

Main Idea: In Esther 10, two things impress me, one that's obvious, the other not so obvious. In essence, these two observations tie together the whole story by illustrating the theme of the book, the amazing providence of God.

- I. At first glance the story ends where it began (1-2).
 - A. A pagan ruler is still in control.
 - B. A pagan ruler is still doing what he wants.
 1. Xerxes imposed tribute.
 2. Xerxes possessed power.
- II. Upon closer look the story shows the difference God makes (3).
 - A. We discover what God did *for* Mordecai.
 1. He's second in the kingdom.
 2. He's respected by his peers.
 - B. We discover what God did *through* Mordecai.
 1. He worked for the good of his people.
 2. He spoke up for the shalom of his people.

Wrap Up: Highlights from the book of Esther...

1. The Lord is in control of everything.
2. The Lord operates by a plan.
3. The Lord will take care of His people.
4. The Lord specializes in taking people from where they are to where they should be.
5. The Lord gives us opportunities that He wants us to use for Him.
6. It's amazing to watch the Lord at work!

Scripture Reading: Psalm 97

He never would have become the president of the United States had he not come down with polio.

That pretty much sums up James Tobin's biography, *The Man He Became: How FDR Defied Polio to Win the Presidency*. I listened to the audiobook a couple of months ago, about the same time we began our series in Esther. I found myself fascinated by the realization that, as in the case of the book of Esther, God is at work even when you can't see Him.

Again and again, the Living God orchestrated events that resulted in Franklin Roosevelt becoming not just president, but president in one of the most influential times our country has ever known.

Let me read for you the book's promo:²

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

In 1921, at the age of thirty-nine, Roosevelt was the brightest young star in the Democratic Party. One day he was racing his children around their summer home. Two days later he could not stand up. Hopes of a quick recovery faded fast. "He's through," said allies and enemies alike. Even his family and close friends misjudged their man, as they and the nation would learn in time.

With a painstaking reexamination of original documents, James Tobin uncovers the twisted chain of accidents that left FDR paralyzed; he reveals how polio recast Roosevelt's fateful partnership with his wife, Eleanor; and he shows that FDR's true victory was not over paralysis but over the ancient stigma attached to the crippled. Tobin also explodes the conventional wisdom of recent years—that FDR deceived the public about his condition. In fact, Roosevelt and his chief aide, Louis Howe, understood that only by displaying himself as a man who had come back from a knockout punch could FDR erase the perception that had followed him from childhood—that he was a pampered, too smooth pretty boy without the strength to lead the nation. As Tobin persuasively argues, FDR became president less in spite of polio than because of polio.

The Man He Became affirms that true character emerges only in crisis and that in the shaping of this great American leader character was all.

It's important to learn to see what God is doing when it doesn't appear as if God is doing anything. In others' lives, and in our own.

D. L. Moody was born in 1837 in Northfield, Massachusetts, into a very poor family. At seventeen he went to Boston to work in his uncle's shoestore. It was there that God used Edward Kimball to lead Moody to Christ. Moody prospered as a shoe salesman, but in time he left the business so he could devote all his energies to evangelism.

For the next thirty-eight years until he died, Moody labored to make Christ known. During his ministry he traveled more than a million miles and preached (it is estimated) to more than one hundred million persons--and that was before the days of public address systems, radio, and television. It is claimed that he personally dealt with 750,000 individuals.³

It's amazing what God can do with a man who's yielded to His service.

Consider John Wesley. Two hundred years ago the Spirit of God reached and enlisted this man for service in the advancement of the gospel. Wesley ministered for over fifty years. In that time he traveled one quarter of a million miles, and preached some 40,000 sermons. He averaged 800 sermons a year for fifty years! Through his ministry scores of people came to know the Savior.⁴ It is awesome to behold what God can do through one person surrendered to His service.

Maybe you're thinking, "I would like for my life to make a difference for God. He means so much to me. And I truly want Him to use me for His glory. But I'm no D. L. Moody nor John Wesley. Can God use *me*?"

² Amazon book promo. <http://www.amazon.com/The-Man-He-Became-Presidency/dp/0743265157>

³ Warren Wiersbe, *Giant Steps*, 208.

⁴ Robert Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*, 261.

Indeed, He can! The Bible is full of stories about ordinary people that God used to accomplish extraordinary feats. We've been examining one such account for the past couple of months--the story of Esther. In this narrative we've watched God take two very ordinary people, Esther and her cousin Mordecai, and accomplish something quite spectacular through them.

Today we come to the end of our journey. The book of Esther concludes with a short but significant chapter. Esther 9 was the longest chapter in the book. Chapter 10 is the shortest--only three verses. We might be inclined to skip over Esther 10. Most commentaries have very little to say about it, but like all of God's Word, this portion is important. In Esther 10, we discover two observations, one that's obvious, the other not so obvious. In essence, these two observations tie together the whole story by illustrating the theme of the book, the amazing providence of God.

I. At first glance the story ends where it began (1-2).

How does the story end? Notice verses 1-2, "King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores.² And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?"

The narrator informs us of two news items. First we're told that...

A. A pagan ruler is still in control. His name is Xerxes, *King Xerxes*--as the text specifies. Xerxes is still in control just like he was when the story began.

Remember how the book began? The first verse of Esther states, "This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush (1:1)."

When the story began a pagan ruler was in control. When it finishes, he's *still* in control. What was Xerxes doing when the story began? Whatever he wanted! In chapter one he threw two parties (one lasted 180 days), drank until he couldn't think straight, ordered his wife to display her beauty before his male guests, and then banished her from the palace for her insubordination.

That's how the book began. How does it end? The same way.

B. A pagan ruler is still doing what he wants. We're given two specific pieces of information about the king in verses 1-2. First we're told that...

1. *Xerxes imposed tribute.* He "laid tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea," as the KJV puts it. The word "tribute" elsewhere refers to forced taxation or involuntary labor (Exod. 1:11; 1 Kgs 5:13).

Just how extensive was Xerxes' taxation? He forced his whole empire to keep his coffer full. According to Herodotus, the region of Babylonia was responsible to provide supplies for Xerxes for four months out of every twelve, with the rest of Asia being responsible for the remaining eight months (Baldwin, 114). Xerxes was a man who got what he wanted. The reason is linked to a second piece of information given in verse 2...

2. *Xerxes possessed power.* Xerxes ruled as king for twenty-one years (486-465 B.C.). In fact, verse 2 reports that the power of Xerxes was documented in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.

You say, "I don't get it. Why are we told *that*? What's the significance?" The writer of Esther doesn't want us to miss this point. *This* king is powerful. This king is a world

ruler. This king does whatever he wants. Yet know this. Even a ruler as powerful as Xerxes does not intimidate God or frustrate the purposes of God.

Let that sink in. This book begins and ends with the spotlight on Xerxes--a pagan, self-centered dictator who had a low view of the sanctity of life, a man who could care less about the Lord God and His Word. Answer this. Does such a man pose a threat to the plan of God?

Be careful. Though few of us would *say* it, I wonder if many of us don't question the sovereignty of God by the way we *live*.

I've been noticing a common attitude in the Christian community, and sadly, I've seen it in my own heart. It's the response of *fear*. A lot of people these days who claim allegiance to Christ are demonstrating fear and anxiety about the secular scene. We see what's happening in Washington--and wonder if God sees it. We hear words of hostility against those "narrow minded people who believe in absolute truth"--and wonder if God hears it.

Beloved, the book of Esther reminds us that as Christians we have reason to exhibit confidence, not fear. Why? Because we *know* Who is on the throne! In the lunchroom we ought to give our peers cause to say to us, "Hey, I've noticed something different about you. You don't seem to be unnerved by what's happening in this vicious world. What makes you tick?" And we can tell them, "I have hope, and the reason I have hope is because I know the Person who's in control. Would you like to meet Him? His name is Jesus Christ."

There's observation #1 from Esther 10. At first glance, the story ends where it began. A pagan ruler is still in control and doing what he wants. That's the conclusion to which a casual reading of this book might bring you. There's no mention of God anywhere. All we see is this king who's doing what he wants to do. But look closer. Here's observation #2...

II. Upon closer look the story shows the difference God makes (3).

Here's the final verse of the book, "Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews."

How do you explain this phenomenal turn of events in the life of Mordecai? I'm intrigued by how verse 2 answers that question. It states, "And all his acts of power and might [speaking of Xerxes], together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which *the king had raised him*."

Notice that. Who raised Mordecai to a position of greatness? According to the official records, *Xerxes* did. You say, "I thought God did it." He did. We know that, but Xerxes didn't. And most people didn't. Only people of faith recognize the work of God.

Have you noticed how people will go to great lengths to explain away the works of God without mentioning God? Remember how the enemies of Jesus explained the empty tomb? They spread the story that the disciples came during the night and stole the body (Matt 28:13).

Think of the virgin birth. It was a miracle, wasn't it, a work of God. Not according to critics who said that Jesus was an illegitimate child.

What about creation? How did this world get here? Genesis 1:1 says that God created the heavens and the earth. The humanist says, "No He didn't. This universe is here by natural causes."

A classic example of how people try to explain away the works of God is the account of the blind man in John 9. Jesus gave him sight. It was an undeniable work of God, right? Not according to Jesus' critics. Some said, "It's a different man! He only *looks like* the blind man."

We face the same challenge today. Have you ever shared your testimony with a friend about how the Lord changed your life, and the response you got was a blank stare that said, "Yea, right. So you say God is in your life. Tell me another story."

Take heart, Christian friend. The book of Esther reminds us that even when people don't recognize God, He's still in control fulfilling His plan. A classic case in point is Mordecai. In verse 3 we discover that God made a difference in Mordecai's life in two ways.

A. We discover what God did *for* Mordecai. We've given a couple of significant details about Mordecai in verse 3.

1. *He's second in the kingdom.* Second in rank only to Xerxes. Answer this. Who held that position *before* Mordecai did? You'll find the answer in 3:1--Haman did. Haman is the man who hated Mordecai and who plotted to destroy every Jew from the planet. This Haman was once the second most powerful man in Xerxes' realm. Now Mordecai is. Haman is gone, killed on his own gallows. His estate now belongs to Esther and is being managed by Mordecai.

How can you explain that turn of events? There's only one way. God did it. In my estimation it takes greater "faith" to say the events in Mordecai's life just "happened" than it does to ascribe them to God. Notice a second detail about Mordecai.

2. *He's respected by his peers.* He's "preeminent" (Hebrew means "great") among the Jews and held in "high esteem" by his kinsmen. May I remind you that it hasn't always been that way for Mordecai? Remember, it was his refusal to bow before Haman that caused the edict to be given calling for the destruction of all the Jews. His actions almost cost His people their lives. I can just imagine what his neighbors were saying to him, "Mordecai, if you want to be a martyr, go ahead! But most martyrs go to the stake alone. We don't appreciate you signing us up without asking first!"

Maybe there was no animosity from his peers, but of this we can be sure. The Jews surely loved Mordecai *after* the edict was reversed! I see that as another evidence of what God did *for* Mordecai. There's a second way in which God made a difference in his life.

B. We discover what God did *through* Mordecai. There is a story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees, and Hank Aaron, who at that time was the chief power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves. The teams were playing in the World Series, and as usual Yogi was keeping up his ceaseless chatter, intended to pep up his teammates on the one hand, and distract the Milwaukee batters on the other. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, "Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark." Aaron didn't say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After

rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, "I didn't come up here to read."⁵

That's the response of a man who was focused on the task at hand. I see a couple of indicators of the focus of Mordecai's life at the end of verse 3. These indicators explain why his fellow Jews held him in high esteem.

1. *He worked for the good of his people.* He didn't promote his own interests, but the good (Hebrew *tov*) of his people. And secondly...

2. *He spoke up for the shalom (NIV, "welfare") of his people.* That's the word used in the Hebrew text--*shalom*. It occurs 237 times in the Old Testament and means more than absence of conflict. *Shalom* depicts wholeness and prosperity of all kinds--health, security, material plenty, and good relationships (Baldwin, 115).

What a legacy Mordecai left behind! According to the record of Scripture, He was a man whom God entrusted with much and who used what he had for the good of others. That's the mark of true greatness. To love God--that's the first priority--and then to love others--priority number two. Rather than hoarding, Mordecai helped others.

Isn't that what our Savior did? Matthew 20:28 says, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Perhaps right now you're thinking, "I want to do something significant for God. But I can't. I don't have what it takes. I could really serve Him *if only* I had this, or *if only* I was that." My friend, that's not true.

The issue is this. Are you willing to serve the Lord right where you are with what you have? Will you put Christ first in your life right where you are? You see, if God desires He can promote you (or demote you!) and create different opportunities in your life--like He did with Mordecai.

But don't live in an *if only* world. Choose to serve the Lord wholeheartedly right where you are today--and look out! It truly is amazing to watch what God can do with just one person who's yielded to Him.

God took a man who was headed for a hanging, and promoted him to the second highest position in the kingdom. He's the same Sovereign who took a young man named Joseph from an Egyptian prison to Pharaoh's palace in one day. He's also the One who took Moses from tending sheep on the backside of a desert and used Him to lead two million Jews out of slavery. Later He promoted a shepherd boy named David from caring for lambs to be the shepherd of His people, Israel.

Amos was a farmer until God called him to be a prophet. Daniel was an unknown teen in exile until God used him to get the attention of King Nebuchadnezzar. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were willing to face death in a fiery furnace rather than dishonor God, and as a result of their faithfulness were promoted to key positions of leadership in Babylon. Peter, James, and John were ordinary fishermen--until the Lord called them to be fishers of *men*.

What did Joseph, Moses, David, Amos, and all the others have in common? This. God did something *for* them, and then He did something *through* them. And beloved, God hasn't changed. He's still in the business of doing extraordinary things through ordinary people.

⁵from *Nehemiah, Learning to Lead*, J.M. Boice, Revell, 1990, p. 38

Wrap Up: Highlights from the book of Esther...

Answer this. Who's the main character in the book? Any votes for Esther? How about Mordecai? Here's my opinion. The main character is someone who's not even mentioned. It's *God*. Though we can learn from the actions of the human characters in the story, the purpose of this book is to teach us about God. So to wrap up our study, I want to affirm six lessons we've observed about the Lord in Esther.

1. *The Lord is in control of everything.* Not most things, but everything. He was in control when a fifth century despot deposed his queen (ch 1). He was in control when a Jewish orphan girl won a beauty contest and the right to be the replacement queen (ch 2). He was in control when Haman set in motion his deadly plot (in ch 3), when Mordecai convinced Esther to intervene (ch 4), and when Esther risked her life to approach the king (ch 5). He was in control of a seemingly insignificant detail in chapter 6--the king couldn't sleep one night and just "happened" to discover a slight he'd committed five years earlier. God was in control when Mordecai was promoted and Haman executed (chs 6-7). As He was when Xerxes put into law a second edict in chapter 8 giving the Jews authority to defend themselves against their enemies (which they did in ch 9).

Esther affirms the providence of God. Nothing just "happens" in life. In fact, if just one event could occur outside of the sovereign influence and care of the Lord, then we could not trust Him. But it can't. The Lord is in control of everything.

2. *The Lord operates by a plan.* The Bible teaches that in eternity past God decreed everything that would come to pass. He was not influenced by anyone or anything in the establishment of these decrees, but established His plan solely in conformity with the purpose of His will (Eph 1:11; 2 Tim 1:9).

In accordance with His decree, God created the heavens and the earth. And in spite of mankind's willful rebellion, God continued to perform His established decree by providing a means of redemption. He devised a plan whereby His Son would enter this world and give His life as a substitutionary payment for undeserving sinners. Right now God is forming a people for Himself (Gal 3:13; Rev 5:9). In His providence, God cares for His creation and His people in order to accomplish His purposes (Rom 8:28).

Beloved, the events of life are not haphazard, but work together for God's good purpose. Do you know what that means? We can *trust God*.

3. *The Lord will take care of His people.* Four thousand years ago God made a promise to a man named Abraham. He promised to bless the world through the descendants of Abraham. He promised to bless those who blessed Abraham's descendants and curse those who cursed Abraham's descendants (Gen 12:3). Later God promised to send the Messiah into the world as a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 49:10).

Here's why Haman did not succeed. He *could* not succeed. Nor can any person who tries to resist God's people. The Lord keeps His promises.

Even an event as tragic as the killing of the Messiah was under the control of God. In Acts 2:23 Peter stated concerning Jesus, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." The Lord will take care of His people.

4. *The Lord specializes in taking people from where they are to where they should be.* Where are we? We're born with a self-focused orientation. Where should we be? God created us to live for His glory.

At the beginning of the book, Esther and Mordecai are hardly role models. They're living outside of the promised land, outside of God's will. Esther had to lower God's standard to participate in an immoral beauty contest--and Mordecai encouraged her to do it. Then she married a non-Jew in violation of God's Word. Both Mordecai and Esther hid their Jewish identity.

But then God began to change them. And God used them. By the end of the story Esther is willing to risk her own life for the good of others. And so is Mordecai. It's true. Our God specializes in taking people from where they are to where they should be. Aren't you glad?

You see, God doesn't tell us to "clean up our own act." He knows we can't. But He does for us what we can't do by ourselves--through the power of Jesus Christ. If you don't know Jesus Christ, you can't be God's kind of person. But if you do, you can change. God is committed to transforming your life.

How should we respond? By thanking Him. And cooperating with Him.

5. *The Lord gives us opportunities that He wants us to use for Him.* The key phrase of the book is tucked away in Esther 4:15 where Mordecai asked Esther, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position *for such a time as this?*"

Have you surrendered your life to the Lord? Are you allowing Him to use you and the things He has entrusted to you for His purposes? You have neighbors who need what the Lord has equipped you to give them. And relatives. Maybe classmates, too.

John Wesley once said, "I want the whole Christ for my Savior, the whole Bible for my book, the whole church for my fellowship, and the whole world for my mission field."

Is that your passion? If not, will you ask the Lord to change your heart starting right now? And if you do, hold on to your seat because...

6. *It's amazing to watch the Lord at work!* It's amazing to behold what the Lord can do through just one person who's yielded to Him.

God works through the weak, through the insignificant. That's why He chose the cross. Oh the cross may be an embarrassment to sophisticated people, but not to redeemed people. We know that on the cross one man--the God-man--died for our sins and paid sin's penalty. The crowd mocked Him, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross. Save yourself!" (Matt 27:40) But rather than saving Himself, He died to save us. And then He conquered death! How amazing to watch the Lord at work!