
Esther



Introduction

Can Christ Be Preached from Esther?

Exalting Christ . . . in Esther? This is the second question I asked myself when I was contacted about writing this commentary. The first question was, What did I do to Akin, Platt, and Merida? They initially asked me to write on Ezekiel, which I did, and it is not exactly full of kicks and giggles. Now they want me to write a Christ-exalting commentary on the only book in the Bible that has no mention of God. *Not one single reference!* There is not a “Most High,” a “Holy One,” a “Sovereign One,” an “Almighty,” a “Great I Am,” an “Elohim,” or an “Adonai” in Esther. Despite the best efforts of some to find it acrostically using the first letters of a phrase in 5:4 or backwards using the last letters of another phrase in 5:13, there is not even a mention of Yahweh anywhere in the book (Firth, *The Message of Esther*, 11). There is also no word given to a prophet, no vision or dream through which God speaks, and as a matter of fact, not even a single prayer is mentioned in any of the ten chapters (Jenkins, “Esther and the Silent Sovereignty of God”). There is no comment on the Torah or the temple. So, in the book of Esther, there is certainly not a specific mention of Jesus. Can Christ be preached from Esther?

Honestly, I hesitated to respond positively to an opportunity to write this commentary. Though I have seen the Veggie Tales version of Esther numerous times (I have four children), none of the churches of which I have been a member ever offered a chapter-by-chapter, in-depth study of the book, much less a sermon series. Moreover, none of the exegesis classes I took in seminary covered Esther. In my research I found several pastors who preached a multipart sermon series on Esther in which they either combined large portions of Esther’s ten chapters or they skipped some of them entirely, such as Tim Keller’s “Esther and the Hiddenness of God.” Also through my search, though, I am happy to share I found at least two pastors who offered a chapter-by-chapter sermon series, but those who shepherd their people through Esther on a verse-by-verse basis seem to be few and far between. Of those who have preached through Esther, whether in part or in total, one wonders how many did so with a Christocentric lens.

My main hesitation in responding positively to an opportunity to write this commentary, however, was that as a committed practitioner and adjunct professor of expository preaching, I needed to make sure I could actually do what I was being asked to do. Can sermons that exalt Christ be preached from Esther? Maybe you have purchased this book because you were wondering the same thing. Can sermons that exalt Christ be preached from Esther that are not full of eisegesis (i.e., putting something into the text that was not true for its original audience, or making the text say something that in reality the text is not saying)? Graeme Goldsworthy offers some helpful wisdom here:

We do not start at Genesis 1 and work our way forward until we discover where it is all leading. Rather we first come to Christ, and he directs us to study the Old Testament in the light of the gospel. The gospel will interpret the Old Testament by showing us its goal and meaning. (*According to Plan*, 55)

Because it is helpful when an author admits his biases up front (though I would say mine is more a biblical/theological conviction than a bias), you should know the default hermeneutic I use to fuel my homiletic on these matters is that Jesus believes Christ-centered preaching can occur from the Old Testament (see Luke 24:25-26,44-48) and the apostles practiced it (Acts 2:14-36). Finding consensus on how Christ should be preached from the Old Testament, however, is about as easy as finding a leprechaun at the end of a rainbow. Some like Richard Longenecker believe “our commitment as Christians is to the reproduction of the apostolic faith and doctrine, and not necessarily to the specific apostolic exegetical practices” (*Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 219). Likewise, Abraham Kuruvilla cautions against “creating a comprehensive apostolic hermeneutical model out of” what he calls “scant data” (*Privilege the Text!*, 246). He contends that important questions need to be asked when considering Luke’s use of “in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). He asks,

Is it every portion of Scripture, or every book, or every pericope, or every paragraph, or every verse, or every jot and tittle?
The subsequent statements by Jesus to the Emmaus disciples suggest that what is meant is every *portion* of Scripture—a broad reference to its various parts, primarily the major divisions: Law, Prophets, and Psalms (writings). (*Ibid.*, 248)

An important question, then, is, Can *each* text in the Old Testament teach us something about Christ? Or, with our task in mind, can each text in Esther be used to teach us something about Christ? Tim Keller contends that redemptive-historical preaching

reads the Bible in a way that stresses the organic unity between unfolding historical stages of God's redemption in Christ. This approach is careful to "preach Christ" and his salvation from every passage of the Bible, whether he is overtly referred to or not. ("Preaching the Gospel in a Post-Modern World")

Consider also these words from Al Mohler:

Every single text of Scripture points to Christ. He is the Lord of all, and therefore He is the Lord of the Scriptures too. From Moses to the prophets, He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and every story in the Bible ends with Him. (*He Is Not Silent*, 96)

In considering these different views, I find the words of my mentor, Jim Shaddix, particularly helpful. He writes,

While some texts have Christ as their center (christocentric), and others have Christ as their intended realization (christotelic), some texts simply reflect the character and image of Christ into which God is re-creating us (christiconic). (Vines and Shaddix, *Progress in the Pulpit*, 119)

He goes on to add,

Whether the best line to the cross is a beeline, or whether you and I need to take a few side roads in order to preserve hermeneutical integrity, we must make sure we reach the cross in every message. And when we do, we must make sure to unpack the good news enough that people have the whole story. (Ibid., 124)

Where you land in hermeneutical and homiletical camps I will leave you to discern, but the most important question we need to answer is, How can we rightly divide God's Word so that when we give an account to the chief Shepherd we will not need to hang our heads in shame? Faithfully proclaiming "Thus says the Lord" is a massive responsibility

that should never be entered into lightly or without diligent preparation. Proclaiming Christ-exalting expositions from Esther is indeed possible. Let's consider now some (hopefully) helpful information as we get started.

Where Does the Book of Esther Fit in Redemptive History?

What is really going on in this book? Or to ask it better, What role does this book play in the overarching story of God redeeming a people for his name's sake? To grasp what is really happening in Esther, we have to go all the way back to Genesis 3:15. From that moment in the garden, Satan has wanted to destroy the offspring who would eventually crush his head. We see him attempt this in Exodus with backbreaking work for God's people in slavery, with newborn males being tossed into the Nile, and with Pharaoh's desire to crush the Israelites by the Red Sea—and yet all of these attempts failed. We see it again in the New Testament, after the incarnation of Christ in Bethlehem, with Herod having all males two years old and younger killed. Both attempts to destroy God's people failed, and so did one that occurred between them, which is recorded for us in Esther (3:8-15). Haman, in fact, is just another pawn under the influence of Satan to try to annihilate God's people and prevent any possibility of the Messiah. This gets us to a good, one-sentence summary of Esther: **Through his providence and in keeping with his promises, God places Esther and Mordecai in positions of power to preserve his people and punish his enemies.**

Somehow I made it through eight years of seminary without fully grasping the big picture of the Bible. It was not until I discovered Graeme Goldsworthy's work, *Gospel and Kingdom*, and his contention that the overall focus of the Bible is the kingdom of God that the picture began to become a little clearer. By "the kingdom of God," Goldsworthy means God's people in God's place under God's rule (*Gospel and Kingdom*, 54). In his book *God's Big Picture*, Vaughn Roberts adds one more phrase to Goldsworthy's definition: "The kingdom of God is God's people in God's place under God's rule *and blessing*" (*God's Big Picture*, 21; emphasis added). I have found Roberts's work to be so helpful that I have not only led my congregation through it but also made it required reading for each of my doctoral students.

Using Goldsworthy's and Roberts's terms to place Esther in the overall redemptive story of the Bible, God's people (most of them) had been removed from God's place (the promised land) because they refused

to submit to God's rule. According to his own faithfulness, God did not destroy the Israelites but disciplined them with exile. Specifically, the events in Esther occur during the third (Esth 1:3), seventh (2:16), and twelfth (3:7) years of Ahasuerus's reign (486–465 BC), and most likely between what is recorded in the sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra. In Ezra 1:1-4 we are informed that Cyrus let some of the exiles return to Jerusalem (539 BC), and 42,360 Jews chose to do so, bringing 7,337 of their servants with them (Ezra 2:64-65). The families of Mordecai and Esther, however, were not among those who returned to Jerusalem, and "sixty years later large numbers of Jews remained in the eastern half of the Persian empire, many in the great imperial cities of Persia itself" (Baldwin, *Esther*, 17). As we will see, Mordecai and Esther are in Susa (Esth 2:5), Persia's winter capital (LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 532).

In the last chapters of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, God is growing a people from one man to many. In the second half of Exodus and all of Leviticus, God is giving his people his instructions. In Joshua God is moving his people into the place he has for them. In Esther we can see that even after Israel has been unfaithful to him, God remains faithful and is preserving a people for his name's sake. Haman (who is a real piece of work if you have not read about him yet) wants to destroy not just Mordecai but every Jew living within Ahasuerus's realm of power. God, however, made promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 17:7) that include his descendants, and God intends to keep all of his promises. In redemptive history the book of Esther is not only about God's continuing to have a people but also about his preservation of his people from extinction. Somewhere in Ahasuerus's realm were those through whom the Messiah would eventually be sent, and nothing Haman (or Satan) attempted would be able to overcome God's protective hand.

What Can We Learn about God in the Book of Esther?

One of the most important questions we can ask when studying the Bible is, What does this text teach/reveal about God? We may often be prone to read each text through a self-centered lens, but the Bible's main focus is revealing who God is and what he is doing. God, however, is not mentioned specifically in the book of Esther. Nevertheless, Mark Dever contends that Esther "is one of the longest sustained meditations on the sovereignty and providence of God in the whole Bible. It is really just one long narrative illustration of Romans 8:28" (*The Message of the*

Old Testament, 454). Similarly, Gary Smith says, “The story of Esther is a case study for the truth that ‘for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose’ (Rom. 8:28)” (“Esther,” 426). Esther, then, reminds us that even when circumstances may appear contrary to the fact, God is both watching and working for our good. He is advancing his purposes despite making no appearances (Jenkins, “Esther and the Silent Sovereignty of God”).

Many years ago I was leading a Disciple Now weekend in Tupelo, Mississippi, when another leader shared an illustration I have never forgotten and have used countless times since. He asked for a volunteer. Once the teenager was at the front of the room, the leader pulled a set of keys from his pocket and told the youth, “No matter what, these keys will always be in front of you.” He then asked the teenager, “Where are the keys?” And the teen responded, “In front of me.” The leader asked, “How do you know?” The youth answered, “Because I can see them.”

The leader next pulled out a scarf and blindfolded the youth. He began to shake the keys and asked, “Where are the keys?” The student responded, “In front of me.” The leader then followed up: “How do you know?” To this the teen said, “I can hear them.”

Next the leader stopped moving the keys and asked, “Where are the keys now?” The student, not being able to see them or hear them, instinctively reached in front of him until he grabbed the keys and said, “They are in front of me.” The leader then asked, “How do you know?” and the student responded, “Because I can feel them.”

In the final phase of his illustration the leader took one step back just out of arm’s reach from the student and asked one final time, “Where are the keys?” The student could not see them, could not hear them, and as he reached out frantically in front of him and grasped nothing but air, he could not feel them. The leader asked again, “Where are the keys?” While still trying to find the keys, the student’s new response was, “I don’t know.” The leader then asked, “Where did I tell you the keys would always be?” The youth answered, “In front of me.” So the leader followed up with, “So, where do you think the keys are?” The frustrated teen responded, “I guess in front of me!”

The leader then had the student remove his blindfold, and when he knew the student could see the keys just out of arm’s reach but still in front of him, the leader asked, “So, where are the keys?” The teen responded, “In front of me.” The leader then explained all the mystery around the keys, the blindfold, and the questions: “There are times in

our lives when we do not see God. There are times in our lives when we do not hear God. There are times in our lives when we do not feel God. But he has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Our trust in his presence is not based on our feelings but on his faithfulness.”

I did not know it when I saw this illustration unfold, but God would use it later in my life. When I was a senior in college, my father passed away unexpectedly. His funeral was the first funeral I ever preached. Later in the evening of the day we buried him, I was sitting on a swing in our front yard. On that swing I did not see God. On that swing I did not hear God. And on that swing I did not feel God. But I knew God was with me because of his promise and not because of an overwhelming sense of his presence.

Has there ever been some event or some blessing or some comfort or some guidance that you know was God’s work, but he did not audibly speak to you or perform a miracle to accomplish whatever it was? Maybe you said something like, “God did this,” or, “God provided that.” Perhaps he even used the ordinary means of an encouraging word from a friend rather than writing the message in the sky for all to see. There are things in all our lives that we attribute to God without his directly saying, “You know I’m doing this, right? You know this is my work, right?” We often refer to his providence even though we may not visibly see his presence. This is true for the book of Esther. In this book God’s name is not mentioned once, but his work is seen in every chapter. As LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush write, “Coincidences in Esther are the fingerprints of God’s hands at work” (*Old Testament Survey*, 538).

Here are some of those “coincidences” or “stuff” Dever says “just seems to happen” in Esther:

- Esther just *happens* to be Jewish, and she just *happens* to be beautiful.
- Esther just *happens* to be favored by the king.
- Mordecai just *happens* to overhear the plot against the king’s life.
- A report of this just *happens* to be written in the king’s chronicles.
- Haman just *happens* to notice that Mordecai does not kneel down before him, and he just *happens* to find out that Mordecai is a Jew.
- When Haman plots his revenge, the dice just *happen* to indicate that the date for exacting revenge is put off for almost a year!

(What does Prov 16:33 say? “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”)

- Esther just *happens* to get the king’s approval to speak, but then she *happens* to put off her request for another day.
- Her deferral just *happens* to send Haman out by Mordecai one more time, . . .
- . . . which just *happens* to cause him to recount it to his friends.
- They, in turn, just *happen* to encourage him to build a scaffold immediately!
- So Haman just *happens* to be excited to approach the king early the next morning.
- It just so *happens* that the previous night, the mighty king could not command a moment’s sleep, . . .
- . . . and he just *happened* to have had a book brought to him that recounted Mordecai’s deed.
- He then *happened* to ask whether Mordecai had been rewarded, to which his attendants *happened* to know the answer. Simply consider for a moment the fact that Mordecai *happened* not to have been rewarded for having saved the king’s life. How unusual this must have been! Someone who saved the king’s life never rewarded? I wonder if Mordecai ever chafed under that: “Doesn’t he realize what I did for him?” Well, it all just *happened*.
- Haman *happens* to approach the king just when the king is wondering how Mordecai should be honored.
- Later on the king *happens* to return to the queen just when Haman *happens* to be pleading with Esther in a way that can be misconstrued.
- The gallows Haman built for Mordecai just *happens* to be ready when King Xerxes wants to hang Haman (Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 455–56; emphasis original).

All of these “coincidences” show that the events in Esther are not determined by chance but by control, not by luck but by the Lord. To see it any other way is dangerous. As Dever warns,

Apart from believing that God actively and sovereignly rules over our world, the book of Esther becomes a mere celebration of Mordecai’s wisdom, Esther’s courage, and, most of all, simple chance and luck. . . . This book was written to

show that God himself acts to achieve the total defeat of his foes and the safety of his people. (Ibid., 456)

Similarly, Elyse Fitzpatrick writes,

The book of Esther is not simply a morality tale about a few faithful Jewish people who stand up for God in the midst of a pagan land. More fundamentally and splendidly, it is the story of God's desire to glorify himself and make his Son beautiful in the lives of alienated, weak exiles from covenant faithfulness—like us. ("Introduction to Esther," 599)

Who Wrote the Book of Esther?

We know the book of Esther is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16), but who was its human author? A lot of ink has been used by commentary writers espousing their views, but we do not know who wrote this book. The two most common guesses are the people who know the events best—Mordecai and Esther. Some scholars lean toward Mordecai as the author because of Esther 9:20: "Mordecai recorded these events and sent letters to all the Jews in all of King Ahaseurus's provinces, both near and far." Not satisfied with this explanation, however, some church fathers thought Ezra may have written the book (Smith, "Esther," 420). Whoever the author is, he or she recorded how God preserved his people and also how the feast of Purim was established. Not knowing who the human author is, however, does not make this book any less "profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).

Some Suggestions, Surprises, and Possible Frustrations in Preaching through Esther

First, you will most likely not surprise anyone with how Esther ends, but what may be surprising to them is how many details about the story they have wrong. "I know Mordecai entered Esther in a beauty contest." That comment is what someone shared with me when I told them I was planning on preaching through Esther. That person is a believer and a member of a church. And also wrong. And he (or she—I'm protecting the guilty) is not the only one who holds views of the details of Esther that are incorrect. In preaching through the book, I found that the overall

highlights of the story didn't surprise anyone, but what was surprising was the number of details in the story that they had either missed or misinterpreted. If you preach through this book, it may not be the first time your people have heard of the story, but it may be the first time they study it and get the details straight!

Second, the imperfections of Esther and Mordecai may resonate with your people more than you imagine. As I prepared to preach through Esther, I was worried about how our people would respond to what seemed to be moments of compromise with the world in both Esther's and Mordecai's actions. I was worried that, since they seemed less consistent than Daniel or Joseph when striving to live faithfully in a foreign land, our people would not be able to relate to them. I was wrong. In my first meeting with our LifeGroup leaders, one of them expressed his appreciation for Esther's and Mordecai's imperfections but God's still using them in his plans. His sentiment was echoed in my own LifeGroup later that night and throughout the semester. I found that at least in the case of the people I shepherd, Esther and Mordecai are far more relatable than I ever imagined.

Third, in Esther we have all the information we need but not all the information we want. Was Esther taken into custody against her will, or did she and Mordecai accept the situation? Why doesn't Mordecai honor Haman? Mordecai tells others it is because he is a Jew, but even with that explanation the dots are not connected for us. Did Esther, Mordecai, and all the Jews pray when they fasted, or did they just fast? Was Esther right or wrong when she asked Ahasuerus for the Jews in Susa to have one more day to kill their enemies? The biblical author neither condemns nor vindicates her actions, which gets us to another possible frustration when preaching through the book of Esther.

Fourth, we may not be able to make as many definite calls as we would like. You will be tempted to say, Esther was wrong when she _____, or Mordecai was right when he _____, but because we do not have the information we would like, we can't always be definitive. You will also find that the biblical author records actions made by the characters but does not comment on their morality or spirituality. As an example, let's consider Mordecai's lack of honoring of Haman but from a different angle this time. We are told Mordecai does not honor Haman, and when asked about it, the other gatekeepers discern it has something to do with Mordecai's being a Jew. But nowhere along the way does the biblical author affirm Mordecai's actions. The author neither supports nor

dissents from the actions but just records them. As preachers of the text, then, we cannot add what is not supplied. We may be tempted to either vindicate or condemn Mordecai, but unfortunately we do not possess all the material to make such a call. Therefore, our aim (and responsibility) is to preach what is clearest from the text. And though we may not be able to say with complete certainty that Mordecai did the right or wrong thing, we can say in full confidence that God used Mordecai's actions to advance his providential plan of preserving his people.

Fifth, God delivers his people through ordinary means. In the book of Esther, no sea is split for God's people to walk across on dry land. In the book of Esther, no manna appears on the ground to sustain God's people for forty years. In the book of Esther, no lions' jaws are held shut by angels, and no young Jews walk around in and then out of a fiery furnace. No, in the book of Esther, God will not deliver his people through magnificent displays of his power. Instead, God delivers his people through the ordinary decisions and actions of Esther, Mordecai, and the others in the text. Perhaps this is another reason this portion of Scripture resonates so deeply with so many believers in our day, who have never walked on water or been used to raise the dead but who are striving to obey the Lord. God does significant work through what often seems like insignificant events in our lives.

Sixth, a lot of interesting names are listed in Esther, so take the time to make sure you can pronounce them clearly and correctly. Besides meeting Ahasuerus in the opening phrase of the book, you will eventually be introduced to Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Parshandatha, Parmashta, and others. The feast of Purim may be new to you as well. While some may advise, "If you say the names of people and places in the Bible confidently, no one will know the difference," for one of my seminary professors such lack of linguistic precision would never suffice. We should strive to both read and preach the Word faithfully. If you are unsure how best to discern the pronunciations, multiple Bible software programs as well as some helpful internet sources, such as www.blueletterbible.org, offer recordings of pronunciations for you.

A Brief Note on Starting Your Sermon Series

In sermon preparation, knowing the meaning of a biblical text is only the first half of sermon groundwork. The next half is how to communicate that information, in the power of the Spirit, to the people God has

entrusted to you. I am always excited when I believe the Lord has helped me, through my study, to understand the main point of a Scripture passage. But then a little apprehension creeps in as I am reminded I have to continue praying and discerning how to arrange and proclaim what I have learned in a way that will allow the truth to be communicated clearly. I often jokingly say sermon prep is a lot of agony and a little joy. It is actually all joy: joyful toiling to present ourselves “to God as one approved, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

In the first sermon of the Esther series I preached for those I shepherd, I spent half of my time with introductory matters and then half of it examining Esther 1:1-9. Since some of the important details such as when, where, and two important whos (Ahasuerus and Vashti) are addressed in the first nine verses, that approach flowed well. You may, however, craft an introductory or overview sermon of Esther with key background and big picture information and then prepare a sermon on 1:1-9 or even 1:1-22 as a second sermon. You know the people you shepherd best, so do what will help them grasp Scripture best. For this commentary, however, I will treat the material in 1:1-9 as a single sermon. For a list of the remaining passages and how they are considered, please refer to the table of contents in this volume.

With these introductory matters considered and concluded, we will now focus on our responsibility and privilege of exalting Jesus in Esther! May the Lord use his Spirit and his Word in and through you, and may it be for your good, for the good of your faith family, for the good of your city, and, above all, for the glory of God.