

PLANS & PERIPETY

Someone said life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans. Whether you're working toward a plan, you're likely dealing with what takes place outside your plans. This happened to a Jewish orphan girl, chronicled in the Bible's book of Esther, inbetween the timeframes of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, hundreds of years before Christ.

1- PEOPLE WITHOUT GOD - have pagan values. The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible which does not directly mention the name of God. Yet this distinction helps us examine what God might be doing in our own life stories, as we ask how does God's plan fit in with yours? Prof KH Jobes notes, "Esther is perhaps the most striking Biblical statement of God's providence: as in some invisible and inscrutable way, God governs all creatures, actions, and circumstances through the normal and ordinary course of human life, without intervention of the miraculous."

Esther's cast of characters opens with King Xerxes of Persia, who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. History will write him off as a pandering playboy who lost a crucial battle with Greece. But in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. It was in Susa, one of three capital cities. For 180 days he showed off his riches, with great pomp and splendor. And pagan values.

2- SOME LEADERS ARE LOSERS - making big mistakes. After a week of partying, things take a turn. In his drunkenness, the King orders Queen Vashti to show the debauched guests her great beauty. She refused, likely because she may have been expected to wear only her crown. The enraged king consults his cabinet, "*the wise men who knew the times.*" These were likely astrologers, reading the stars and casting lots, because their worldview reckoned the spirit world controlled their earthly destinies.

But the one true God is working behind the scenes. The leaders decide that disobedient Vashti must be deposed, and she was fortunate not to lose her life along with her position. The king decreed that all women must give honor to their husbands, sending it in every language throughout the empire.

3- A CRISIS CREATES CONFLICT - and risks chaos. Behind the scenes, God is raising up courageous people. In His providence ordinary human events lead to extraordinary happenings. Jobes observes, "the book of Esther is an example of how at one crucial moment in history the covenant promises God had made were fulfilled, not by miracle, but through completely ordinary events." There's a word for this: "*peripety*," which means the reversal of expected outcome. It's a major theme spanning the entire Bible.

The king must have a queen, so he holds a national beauty contest. Chapter 2 introduces two new characters. Mordecai was a Jew exiled from Jerusalem, who was raising Esther, the orphaned daughter of his relative. And he serves in the royal court of Xerxes. All of this was part of ordinary human experience in the difficult time of the exile of God's people, a thousand miles from home.

4- CHALLENGES BECOME OPPORTUNITIES - for better things. Esther was "*a beautiful young woman*" and amazingly she got selected, and found favor in the royal palace. But Esther "*had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to.*" As her older cousin or "uncle" he was responsible for her welfare, and kept track of her well-being. We are never too old to appreciate wise adults, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and others that God providentially provides.

This story records several reversals, as the peripety unfolds. Vashi disobeyed, Xerxes deposed her. He holds a contest, and "*he loved Esther more than all the others, and set the royal crown on her head and made her queen.*" Peripety! An unexpected outcome! Esther had been orphaned and adopted. She obeyed, and now she is crowned queen of the empire. And this is but the beginning of a dramatic story.

5- GOD'S WAY OR MAN'S WAY - it's a daily choice. Mordecai was an official in the king's gate, and he overheard a plot to overthrow the king. Mordecai told Esther who told the king, who investigated. The perpetrators were hanged. Life in the royal court goes on. But a new challenge arises in chapter 3, along with a new character: Haman the Agagite. Now, Agag is listed in the Bible as the king of the Amalekites, arch-enemies of ancient Israel, who gave Moses and Saul much trouble. Now this descendant will give much trouble to God's exiled people. Because Haman got promoted above all the other officials.

They all bowed down and paid homage to him. Except Mordecai. It's another crisis - and opportunity for faith. Mordecai told Haman he could not bow down, because he was a Jew. Haman's costumery and position would have honored his pagan gods. In Exodus 20 God had said "*You shall have no other gods before Me,*" and "*you shall not bow down to images.*" Mordecai could not do such a thing.

6- DRAMA RATCHETS HIGHER - with the highest stakes. Haman was "*filled with fury and sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom.*" What if your actions jeopardized everyone like you in the whole country? It was just part of ordinary life in a pagan kingdom. Haman cast lots, called "*pur*" every month to determine the most propitious time to act. He bribed the king with an enormous sum of money.

He told him the Jews did not keep the laws. Xerxes made a royal edict to all the provinces, for a day of reckoning against the Jews, when they would all be annihilated and plundered. The two men sealed the deal with a drink. But the city was thrown into confusion. Chaos. Catastrophe. What will God do? ☐