

ESTHER: BACKGROUND STUDY

How did Israel end up here, so far from God's place of blessing?

Theme: In spite of the cost, return to the place of God's blessing by obeying His revealed truth in Scripture!

We started our study of the Book of Esther last week with a general survey of the book:

- Esther is a book of history that's not difficult at all to understand (it's short and interesting).
 - ✓ God uses a young Jewish lady (just a normal girl) to do great things (save the nation of Israel).
- Remember that the story breaks down into three main sections based on three main characters:
 1. **(Est 1-2) Esther: The Great Change in the Kingdom** (from the Gentile Vashti to the Jew Esther)
 2. **(Est 3-7) Haman: The Great Enemy in the Kingdom** (the enemy and adversary of the Jews)
 3. **(Est 8-10) Mordecai: The Great Victory in the Kingdom** (the Jews are led to victory)
- And remember, too, that one of the great lessons of the Book of Esther is the Providence of God:
 - ✓ The word *providence* comes from the Latin *pro-* (before) and *videncia/video* (see), and it refers to God's provision for His people based on his foreknowledge (He sees the need before we do).
 - ✓ We don't see any great, grand miracles, signs, or wonders in the Book of Esther.
 - ✓ But at the end of the story, what we see is the great miracle Providence: God working through normal people in their normal circumstances to accomplish His plan.
- This morning we need to return to the history behind the Book of Esther...

Remember that Scripture has three general applications (or three general contexts):

1. Personal Application: (2Tim 3.15-17) All Scripture is profitable for us today. There is something for us to learn and apply in each and every passage of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation (including Esther).
 - But, in order to understand the personal application (and not misapply Scripture), we need to understand the doctrinal application...
2. Doctrinal Application: The Bible really only *says* one thing—it *teaches* (doctrine) one thing. A lot of times we refer to this doctrinal application as the prophetic application because the teaching often has to do with some future aspect of God's plan.
 - In order to understand the doctrinal application (and not misapply Scripture to ourselves), we need to understand the historical context of what we are reading and studying...
3. Historical Application: Most, if not all, the doctrine in the Bible comes to us in an historical context.
 - We need to start here, with the history, so we can understand the doctrine; and once we understand the doctrine, we can search out ways it applies to us today.
 - We started here last week, with a general survey of the story recorded in the Book of Esther, and we need to take one more Sunday (today) to get some historical background...

We need to answer a question: *How in the world did we get here?*

- Israel is God's chosen people. Israel was given the “promised land.” And yet Israel is *not* in the promised land, but rather quite far from it!
- How is it that Israel got here? Why is Israel (in the Book of Esther) *still* so far from their promised land?
- And what in the world does that have to do with us, living in the last days of the Church Age?
- This morning, we need to do a background study on the Book of Esther in order to understand the historical context (and application) of this book...

I. The Formation of the Nation

- There are two things we need to understand about the formation of the nation of Israel: It began with an *unconditional promise* and it was then followed by a *conditional covenant*...

A. (Gen 12.1-3) The Original and Unconditional Promise

1. God made a promise to Abraham that He would make a great nation of his descendants, and that nation would be the head of all other nations and families of the earth (the source of all blessing).
2. (Gen 12.7) Observe, too, that the land (Palestine) forms part of this unconditional promise.

B. (Exod 19.5-8; 24.3) The Conditional Covenant

1. After several generations and the great exodus from slavery in Egypt, God enters into a covenant with His chosen people, Israel (likened unto the covenant of marriage; Isa 54.5; Ezek 16.8).
2. It's here that the chosen family becomes the chosen nation (with it's own laws, the Mosaic Law).

II. The Expansion of the Nation

A. Under David: (e.g., 2Sam 8.6, 14) As David obeyed God, he established the reign of Israel in the land that God promised them.

B. Under Solomon: (1Kg 10.23-25) What David started, Solomon finished. Israel gained control of almost all the promised land, and they became the head of the nations (and Solomon a “king of kings”).

III. The Declination of the Nation

A. (1Kg 11.4-6) But, toward the end of his days, Solomon turned away from God and began the downward spiral of apostasy and idolatry (Israel begins to “decline” as a nation).

B. Ultimately, after Solomon, there is a civil war among the tribes of Israel and they end up dividing:

1. The ten tribes of the north divide from the two in the south and call themselves “Israel.”
2. The two tribes to the south (Judah and Benjamin) call themselves “Judah.”

C. Throughout the history of the kings in both Israel and Judah, we see apostasy and idolatry.

1. What Solomon started just grows worse and worse with every generation.
2. Israel turns away from God's revealed truth (apostasy) and turns to false gods (idolatry).

D. But, we're not quite up to the history of Esther, yet... There is one more stage in Israel's history...

IV. The Dispersion of the Nation

A. The apostasy and idolatry of God's people gets to be so bad that God sends them into captivity.

B. (2Kg 18.9-12) The ten northern tribes (Israel) go into captivity first, to Assyria in about 721 BC.

C. (2Chron 36.14-20) About 100 years later, in 606 BC, the two southern tribes of Judah go into captivity, to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

V. The Restoration of the Nation

A. Remember: God's promise to Israel in Genesis 12.1-3 (and Genesis 12.7, the land) was *unconditional*.

1. The nation of Israel ceased to exist in the sense that they were dispersed and sent into Gentile countries as captives.
2. However, because God's promise to them was unconditional, sooner or later they would go back.

B. (Ezra 1.1-4) After 70 years of captivity, God sends the Jews back to the land—He sends them back to prepare the land for Jews by rebuilding the temple.

C. (Neh 2.17) Some years later, after the temple is rebuilt, God leads His nation to rebuild Jerusalem and her walls (those walls show us that Israel is again a nation, separate from the Gentiles).

- And here is where we arrive at the Book of Esther... Jews still in the land of their dispersion...

VI. The Preservation of the Nation

A. The Book of Esther records the history of God's preservation of the Jews in captivity.

1. But what we need to understand is that when we get to Esther, the captivity had ended!
2. Without getting ourselves confused with dates and Gentile kings, the story of Esther takes place between chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Ezra.
 - a) (Ezra 1.1-4) **Cyrus**, king of Persia, orders the return of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple.
 - b) (Ezra 6.14-15) After Cyrus came **Darius** (and after him, Artaxerxes) and the Jews finished building the temple under him—under Darius.
 - (1) This Darius (full name: Darius Hystaspis) is the Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther.
 - (2) *Ahasuerus* is a title—what they called a “throne name” (much like Pharaoh or Caesar).
 - c) (Ezra 7.1; Neh 2.1, 17) Then, about 20 years later, under **Artaxerxes**, we see a second wave of Jews return to the land in order to rebuild Jerusalem and the walls.
 - d) The important thing to remember here is this: The story of Esther takes place during the 20 years of “silence” between Ezra 6 (the rebuilding of the temple) and Ezra 7 (the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the walls).
3. According to the lists that we have in Ezra and Nehemiah, only about 50,000 Jews returned. The rest (the vast majority; millions!) of Jews *disobeyed*.
 - They preferred to stay where they were, comfortable in their “lifestyle” among the Gentiles... *outside of God's will* and far from God's place of blessing!

B. This helps us to understand the “intentional silence” of God in the Book of Esther.

1. This is what we saw last week: God is not mentioned even once in the whole Book of Esther.
 - a) Jerusalem is not mentioned. The temple is not mentioned. Nothing religious is mentioned at all.
 - b) In Esther, God's people have an outward appearance of religion (called “Jews”), but no mention is made of a real and true faith in God.
 - c) The only thing that might be construed as “religious” is the fasting mentioned in Esther 4.16, but even then there is no mention of prayer!
2. No mention is made of God (there is an “intentional silence” of God) because the vast majority of God's people were living in apathetic indifference to God's revealed truth.
 - a) God gave them the land and the Law... and then told them to go back to the land and rebuild the temple so they could keep the Law.
 - b) About 50,000 obeyed. And millions (!) decided to stay among the Gentiles, comfortable in their “new lives”... and far from God's place of blessing (the promised land).
3. But, God's promise in Genesis 12 was *unconditional*: God will preserve His people, Israel.
 - a) And that is what we see in the Book of Esther: God's providential preservation of Israel.
 - b) But, He does not associate His Name with them—God is not mentioned once in the entire Book of Esther. Why...? Because His people are in disobedience and rebellion.

C. Israel: In this “intentional silence” we can see a picture of Israel today.

1. In the first century, Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah and in AD 70 the Roman General Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and he sent the Jews into a global dispersion that lasted almost 2000 years (until 1948).
2. In 1948, though, Israel became a sovereign nation again! They went back to the land!
 - a) But, only a small portion of the Jews have actually returned (about two million).

- b) There are more than 16 million Jews that have not returned to their promised land.
 - (1) Think about it: The majority of the Jews have chosen to not obey God. They have chosen to stay in the lands of their dispersion, among the Gentiles.
 - (2) The majority of the Jews today are apathetic and indifferent to God's revealed truth (Scripture), and have chosen to stay far from God's place of blessing (the promised land).
 - c) But, just like we see in Esther, God still preserves His nation—His chosen people.
3. Understanding the history of Esther helps us to understand the doctrinal teaching (a picture of modern Israel). And that the history and the doctrine lead us to make a practical application...

D. Church: In this “intentional silence” we can also see a picture of Christendom today.

- 1. Our “promised land” is not a piece of real estate. Our “promised land” is spiritual...
 - a) (Eph 1.3) We have been given (unconditionally) all spiritual blessing in Christ.
 - b) (Rom 8.37) In Christ we are more than conquerors (we can occupy the “land” promised to us).
- 2. But, where are most of the people today who are called by God's name (“Christians”)?
 - a) (Rev 3.14-22) The majority of those who call themselves Christians are like the Laodiceans.
 - b) They are comfortable in the world—comfortable in their prosperous lifestyle.
 - c) They prefer that to sacrificing in order to obey God's Word, get “on fire” for the Lord, and serve Him in His plan and purpose in the world.
 - d) (Rev 3.20) Most “Christians” today are just like this: They have an outward appearance of Christianity (religion), without God in their lives (God is outside this “church”).
- 3. In Christendom (the majority of churches) today, we see the same thing we see in Esther: **Silence!**
 - a) Yes, they carry the name of God and call themselves “Christians” (just like we see the “Jews” in the Book of Esther).
 - b) But, God is not there. He is not mentioned once in Esther, and He is outside most churches today in modern Christendom.
 - c) We started our study this morning with this question: **How in the world did we get here?**
 - (1) How is it that Israel, in the Book of Esther, is so far from the promised land—God's place of blessing?
 - (2) They chose the comfort and pleasure of their lives among the Gentiles over the sacrifice of obeying God's revealed truth (His commands to return to the land).
 - d) Most of those who call themselves Christians today are just like the Jews of the dispersion: They prefer the pleasures, comforts, and entertainment of the world...
 - (1) You can call these people “carnal Christians” or “false converts.”
 - (2) But, regardless of what you call them, they are most certainly in apostasy and idolatry...
 - (a) They have turned away from God's revealed truth in Scripture...
 - (b) And have turned themselves to the fables and false gods of the world.
- 4. Yet in spite of all this, God will preserve His people, just like in Esther.
 - a) God's promise to us in Christ is unconditional: God will never leave us nor forsake us.
 - b) God will even providentially provide for and protect even the disobedient Christian.
- 5. However, we need to understand this: Just like in Esther, the disobedient believer is far from God's place of blessing.

Conclusion:

What is the solution to the problem? What's the moral of the story (the historical background) of Esther?

- It's simple: If you want to experience the blessings of God in your life, you have to return to “place of blessing” (you have to choose to place your life in the center of God's plan and will).
- For the Jew, that “place of blessing” is a physical place: Palestine, the promised land.
- For the Christian, that “place of blessing” is spiritual: It is obedience to God's revealed truth, Scripture.
 - ✓ That means you have to move in the *opposite direction* that most church-goers are heading today!
 - ✓ Most church-goers are heading *away* from truth/Scripture (apostasy) *to* false doctrine (idolatry).
 - ✓ Our “place of blessing” will be found by turning *away* from false doctrine *to* the truth of Scripture.

One word of caution: No one can tell the different between a “carnal Christian” and a “false convert.”

- Why don't “Christians” act like Christians?
 - ✓ Remember, a Christian is a disciple—a *follower*—of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - ✓ If someone says they are a Christian but they don't follow Christ (they don't act like a Christian), what are we to conclude?
- For all those in Christendom who are not intentionally following God's revealed truth in Scripture...
 - ✓ For all those who are comfortable in the world (with the world's pleasures and entertainment)...
 - ✓ For all those who are *not* obeying God's Word (just like the majority of the Jews in Esther's day)...
 - ✓ You need to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith (if you are really saved or not).
- Because the answer to the question is simple: (Why don't “Christians” act like Christians?)
 - ✓ They're probably not Christians—they're false converts (those who *say* they are saved, but are not).
 - ✓ There is no way for anyone to distinguish between a “carnal Christian” and a “false convert” (not even the carnal Christian / false convert!).

So, in spite of the cost, return to the place of God's blessing by obeying His revealed truth in Scripture!

- Read the Bible and do what it says.