

Esther - The Providence of Purim

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 March 2020

Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

[0 : 00] Well, if we could, for a short while this evening, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read in the book of Esther and chapter 9.

Esther chapter 9, and if we read again, we'll read at verse 26. Esther chapter 9 and at verse 26.

Therefore these days were called Purim, from the word poor, because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them.

The Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year in the way prescribed and at the time appointed.

These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews, nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants.

[1 : 08] And so on. Now the book of Esther, it's a book about God's people and God's providence. And it's a book which is particularly, as we were reading there, it's particularly relevant to the Jews at this time of year.

Because this coming Monday, the 10th of March and Tuesday, the 11th of March, is the Jewish celebration of Purim. And Purim is a Jewish festival which is held every year according to the Jewish calendar on the 14th and 15th day of Adar.

And as we read, Purim was appointed by Queen Esther because through God's providence, God's people, the Jews, they experienced salvation.

And as part of their celebration of Purim, the Jews will read through this wonderful book of the book of Esther. And they will read it this coming Monday evening. And then they will read it again on Tuesday.

And by reading through this wonderful book of the book of Esther, the Jews will not only remind themselves of when the festival of Purim was appointed, but they will also remind themselves of why the festival of Purim was appointed.

[2 : 21] It was appointed as a celebration of salvation, the salvation of the Jews while they were living under the rule of the Persian Empire. But as we read there in verse 26, this Jewish celebration was called Purim.

After the term, it says there, Pur. And Pur is, you could say, it's the singular Hebrew word for one dice. You know, like rolling a dice.

But Purim is the plural form of the Hebrew word Pur, which is two or more dice. And this Jewish festival, it was named Purim by Queen Esther in response to Haman's evil plot in seeking to kill the Jews.

Because as when you read the story, it's a wonderful story. Haman, he rolled the dice, he cast the lots, he cast Purim in order to determine on what day of the year all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire were to be assassinated.

And the Purim, it landed on the 13th day of Adar. And today, or in a few days' time, the Jews will celebrate their salvation on the 14th day of Adar.

[3 : 36] Because it was on the 13th day of Adar that Haman and all his enemies, they died instead of the Jews. But as you know, the book of Esther, it's a wonderful book as we said.

But the book of Esther, it's unique because God is not mentioned in this biblical book. There's not one mention of God or the Lord or even Jesus in the entire book of Esther.

Of course, that doesn't mean that God is absent from the book, not at all. Because even though God isn't mentioned in the storyline, we can see as you read through it, you can see all the time that he's certainly working behind the scenes to ensure that the script which he has written is worked out to perfection.

You know, my friend, the book of Esther, in the book of Esther, God is working in providence. And he's working all things together for the good of his people and the glory of his name.

And the story, the story of Purim, it's a wonderful reminder that God is always working even in the story of our lives. And he's working in the story of our lives even when we can't see it.

[4 : 48] And this evening, just for a short while, I'd like us to briefly consider the story of the book of Esther. I'm sure you're familiar with the story. If you're not familiar with it, I'd encourage you to read this wonderful book.

But I want us to just briefly see three things from the book of Esther. I want us to see the place of the story, the plot of the story, and the providence of the story.

The place of the story, the plot of the story, and the providence of the story. So first of all, the place of the story. The place of the story. The book of Esther, it finds its place and setting not in the promised land of Israel, but in the problematic land of Persia.

Because at the time, the Persian Empire, it had grown and expanded to cover, as we read there, 127 provinces, which included the land of Israel.

The Persian Empire, by that time, it had spread from India all the way round to Ethiopia, which covered most of the Middle East. It included Israel and Babylon and Egypt and other parts of Africa.

[5 : 59] The Persian Empire at that time was massive. And they were seeking to expand it to take over what was to them the known world. But what's interesting is that King Ahasuerus, he had inherited the Persian Empire from his father, Darius.

And Darius had inherited the Persian Empire from his father, Cyrus. And these two names, Darius and Cyrus, they ought to be familiar to us.

Because it was King Cyrus who allowed the Israelites to return home to rebuild the temple after the exile. It was, you'll remember, it was in Babylon that the Israelites, they were sent into Babylon to live in a foreign land under the rule of a foreign king.

They were made to worship foreign gods. But after a time of exile in Babylon, the Israelites, and God in his mercy, he allowed the Israelites, through this Persian king, Cyrus, to return to their homeland, to rebuild the temple.

But out of the mass of people who were exiled in Babylon, we're told that only 50,000 people, 50,000 Israelites, they were this small number that returned home to Israel.

[7 : 16] But those who returned home, you read it in the book of Haggai and also Nehemiah and Ezra, they, well, they had this new hope, they had this new desire, but it wasn't long until they ran into problems.

And about 15 years later, after their return, the Israelites, they hadn't made much progress in rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the city. And this was due to the fact that they'd lost sight of their priorities.

They didn't put the Lord first. And so by the time King Cyrus came along, after, sorry, Darius came along, after King Cyrus had passed away, it was then that Darius, under the encouragement of Ezra and Nehemiah, they rebuilt the temple and they restored the city.

And then there's this 40-year gap, 40 years between Ezra and Nehemiah, and we come to the book of Esther. Because around 483 BC, just over 100 years after the exile in Babylon, Ahasuerus, son of King Darius, grandson of King Cyrus, he's now king over this large Persian empire.

And King Ahasuerus, he's living in Susa, which is the capital city of the Persian empire. And everything, the scene is set for what's to take place in the book of Esther.

[8 : 41] But you know, as we consider the place of the story in history, you know, I always find it fascinating how history just comes together and how it all falls into place.

What we find here in history is that we're reminded that the story of Esther is really significant. Esther's actions to protect the Jews, they're not only a fascinating, it's not only a fascinating story, but the wonderful thing is, it's God's story.

As we often say, history is his story. History is his story. And the place of Esther's story in history is his story. The people God used to accomplish his perfect plan and purpose in history is his story.

Just like in the story of our lives. It's his story. You look at your life tonight. It's his story. You look at what you once were and what you now are tonight in Christ.

It's his story. And it's a wonderful story where the Lord is working in us and he's working through us and he's working all things together for good and ultimately for his own glory.

[9 : 51] And you know my friend, that's the greatest comfort for us tonight. That the story of our lives, however many ups and downs there have been in it, the story of our lives has been planned and penned perfectly by our Heavenly Father.

And that even on the darkest of pages in the story of our lives, the Lord is working in it all to bring us into a closer relationship with himself.

You know, is that not what the Lord assured the Israelites? And is that not what the Lord assures us in those well-known words of Jeremiah 29, verse 11? For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord.

You know, the Lord said that before they went into exile. I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a hope and a future.

And so when we consider the place, the people and even the plot in the story of Esther, we have to say, well, this is his story. And remarkably, the plot of the story of Esther, it covers just a 10-year period from 483 BC to 473 BC.

[11 : 10] And what we see is that it's during that time frame that the Lord mysteriously worked in and through the lives of four particular individuals in order to accomplish the deliverance of the Jews.

And I just want us to briefly consider these people in the plot of the story of Esther. Because in this narrative, when you read it, and the reason I'm preaching this tonight, I want you to go home and read this.

It's a wonderful book. I read through it the other day and it's reminded how wonderful it is. But in this narrative, the narrative of the book of Esther, we meet four people. We meet King Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Haman, and Queen Esther.

And so we've considered the place of the story, but secondly, the plot. The plot of the story. The plot of the story. And the first person we're introduced to in the story of the book of Esther is King Ahasuerus.

And as we said, when Ahasuerus became king over the Persian Empire, he inherited a lot of power. He was king over 127 provinces.

[12 : 19] And he had a powerful army which he was preparing to take over the known world. But as you would expect, all that power, it went to his head.

And, well, you think, well, Ahasuerus, he would invite all his nobles and he would invite all his officials into the palace and he would throw these large parties.

In fact, that's how the book of Esther introduces us to King Ahasuerus. There's this large party going on. And Ahasuerus, he gets so drunk that he orders his wife, his wife at the time, Queen Vashti, to come out and dance before all his guests.

But she refuses. And of course, Ahasuerus, he won't take no for an answer. He's the most powerful king in the land. And as the most powerful king in the land, he eliminates anyone who will stand up to him, even his wife.

And that's what happens. Ahasuerus, he puts his wife to death for saying no to him. But, you know, we can learn a lot from all these different characters in the book of Esther.

[13 : 26] We can learn a lot from those in the plot of the story because, you know, when we look at Ahasuerus, we see a man who abused his power and his position. And, you know, maybe for us there can be that temptation whether at home or in the workplace or even in church.

There can be the temptation to be bossy, to be controlling and even to lord it over other people. And when we don't get our own way, maybe there's the danger in our own heart to become stubborn or angry with other people where we can't be spoken to, we can't be told what to do because we're right and that's it.

But, you know, the truth is what we learn from Ahasuerus is that in the Christian life there's only one king and King Jesus states that he who exalts himself shall be humbled but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.

You know, the early church father, Augustine, he said that the defining feature of a Christian should be humility, humility, humility, humility. That's what he said, humility, humility, humility.

But after deposing Queen Vashti, King Ahasuerus has started looking for a new wife which is how Mordecai appears on the storyline. He comes into the plot of the story.

[14 : 52] And Mordecai, he's introduced to us as a Jew. He was part of the exile in Babylon. But what's important is that Mordecai was Esther's uncle. Because Esther was an orphan following the exile in Babylon.

And so Mordecai, he raises Esther just like his own daughter. And inevitably, Esther trusts Mordecai. To the point that when Esther became queen and there's two of the king's officials trying to put the king to death, Mordecai overhears the plans, tells Esther, who relays the message to King Ahasuerus resulting in these officials being hanged on the gallows.

But as you read the story, it's a fascinating story how Mordecai protected the king and yet that act of kindness was never recognized.

It wasn't recognized for at least five years until one night the king couldn't sleep. He gave orders for the book of memorable deeds to be read to him in order to try and make him fall asleep.

And what was read to Ahasuerus was the occasion when these officials sought to commit an act of treason against the king. And when Ahasuerus discovered Mordecai's act of kindness to him, he immediately sought to promote Mordecai to the second highest position in the land.

[16 : 20] In effect, he became the prime minister. And you know, the lesson we can learn from Mordecai in the plot of the story is the lesson to remain faithful to the Lord and wait upon the Lord.

That's the lesson. Remain faithful to the Lord and wait upon the Lord. Because when everyone was commanded to bow down to Haman, Mordecai refused because he wanted to remain faithful to the Lord.

And when you read the plot of the story of the book of Esther, you see how Mordecai remained faithful to the Lord and he waited patiently upon the Lord. He didn't seek promotion or position or power and yet the Lord blessed him.

The Lord blessed him with all these things. You know, Mordecai, he was a living example of what Jesus taught us. To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Knowing then that all other things shall be added unto us. But of course the twist in the story and I know I'm only just skimming the surface of the story.

[17 : 29] The twist in the story, the twist in the plot comes from Haman. Because before Mordecai is promoted to this position of prime minister, Haman is the prime minister.

And it was because Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman that Haman sought to destroy all of the Jews. Haman even convinced King Ahasuerus, this king who was always getting drunk with all his officials, he convinced him to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, men and women and children in one day.

And they were to do it on the 13th day of Adar. And as we said, the 13th day of Adar was decreed by Ahasuerus when Haman threw the Purim.

The Purim being the dice. Haman rolled the dice, he cast the Purim, he cast lots in order to determine that all the Jews throughout the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire, they would all be assassinated.

But as Haman and Ahasuerus drank to their decree of destruction, you see in the storyline that Mordecai was informing Queen Esther of their plan.

[18 : 49] And it's at this point that the main character in the plot she comes to the fore. Where Esther, she's this Jew by birth, she's now the wife and queen of Ahasuerus because of her beauty.

But you know, the real beauty of Queen Esther is revealed that when she takes this risk, this wonderful risk in persuading her king to change his mind about killing the Jews.

And you know, as a man who remained faithful to the Lord and waited upon the Lord, Mordecai, looking at it all, stepping back from it, wondering about the Lord's providence, he could see the Lord's hand in making Esther queen over the Persian Empire.

Because Mordecai, you'll remember, he famously says, who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this. And Esther, she responds by saying, I will go to the king though it is against the law and if I perish, I perish.

Now, Esther's words, they weren't careless, they were careful. In fact, her words were prayerful. But Esther also knew that it was no use just being prayerful.

[20 : 03] She had to act. She had to act and she had to act quickly because providence had led her to this one point in her life where she had to stand up and stand up for the Lord and his people.

And you know, my friends, sometimes we have to be like Esther. Sometimes we have to prayerfully take risks and do things that will take us out of our comfort zone. Whether that is the challenge, a challenge for us to stand up as one of the Lord's people, whether it's the challenge of having to speak out and challenge someone else about their faith or even invite someone else to church, whatever it is, to get us out of our comfort zone.

Sometimes we have to prayerfully take risks for the kingdom of God because that's what Esther did. Esther knew that everyone who went into the inner court of the king would be put to death except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter.

And when Ahasuerus held out the golden scepter, Esther makes this one request that Ahasuerus and Haman come to a feast the following day.

And you know, what we see when you look at this book and step back from it is that the place of the story and the plot of the story, it all comes together through the providence of the story.

[21 : 33] That's what I want us to consider lastly and briefly, the providence of the story. The providence of the story. When we speak about providence we mean that our sovereign God has seen it all take place beforehand.

That's what the word providence means. Seen beforehand. Seen beforehand. Where our sovereign God God he has seen it and planned it and ordained it before it even happened.

Which means that nothing in this world takes place by chance. There's no chance events, no chance meetings, no chance conversations. There's nothing, nothing is an accident.

Even the people you pass on the street in a day, it's not an accident. It's all according to the Lord's providence. The people you meet in the shop, the people you, that come into your home in a day.

It's all ordered by our sovereign God. Therefore, when you read the book of Esther, and as I said, I encourage you to read it and reread it. When you read the book of Esther and you understand the place of the story and the plot of the story, you see the providence of the story.

[22 : 48] Because as we said, even though God isn't mentioned in the storyline, he is certainly working behind the scenes to ensure that the script which he has written is worked out to perfection.

My friend, the providence of the story is that it wasn't an accident that Esther became queen over the Persian Empire. It wasn't an accident that Mordecai overheard two king's officials plotting treason against Ehasuerus.

It wasn't an accident that Haman ruled the Purim so that the appointed day of annihilation of all the Jews would be on the thirteenth day of Adar. It wasn't an accident that king Ehasuerus couldn't sleep one night.

It wasn't an accident that he wanted the memorable deeds to be read to him in order to make him sleep. It wasn't even an accident that he had his servant pick up this particular book and read that particular memorable deed about Mordecai and what he did five years earlier.

It wasn't an accident that on the very day of Esther's feast Ehasuerus finds out about Haman's attempt of treason against his queen. It wasn't an accident that Ehasuerus hanged Haman on the very gallows which Haman had built for Mordecai.

[24 : 05] My friend, it wasn't an accident that Mordecai was exalted to this position of prime minister and Queen Esther saved the Jews and appointed this wonderful feast called Purim.

None of it was an accident. It was all according to God's sovereign plan. Providence. I find the doctrine of God's providence probably one of the most beautiful doctrines next to the doctrine of salvation.

And you know, as we said earlier, the Jews will read through the book of Esther. They'll read through it on Monday. They'll read it again on Tuesday. We'll do well to read it tonight because it's a wonderful book.

The place, the plot, and the providence of the story of the book of Esther. It's a beautiful reminder that our sovereign God is always working in the story of our lives even when we can't see it.

And you know, you know, my friend, you may look at your own life tonight and you may look at your own providence and what's taken place in your life. Even if it's been hard providence, providences of sin, providences of sickness, providences of suffering, providences of sorrow.

[25 : 24] And you might be able to look at these things and say, well, had the Lord not brought these things into my life, I would never have sought the Lord the way I did. Had it not been this way, I wouldn't have learned about the goodness of God and His sustaining grace day by day.

Had it not, had this not been my providence, I would never have discovered the comfort and consolation of my heavenly Father the way I know it tonight. You know, my friend, the place, the plot, the providence in the story of the book of Esther, it's reminding us this evening that amid all the varying and changing circumstances in our lives, our greatest hope is that every providence, every circumstance, every meeting and every parting, they are all in the sovereign hand of our heavenly Father.

And you know, we come to the Word of God tonight. Confident, are you not? Confident that the God of that Word, He's speaking to us and He's reminding us that He's the one who has written the story of our lives.

And you know, the beautiful thing is He's the one who turns the pages in our providence. He's the one who turns the pages and He's present on every page.

The Heidelberg Catechism and with us I'll close. The Heidelberg Catechism, it's a beautiful catechism.

[27 : 04] I don't know if you've come across it before. If you haven't, I'd encourage you to read it because it's set out in the form of questions and answers just like a shorter catechism. And it has particular questions attributed to 52 Lord's Days for every, well, for every year, for every week of the year.

52 Lord's Days. And on Lord's Day 10, which providentially is this coming Lord's Day, in Lord's Day 10, the Heidelberg Catechism asks, what do you understand by the providence of God?

What do you understand by the providence of God? And the Heidelberg Catechism says, God's providence is His almighty and ever-present power, whereby as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things, come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

And the second question, the Heidelberg Catechism asks on the Lord's Day 10, what does it benefit us? What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

And there's this wonderful answer. What does it benefit us? That we can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future, we can have a firm confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from His love.

[28 : 52] Do you know, my friend, it's a beautiful reminder that our God is a sovereign God. and just like Queen Esther, the place, the plot, and the providence in the story of our life, through it all, whatever is in our cup, through it all, the Lord is calling us to trust Him.

To trust that He knows what He's doing. To trust that His way is perfect. And to trust that He knows. He knows the way that you take. That's what Job came to discover.

He knows the way that I take. And that when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. The place, the plot, and the providence in the story of our lives.

I'd encourage you to read the book of Esther. It's a wonderful book where we're to trust the Lord with all our heart. May the Lord bless these few thoughts to us.

Let us pray. O Lord, O gracious God, we give thanks to Thee this evening for reminding us that even when we can't see Thee, that the Lord, one who is still there, the Lord, the God who is an ever-present help, even in our times of trouble, and Lord, that Thou wouldest remind us even anew this evening that the Lord, a God who is still with us, that the Lord of hosts upon our side doth constantly remain, and the God of Jacob is our refuge, us safely to maintain.

[30 : 30] O Lord, help us to trust Thee, to trust Thee in the darkness and to trust Thee in the light, to know that O'er the one who knows the way that we take and that when Thou hast tried us, we shall come forth as gold.

Bless, Lord, Thy people, encourage them, keep them. Keep us, Lord, by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time.

Help us, Lord, day by day, that in every, oh, in every experience that we go through in our lives, to keep trusting Thee, to trust in the Lord with all our heart, to lean not upon our own understanding, but in all our ways to acknowledge Thee, for Thou art the one who shall direct our path.

Keep us then, we pray, go before us, take away our iniquity, and receive us graciously for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. We're going to bring our time together to a conclusion by singing in Psalm 73.

Psalm 73, we're singing from verse 23 down to the end of the psalm. Psalm 73, from verse 23.

[31 : 50] A psalm that was written by Asaph, and Asaph questioned what the Lord was doing in his life, but it's when he went into God's house and worshipped the Lord that he came to understand that his God is sovereign, and he's in control.

And this is what Asaph confesses, and it's the confession of every Christian. Nevertheless, continually, O Lord, I am with Thee. Thou dost me hold by my right hand and still upholdest me.

Thou with Thy counsel while I live wilt me conduct and guide, and to Thy glory afterward receive me to abide. So Psalm 73, we'll sing from verse 23 down to the end of the psalm, and we'll stand to sing if you're able to God's praise.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Nevertheless, continually, O Lord, I am with Thee.

Thou dost me hold by my right hand and still upholdest me.

[33 : 18] For with Thy counsel while I live wilt me conduct and guide and to Thy glory afterward receive me to abide.

whom have I who have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone and in the earth whom I desire Besides Thee there is none.

My heart and heart doth fail and fail, but God doth fail me never.

For of my heart God is the strength and portion forever.

For lo, they that are far from Thee, forever perish shall, and that a hoarding from me go, Thou hast destroyed it all.

[35 : 49] But surely it is good for me that I draw near to God.

In God I trust that all Thy works I may declare a gold.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore.

Amen.