

God's People in Godless Times

Why is the Lord (partly) hidden in the Book of Esther?

godless times study #5: Esther

essential facts

The Jews were lowly captives in Persia with little political influence. (Daniel had died.) Moreover, the King of Persia, Ahasuerus, who is also known as Xerxes, allowed Haman to trick him into endorsing a plan to kill all the Jews in the vast empire. The situation seemed hopeless, but Esther, a beautiful Jewish young woman, miraculously became queen, revealed Haman's wickedness to the king, and thereby delivered her people. The Lord worked in all this, but he is never directly mentioned in the book. Why not?

possible explanations

and objections to the question

Which of the following points do you think are valid or important?

The Lord is hidden in Esther because of the Persian setting.

The Lord is hidden in Esther because of the intrigue and violence.

The Lord is hidden in Esther so that godly readers might look for Him.

The Lord is hidden in Esther because He had rejected His sinful people.

The Lord is hidden in Esther to better reveal His providential care for His own.

The Lord is hidden in Esther but still present and powerful like a stealth fighter jet.

The Lord is hidden in Esther to encourage readers to live by faith (2 Cor. 5:7, Heb. 11:1).

The Lord is NOT really hidden in Esther, because He was with His people, the Jews.

The Lord is NOT really hidden in Esther, because He heard and answered prayer (4:16).

The Lord is NOT really hidden in Esther, because He revealed Himself against His enemies.

The Lord is NOT really hidden in Esther, because He revealed Himself by saving His people.

The Lord is NOT really hidden in Esther, because His people had a joyful celebration at the end.

5. God is never mentioned directly in Esther, but...

godless nations
are not without God.

In Esther, Persian King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes as he is known in secular history, ruled over 127 provinces (1:1), but God is never directly mentioned. Nevertheless, the true King of kings silently worked behind the scenes. This is especially clear in the first seven chapters.

Because Esther is focused on the Jewish people, it is also focused on God.

Mark the lines (as completed) below as either correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() The Jews seemed weak, and they were.
A-1	() They were lowly captives (2:5-6).
A-2	() No Jew is even mentioned in chapter one.
A-3	() They were not invited to the great feasts in 1:1-8.
A-4	() There was nothing special to report about Esther (2:7).
A-5	() The Persian King was powerful (1:1-4). The Jews in Persia were not.
A-6	() Esther continued to feel weak, even after she became the queen (4:10-11).
A-7	() Nevertheless, somehow, things were very different at the end of Esther (10:1-3).
B	() Haman, the enemy of the Jews, seemed powerful, but he was not.
B-1	() He was promoted by King Ahasuerus / Xerxes (3:1-2).
B-2	() His genocidal plan against the Jews was approved (3:8-15).
B-3	() He was wealthy and proud of his success and power (5:11).
B-4	() He was obsessed with Mordecai, the Jew (3:2-5, 5:9).
B-5	() He was dependent upon his wife (5:9-14, 6:12-13).
B-6	() He was executed and removed quickly (7:5-10).
B-7	() He was like Hitler in his hatred of the Jews.
B-8	() He acted like the dragon in Rev. 12:13-17.
C	() The Lord seemed to be missing, but He was not.
C-1	() God is not mentioned, but wicked Queen Vashti was killed (1:9-22).
C-2	() God remains hidden from view, but Esther was chosen as queen (2:8-18).
C-3	() Prayer was not offered (4:16), but the king was gracious to Esther (5:1-5).
C-4	() We do not know why, but it was good that the king could not sleep (6:1-2).
C-5	() Why Mordecai was not honored earlier is unknown, but in chapter six he was.
C-6	() God's justice is not mentioned, but Haman was hanged on his own gallows (7:3-10).
C-7	() Esther shows that God has a special love and plan for the Jewish people (10:3).
C-8	() Esther shows that we can plainly see God work, without actually seeing Him.
C-9	() Esther shows that God will not allow wicked rulers to succeed in the end.

Most of the lines above are correct or partly correct. See the discussion on the next two pages for answers.

The following discussion was overheard at an imaginary Bible study on the hidden work of God. Those present were discussing the points on the worksheet on the previous page.

study leader (on God working behind the scenes)

It is easy to miss some of the great things that God does among us because they are intermixed with sinful human behavior. Several worksheet lines are about the evil deeds of Haman (B), the enemy of the Jews (7:6), but the Persian king was no saint either. The first chapter shows that he was powerful (A-5), but he drank too much, became angry, and divorced Vashti who was not a wicked woman. (Thankfully, she was not killed, C-1.) Even so, God was at work in it all (C). With these things in mind, what are your thoughts on today's worksheet lines?

history teacher (on the importance of the king)

I think there should be far more about the Persian king, Ahasuerus (B-1), on the worksheet because he is mentioned more in the book than Haman or even Esther. Just count the times they are mentioned and see! He is important in world history, too, in which he is called by his Greek name, Xerxes. Morally and militarily he was not so great (B-2), but he sure was important (A-5).

conservative activist (on evil in big government)

Yes, and did you notice how quickly the king approved Haman's plan for genocide (B-2), apparently without even knowing or caring what people were to be killed (3:8-11)? That is the sort of stupid decision making you get in large bureaucracies, and it shows that less government is better!

In addition, did anyone notice that much of the last three chapters in Esther are about undoing the decrees that the king had allowed Haman to make? In a way, Haman was quickly removed, but in another way he was not (B-6). His evil decrees against the Jews were still in effect. Since Persia was a huge bureaucracy (1:1), changing anything and draining the bureaucratic swamp was very difficult. Yet, it needed to be done, and it still needs to be done today as well!

avid Bible reader (on the need to focus on God)

I'm not into politics, but I'm glad that there is a lot about God on our worksheet (C). Exodus, Esther, Daniel, Revelation, and the Bible as a whole all show that rulers can not avoid God. God's special love and care for his people (C-7) makes doing so impossible. The Lord does not allow wicked rulers and their henchmen to prosper forever (C-9), even if they boast about it for a while (B-3). So let's not spend all our time thinking and talking about kings and bureaucrats. We need to see God at work, even if it's difficult to do at times (C-8).

history teacher (on the need to see God in history)

We need to see God at work in history, too, and Esther helps us do just that. The Persians in Esther fit perfectly with what we know about them from ancient history relative to the Greeks. One of the main reasons Xerxes / Ahasuerus failed against the Greeks was because of the disunity inherent in the huge Persian empire and its bureaucracy. The Greeks were more nimble.

study leader (on God using small things)

Perhaps we are too focused on the biggest changes that we see in Esther, the removal of Haman and the promotion of Mordecai (A-7, C-9). Let's not forget that God used various small things to bring about these great changes. We need to see God in the small stuff, because he often leads and shows himself through the details. A number of the C lines on the worksheet are about small but significant matters. Did any of the lines from C-2 to C-7 catch your attention?

prayer group leader (on prayer in 4:16)

Yes, I'm very interested in line C-3 and verse 4:16 because they are about prayer. The king extended his favor to Queen Esther in 5:2, after many had fasted and prayed in 4:16. Her life was in danger for going into the king's court without being invited. So she called for fasting which, of course, involved prayer. The first part of line C-3 is incorrect.

retired military officer (on the stress on danger)

Why do you think it says *fast* instead of *pray* in 4:16? Some believe it is because the author wished to avoid mentioning God even indirectly, but I'm convinced that it is because the author wished to stress the seriousness of the situation. Prayer was offered (C-3), but the fasting clearly points to the danger that Esther had to face for the sake of her people.

study leader (on Esther's bravery)

Yes, Esther was special because of her bravery as well as her beauty (A-4). No wonder she is the second most mentioned woman in the Bible! (Most people don't know that she is second only to Sarah.) The C lines are more about the providence of God than Esther herself, however.

history teacher (on God's perfect timing)

I think, divine providence in Esther is best seen in the timing of various things, such as when the king could not sleep on a certain night (C-4) and thereby was reminded just in time about Mordecai (6:1-5, C-5). Moreover as a believer, I totally agree with line C-8, that we can plainly see God at work without actually seeing him. Skeptics, of course, deny this, viewing the safe return from Persia and Babylon, the earlier deliverance from Egypt, and the recent return to Israel as mere coincidences. The skeptics and scoffers have great faith in godless chance!

study leader (on God's ironic justice)

Yes, but don't you love the irony in it all? Hitler's hatred of the Jews unwittingly played a key role in the Jewish return to the promised land in our day (B-8), and Haman's hatred played a key role in his own removal since he build the gallows on which he was executed. God's justice is not directly mentioned, but it is difficult to miss (C-6). — So what is the application of all this?

history teacher (on living by faith)

I think Esther is a call to live by faith rather than by sight alone (Heb. 11:1-2, C-8). In this, we should expect by faith to see God work in little things as well as in big things and human history (C-9) which is centered on the Jewish people (C-7) and the Messiah (John 4:22).

study leader (on seeing God through prayer)

Amen! But to rightly see God in history, politics, and daily life we must try to distinguish between that which God sovereignly wills and that which he allows sinful men and nations to do. I believe the omission of God's name in Esther supports this word of caution. Moreover 4:16 shows that we should take situations and actions seriously and pray. We will see God through answered prayer.

my application
