

Fireproof Faith: Esther and God's Divine Providence

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The entire book of Esther is filled with irony and humor and served as encouragement to Jews who would face such extreme situations. The Jews at this time were a people largely in Diaspora—that is, scattered throughout the ancient world. We jump from Babylon where, Daniel stood his ground and would not bow down to the customs of the Babylonian rule, to Persia where the Jews were once again subject to yet another powerful empire. The Persian court described in Esther was rich and powerful beyond one's imagination.

Esther was a Jew who had to balance the call to assimilate and to serve the capital city of Susa, where she lived, with her understanding and need to maintain her own separate identity as a Jew, and one set apart for God. Interestingly, the Book of Esther never mentions God and yet we can see the presence of God in a time and place where God seemed quite absent. We also see His favor working for His people to establish His will through His divine providence.

BOOK OF ESTHER CHAPTER OVERVIEW AND REFLECTION:

1. (Esther 1:1-22): King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) orders Queen Vashti to appear at his over the top banquet to show off her beauty, but she refuses. The King, guided by his officials, worried that all women would follow Vashti's example. So, the king banishes Vashti and commands all the women in the kingdom to honor their husbands.
2. (Esther 2:1-18): The King gathered all the beautiful young virgins in his kingdom so he could choose another queen. Ultimately he chooses Esther who was an adopted daughter of a Jewish exile named Mordecai. In this chapter we learn that Esther "had a beautiful figure and was extremely good-looking." We also learn that she was a young woman who pleased the king and gained the King's favor.

"The young woman pleased him and gained his favor so that he accelerated the process of the beauty treatments and the special diet that she received. He assigned seven hand-picked female servants to her from the palace and transferred her and her servants to the harem's best quarters" (Esther 2:9 HCSB).

Interestingly in this story, Esther never reveals her ethnicity. She kept her true identity hidden as her cousin, Mordecai, commanded her to. Some might judge

her for now self identifying. Like today, many are criticized if they are boldly shouting from the mountain tops they are Christian.

When we've been talking this whole series about standing out, why did Esther keep hidden. She blended in and was forced to assimilate to the Persian culture. And yet, she still gained favor!

“The king loved Esther more than all the other women. She won more favor and approval from him than did any of the other virgins. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti” (Esther 2:17 HCSB).

Definition of Favor: is a gift from God that means acceptance, goodwill, and preferential treatment. It's not something that can be earned or is an entitlement, but rather follows surrender. Some say that favor is similar to grace and mercy, and that its a way for God to step into a person's situation.

Isaiah 66:2b says, **“These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word” (Isaiah 66:2b NIV).**

3. (Esther 2:19-23) Meanwhile Mordecai, while sitting at the king's gate, overhears two of the king's eunuchs plotting to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Mordecai tells Esther, who tells the king, and the two men are hanged.
4. (Esther 3:1-15) Now the story gets really heated. Haman, the king's chief official, gets angry at Mordecai's refusal to bow down before him and convinces the king to issue a proclamation to destroyed all the Jews.

Now interestingly, the word tells us that Mordecai refuses to “bow and pay homage” to Haman. It was not a call to bow and worship him. To “bow and pay homage” is an expression that typically means to show great respect and honor to someone or something. It was customary to bow and show respect to the king and his royal court. So why didn't Mordecai bow? It's not like they were asking him to worship an idol like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. One commentary said, maybe he considered bowing to any man as practicing idolatry, or his refusal was based upon his own pride and the long-standing hostility between the Israelites and the Amalakites.

Regardless of the reason, Mordecai's choice to not act in the customary respectful way not only affected him, but all of his people. A law was made to destroy all of the Israelites. So he implores his cousin Esther to help.

After Mordecai sends word to Esther that she should appeal to the king to spare her people, Esther sends word back that she has not been summoned into the king's presence for 30 days, and the punishment for appearing without being summoned is death. Then Mordecai sends this reply,

“Mordecai told the messenger to reply to Esther, ‘Don’t think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king’s palace. If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father’s family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this’ (v.13-14).

Mordecai was confident in the faithfulness of God that he believed God would rise up another to save his people as he had done time and time again. He is merely telling Esther that if you have position or gifts or opportunities not granted to others, you are then responsible to be the vessel through whom God's divine providence can take place. We all are responsible to steward that which God has given to us. Turn to your neighbor and say I have a responsibility.

After hearing Mordecai's response, Esther makes a bold decision:

“Go and assemble all the Jews who can be find in Susa and fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, night or day. I an my female servants will also fast in the same way. After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish” (v16).

Esther realized it was a call to lay down her life for a greater cause. She had the favor of the King but God's providence would say, this favor is not for her alone. We see God gave Esther favor with the King so that she could act on behalf of His chosen people. She did nothing wrong but now has an opportunity to right the wrongs. She chose to stand up when God made her stand out even if it would cost her life. At the appointed time, God would have her stand up to accomplish His divine will and reveal her hidden identity.

So many are willing to serve the king when there is a blessing in return. How many are willing to serve the king if it costs them everything with no guarantee of a return?

Esther was motivated by love - the love for her people and acted in faith, faith in her God! So she called her people to fast and pray!

5. (Esther 5:1-8) Esther Invites the King and Haman to Two Banquets

“As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she gained favor in his eyes. The king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Esther, and she approached and touched the tip of the scepter. ‘What is it Queen Esther?’ The king asked her. ‘Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be given to you’ (Esther 5:2-3 HCSB).

She doesn't ask to save her people. Instead, she invites the King and Haman to a banquet and he agrees to attend. While at the banquet the king asks her again what she would like, again, she doesn't ask to save her people. She asked for them to attend another banquet.

While awaiting for the second banquet we flash back to Haman's anger in the story.

6. Haman Builds a Gallows for Mordecai (Esther 5:9-14): Haman follows the advice of his wife Zeresh and his friends to have a huge gallows built for the purpose of hanging Mordecai. And before he could speak to the King to hang Mordecai, the king is met again with divine providence.
7. Mordecai Is Honored (Esther 6:1-13): Meanwhile the king is unable to sleep that night, and asks for the royal records to be read to him. It just so happens that the records that are read tell of Mordecai's saving the king from an assassination attempt. The king asks Haman, who was there to ask for permission to kill Mordecai, how to honor one deserving of recognition. Haman, thinking this was for himself, tells the king some elaborate plan. The king jokes on him because the king tells him to do that for Mordecai.

Chapter 6 is a good read! Now going back to Esther's story. At the second banquet, Esther reveals to the king that she is a Jew, pleads for her people, and names Haman as the villain.

“Queen Esther answered: ‘If I have found favor in your eyes, Your Majesty, and if the king is pleased, spare my life; this is my request. And spare my people; this is my desire. For my people and I have been sold to destruction, death, and extermination. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept silent. Indeed, the trouble wouldn't be worth burdening the king’ (Esther 7:3-4 HCSB).

In these words, we can see that Esther spoke and carried herself with honor, grace, and poise. She walked with humility. She doesn't come to the king with a spirit of entitlement. She is the Queen, and yet is not making bold requests or demands. She is humbly making a request. The rest of the story is awesome!

King Ahasuerus spoke up and asked Queen Esther, “Who is this, and where is the one who would devise such a scheme?”

6 Esther answered, “The adversary and enemy is this evil Haman.”

Haman stood terrified before the king and queen. 7 Angered by this, the king arose from where they were drinking wine and went to the palace garden. Haman remained to beg Queen Esther for his life because he realized the king was planning something terrible for him. 8 Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the house of wine drinking, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, “Would he actually violate the queen while I am in the palace?” As soon as the statement left the king’s mouth, Haman’s face was covered.

9 Harbona, one of the royal eunuchs, said: “There is a gallows 75 feet tall at Haman’s house that he made for Mordecai, who gave the report that saved the king.”

The king commanded, “Hang him on it.”

10 They hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king’s anger subsided.

The rest of the story is total vindication!

8. (Esther 8:1-17): Esther persuades the king to issue a new decree reversing the king’s earlier unalterable decree to annihilate the Jews. Now the enemies of the Jews are to be annihilated instead, and there is much rejoicing.

In verse, 17 it says, “...And many of the ethnic groups of the land professed themselves to be Jews because fear of the Jews had overcome them.” This is another reversal or irony: It was once dangerous and life-threatening to be a Jew; now it was dangerous to not be a Jew.

9. (Esther 9:1-10:3) On the very day when the initial slaughter of the Jews was to be carried out, the Jews instead took vengeance on their enemies. The Jewish festival of Purim is established in memory of these events, and King Ahasuerus elevates Mordecai to the position previously held by Haman.

Giscelle Reflection and Thoughts.

Although God isn't mentioned anywhere in this story, It is not mere coincidences that happen. It was God's providential hand at work. We have a fireproof faith when we understand:

- God has a plan for everyone's life
- We must trust in God divine providence even when it's not obvious
- We must be willing to take risks no matter the cost
- God is always at work, he is always present even when seems he is absent

Ohana Group Questions:

1. Share in how you have seen the Divine Providence of God unfold in your life. How has that helped to fire proof your faith?
2. Share a time when you had to make a difficult decision to do something God was calling you to do. What did it cost you?
3. Share a time when you felt as if God was absent but later realized he was present. Is there anything going on in your life right now that it feels like God is absent?
4. In what ways has God created you for such a time as this? Take time to close in prayer for one another. Pray for the divine favor of God, the boldness and courage to be obedient to Christ no matter the cost.