lot like the days we are living in—an absence of God's miraculous presence. We are not familiar with experiencing divine intervention in the way the Bible often describes.

The church often lacks a distinct biblical identity and witness as the people of God. If we are honest, there is a lot of compromise by the church in the west, and we often live like the rest of the world while only claiming a distinction. So maybe this book does have something to say to us.

As I said before, God is not mentioned at all in this story, and it is actually a brilliant move by the anonymous author. It's as if the author is saying through the whole story: “Reader, can't you see all the ways YHWH is so very present and at work behind the scenes?”

Esther is a story that chronicles God's surprising preservation of his people when their very existence is threatened by a superpower. Irony, or reversal, is the key to the plot of Esther—(Esther 9:1, the reverse occurred).

Haman, the great enemy of the Jews, at the moment he thinks he is being honored, tumbles to the bottom; and in an ironic twist of fate, is impaled, by order of the king, on the stake he built to kill Mordecai.

The providence of God is clearly at work. The circumstances that get Esther—this Jewish captive—next to the seat of power in the empire. Mordecai, her cousin and gatekeeper to the palace, just happening to overhear two men plot to kill the king and getting credit and honor for saving the king's life. The turn of fortunes upon Haman, his family, and the enemies of the Jewish people. Something is going on, but what? God behind the scenes bringing his goodness, grace, and preservation to his people.

The Book of Esther is many things—a story of irony, a comedy, a story about sovereignty and providence, a story of remembrance. But most of all, I believe it is a story about coming home.

I can't help seeing this story as a story written for the church in our time. It seems to me that Esther was a young woman who was so far from home, so removed from the morality of her people and an identity with the people of God who nevertheless found her way home.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a woman who told me that she had grown up in a Christian home, had gone to church, and assumed that she was a follower of Jesus. At one point, a crisis came into her life and she went to fall back on her faith—thinking it would hold her—but she found that there was nothing to fall back on. There was no depth, no real personal relationship with God there. She then realized she had never cultivated a personal relationship with Jesus but had only given mental assent to the gospel and the teachings of the Bible. Nevertheless through this crisis, she found her way back to Jesus, and as I teach through this today, I’m thinking of her and those like her whom God is calling to come home.

I. Choosing between death or death

- A. I would like to camp out in chapter 4 today because I really think this is the climax of the story of Esther, and it’s worth sitting in!
- B. As we read, there has been an edict that has been sent out, sealed with the king’s ring, that all the Jews in the Empire are to be wiped out on a certain day—determined by Haman and the rolling of the dice. This came about because Mordecai would not bow to Haman, the king’s newly-appointed vizier. Now we don’t know exactly why Mordecai doesn’t bow—Is it because he knows the ruthlessness and evil of this man, and he will not pay him honor? Is it simply because of the fact that he is a Jew?—that is the reason he gives when asked. Whatever the nuances behind this, it sets Haman on a trajectory not only to kill Mordecai but all the Jews in the Persian Empire.
- C. In response to the edict, it says, **“When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.”**
 1. As has been mentioned—Mordecai seems like he was a compromised Jew at best, and we really don’t know about the piety of the Jewish community living in Susa. All we know is that these were Jews who could have returned to their home in the land of Israel and chose to stay in a foreign, pagan land. But the point is, wherever these Jews are “spiritually” on the faithfulness and loyalty to YHWH spectrum, when tragedy strikes, they turn to “mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing.”
 - a. Of course, mourning in this way is customary for the Jewish people. But the author uses these very specific words to describe what happened. It’s interesting because these exact words were written some 400–500 years earlier by the Prophet Joel.
 - i. **The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”—Joel 2:11–17**

- ii. In this scene from Joel, judgment is at the door. It is coming and nothing can stop it. God is bringing justice and judgment upon the nation of Judah for their sin ... and yet, God says—**“Even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing.**
- iii. Could it be that these exiled Jews are reading and applying the Book of Joel to their situation? If Mordecai’s spiritual awakening took place when he refused to bow to Haman, then is this his act of repentance, turning back to YHWH? We can’t know for sure, but I think these three terms are used by the author intentionally to get us clued into what is really happening—a spiritual revival, a return to faithfulness to YHWH seen in repentance through fasting, weeping, and mourning.

D. What about Esther?

1. Esther is clueless to what is going on. Now I’m not blaming her. She lives in the palace—an image of security, of comfort, and ease. Esther is removed; she is far away from the fight—and from any threat or any danger of death. Or is she?
2. Esther gets word of Mordecai’s state, and she seeks more details about it. She sends him items to console him, to bring comfort or ease to his pain. And he sends word about what is happening via her servant—**“Mordecai told him (Esther’s servant) everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.”**
3. Esther’s response is a completely rational response given the situation. She says, **“All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”**
 - a. In essence, she says—my royal position really doesn’t mean anything in terms of access or influence. If I approach the king uninvited, it could mean certain death.
 - b. When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: **“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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?”**
 - c. This is of course the climax and turning point in the story. The question is, will Esther join in the suffering of her people; will she take up her true identity and calling or insulate herself from this threat—from pain and suffering? This creates a crisis in her life. What will she do?
 - i. Mordecai’s warning is so interesting to me. He tells her, in essence—no palace walls, amount of luxury, royal status, insulation, or protection can keep you from this threat that is coming, Esther. You cannot escape! But then he gives another warning: If you do not do something, you and your father’s family will perish.

- (a) This is a strange thing to say because we are told in chapter 2 that Esther’s parents are dead and that Mordecai had raised Esther as his own daughter. Also, all the Jews are in danger of being annihilated. So what is this?
- (b) It seems to me that Mordecai is saying to Esther—you have a choice between the threat of death and a death of your true self—You and your father’s family—a loss of identity with the people of God. There are worse things in life than dying—specifically to lose who you really are, to neglect and reject that God has made you for himself, for his love, for his glory, for relationship and partnership with him. To deny that is a spiritual death far worse than physical death or danger. It reminds me of what the book of Hebrews says about Moses—**“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.”—Hebrews 11:24–26**
- (c) What is worse than physical death? To bury your God-given identity, meaning, and purpose in the ground. To gain the whole world, to be rich in all the ways this life has to offer, and yet not be rich toward God; to insulate your life from all fear, threat, pain, and suffering, and lose your own soul. As C. S. Lewis once said—do this—lock your heart away, protect it—*“lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation.”—C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

II. You were made for meaning

- A. I see in Esther’s story a prophetic story for our times. Since I can remember, people have been talking about the end of the Christian era. It’s the post-Christian West. The church has become obsolete—not by annihilation or at least not a physical snuffing out, but by a slow burn; by being colonized more and more by the culture around us, having our desires, identity, and purpose shaped by culture and not by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.
 - 1. I think that the reasons for this state of the church are many—whether due to hypocrisy and compromise in the church, or a sneaky suspicion that many churches and church leaders don’t actually believe or live out what they are preaching. Maybe some of it is due to arguments in culture and education between science and religion that makes any supernatural belief just absolutely absurd, or there may be a hundred other reasons. Whatever it has been, we have seen generations leave the church in droves.
 - 2. The church of the west often fails to live up to its high calling because it is hamstrung by, *“A low spiritual state of the church, a lukewarm love for Christ, a sickly worldliness, and a lack of vital prayer. The reason? Self-satisfaction that comes from comfort, compromise with capitalism, and accommodation to the consumeristic spirit of our age.”—Michael Goheen, Introducing Christian Mission Today*
 - 3. Because in the Western world we are so enamored by individualism and freedom to express that individualism, or the authentic self, we can see the different philosophies, religions, and lifestyles of our culture as a kind of menu based on an appetite for freedom. We are comparing freedom with freedom. Rather, we should be comparing meaning with meaning—how much solid identity and purpose does this philosophy, religion, or lifestyle offer me?

- a. Where our cultural redemptive narrative can offer us unlimited freedom—to choose to do and be whatever we want to be—it can offer us little meaning or purpose, whereas Christianity offers us limited freedom yet infinite meaning. It says you have a created identity and purpose to live out, and Jesus is the only way to discover it.
- b. Andrew Sullivan, who is a writer and political commentator, writing an article for *New York Magazine* in 2018, wrote,

“Seduced by scientism, distracted by materialism, insulated, like no humans before us, from the vicissitudes of sickness and the ubiquity of early death, the post-Christian West believes instead in something we have called progress—a gradual ascent of mankind toward reason, peace, and prosperity—as a substitute in many ways for our previous monotheism. We have constructed a capitalist system that turns individual selfishness into a collective asset and showers us with earthly goods; we have leveraged science for our own health and comfort. Our ability to extend this material bonanza to more and more people is how we define progress; and progress is what we call meaning. In this respect, Steven Pinker is one of the most religious writers I’ve ever admired. His faith in reason is as complete as any fundamentalist’s belief in God ... But none of this material progress beckons humans to a way of life beyond mere satisfaction of our wants and needs. And this matters. We are a meaning-seeking species.”

—Andrew Sullivan, *America’s New Religion*

- i. The secular redemptive narrative fails mainly because we are made by God and for God—this is our true identity and purpose. And when we try to live outside of him—to satisfy ourselves outside of him—we experience disappointment and disillusionment. Nothing outside of God himself can satisfy the “meaning-seeking” that Sullivan speaks of. It may satisfy momentarily, but we know deep down that we were made for so much more (Lewis, not too strong but too weak).
 - ii. Rather than seeing what so many have predicted as the death of Christianity and the triumph of secularism, we are actually seeing a flood of stories of intellectuals, academics, cultural influencers, and everyone in between who are now returning to their Christian roots and to the church because they have found that this secular redemptive narrative cannot deliver on its promises. For some, it has come about through suffering or a personal crisis or just a history of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. For Esther, it came in an unexpected moment that she wasn’t looking for, but it found her out and exposed her need.
 - c. God offers us so many opportunities to respond to his person by his grace. This is one of those moments to re-join the people of God, to take hold of your true identity, belonging, and purpose. To live for God and to live with God. To fulfill your created purpose to glorify him and to partner with him in spreading his kingdom rule to the ends of the earth.
4. Did I mention that Mordecai gave Esther a word of hope? His final word to her, he says—**“Who knows, but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”** He is quoting once again from Joel’s prophecy that said—**“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing.”**
 - a. **“Who Knows”**—We don’t know what will happen next or what the total outcome of any situation will be. But we know that if we turn or return to the Lord, he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. In our God, there is healing, there is life, there is hope, and there is infinite meaning and purpose. We get to join God’s redemptive work through our own lives and opportunities.

III. Joining God's redemptive work by choosing to die

- A. **Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.**
1. Esther recognized the serious and inescapable threat of what was coming, and she enters into a three-day period of fasting—grieving, mourning, and weeping—asking all the people of God to join her. This is what will produce in her a transformation of character, a bold and renewed identity with the people of God. (She goes from blending in with the Persians,—hiding her name and true identity—to boldly and cunningly facing the enemy and proclaiming her name and place among the people of God, becoming an agent of God's redemption and salvation for God's people.)
 2. Rather than Esther using her position and place for herself—her comfort, her protection, her benefit—she uses it for the sake of her people. She uses what she has in redemptive participation—putting her life on the line in order to save her people.
 3. A new birth, a renewed spiritual life, an awakening like this really only comes by a death. This is the pattern for God's people—something must die in order for much fruit to come. Jesus, the Master, the One who is the way, the truth, and the life says it again and again in different ways.
 - a. **“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”—Mark 8:35–36**
 - b. **“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.”—John 12:24–26**
 - c. Of course we know that this is what God has ordained for the world—it is through the death of Jesus Messiah that the way is opened up for salvation, for life. I think what we often fail to remember is that the way of Jesus doesn't mean Jesus died so I don't have to, but in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—*“When Christ calls a person—he bids them come and die ...”*—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*
 4. When we turn our lives over to Jesus Christ, this is what God begins to do in us—to redeem us and bring us back to our true identity and created purpose, to use our lives to bring about his beautiful redemption and salvation in the world. It is a kind of death, but one that is truly necessary that we might truly live.

Closing

One main message of Esther seems to be that personal renewal—finding our true identity and meaning—comes only through a death to self—seen in Esther's fasting and putting her life on the line—a kind of death to self. With that, you can begin to see the gospel and redemptive thread of this story.

Esther—the royal queen of the known world—lays aside her royal garments and takes upon herself the garments of brokenness, weeping, and mourning. She enters into the pain of her people, afflicting her body, and then three days later, courageously walks into her own potential death as her people's representative, outwits the evil serpent, Haman, and saves her people from annihilation—bringing them salvation and prosperity.

Our way back to God, to renewal, and to an identity in him and to our created purpose and meaning is through the Son, Jesus Christ, who himself took on the affliction and cause of his people. He went through suffering and death—three days he was laid in the tomb—without water or food (and yes, for others, there was weeping, and mourning). But at the end of three days, he rose to a new creation, outwitted the serpent, triumphing over him through death, and now is exalted to the right hand of God—securing blessing and hope for his people now and in the age to come.

This is the pattern by which God makes us into a new creation as well. Yes, by trusting in what Jesus did in his life, death, and resurrection for us, but also by modeling that life in our own lives—dying to self that we might live for him. It's time to come home—back to identity with God and with his people, by following Messiah in his way of death that will produce life for others.

Communion

The Book of Esther is many things—a story for our times, a story of irony, a comedy, a story about sovereignty and providence, a story about coming home. But most of all I believe it is a Story of Remembrance.

In chapter 9, we are told that the Jews covenanted that they would always observe these two days of Purim and that they would remember it throughout all generations—remembering how they had been rescued and redeemed; remembering who they are as the people of God and living out that distinct identity and witness in the world around them.

Jesus gave his people this table as a way to remember ...

To remember through the bread and the cup our salvation and redemption.

To remember and return to who we are through Christ's work—beloved children of God, called to live with God and to work with God to bring his redemption and salvation to others.