
Courageous Faith in Vulnerable Times

DAVE BAST

One of the basic assumptions Christians make is that God is at work in the world bringing about his purpose to save his people and renew the whole creation; but a basic question is: How is God doing this, and what is our role in the project, if any? We will think about that today on *Groundwork*, by looking at the familiar Bible story of Esther. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and today we have a very special guest to help us in this program and the next program in our study of Esther. She is Dr. Carol Bechtel, who is a professor of Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and also the author of a commentary on the book of Esther in the *Interpretation* series. So, welcome, Carol.

CAROL BECHTEL

Thank you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is good to have you with us. Recently on *Groundwork* we did a study of Ezra and Nehemiah; that series was called: *Now What? Rebuilding when Life Falls Apart*; and that, of course...Ezra and Nehemiah are both set in the post-exilic period when, after Cyrus of Persia had released the Jews from what had been their Babylonian captivity, some went back to Jerusalem to try to rebuild the walls and the Temple; but in this just short two-part series, we are in a similar time period there, Carol, but we are back in Persia with the story of a lot of the Jews who did not go back. So, they are still living there, around the year 483 (BC), or somewhere along in there...a little bit murky where exactly the timeframe, but it is in that same period. Carol, could you say a little bit about the book of Esther? Sort of its history...anything you know about who...if anybody knows who wrote it...how long its been kind of accepted as part of the Canon of scripture...and things like that?

CAROL BECHTEL

Sure; so, we don't really know who wrote the book of Esther, but it was somebody who clearly cared a lot about giving the people of faith some guidance in terms of how to live a faithful life in the midst of an unfaithful culture; and how to live in the Diaspora, essentially. We know that it was written in the early Greek period, but the story itself is set in the Persian period...a century or so before. If you think of an analogy, it is a little bit like the TV series *Mash*, which is set in the Korean War, but the story is actually being written during the Vietnam War, and it allows the author to make some points obliquely about his own time by telling a story about another time.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is really interesting; so, the early Greek period would be, you know, after Alexander the Great had conquered all that...the Persian Empire was no more...

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

It is set back then, yes.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

What can you say about the tradition of canonicity for Esther? I mean, that is a technical term...when was it included? Because it seems a bit like an outlier, doesn't it? It doesn't take place in the Holy Land, as we might say. It is from a much later period. It is focusing outside. Was there ever a question about whether this should be included in the Bible?

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, it is part of the writings—it is part of that section of the Old Testament canon that was accepted later. One of the fights about the book of Esther is that the name for God is not used in the book. There is actually a very good reason for that, I think, and it is a kind of precaution against accidentally pronouncing the name for God, which is a big no-no, in the midst of the celebration of Purim, which is typically a Jewish celebration that this story explains, but it involves a lot of drinking; and it is almost as if not mentioning the name for God is a way of protecting the readers of the book from accidentally pronouncing the name of God; at least that is the story that explains it.

DAVE BAST

So, Purim was a later festival...a lesser, in a sense, compared to the big three of Passover and Tabernacles and Pentecost; but it was celebrated by subsequent generations of Jews.

CAROL BECHTEL

And this story explains the origins...

DAVE BAST

How it began, yes.

CAROL BECHTEL

Of the celebration of Purim. Now, to say that God is not mentioned in the book is *not* to say that God is not very much a character in the book. It is just that God is a character behind the scenes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, it is unusual to have an entire book...what, ten chapters...with no reference to God, or certainly to the name of God. Once in a while, there are segments... So, like the book of Exodus basically doesn't mention God throughout the whole first chapter, and yet, God is present through the Hebrew midwives. He is making his people into a nation, as he promised Abram, but he is not mentioned right away; but eventually, of course, God comes in by the end of Exodus 1 and 2 and following; but yes, for an entire book to not have God...but maybe that is a little bit...Carol and Dave...also a reflection of our own experiences; that God is not often a visible, audible presence in our day-to-day lives either.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly; and I think the place to look for God in the book of Esther is in the so-called coincidences. Frederick Buechner says a coincidence is just God's way of remaining anonymous; and God is all over the book of Esther in these so-called coincidences.

DAVE BAST

That is a wonderful point because, you know, frankly, I have never seen God...I have never heard God's voice telling me to do this or that; and Esther is similar in that respect; and there are no miracles...at least, no obvious...no walking on water...no loaves and fishes...but these coincidences occur again and again, don't they?

CAROL BECHTEL

They do; and I think that is one of the things that helps us to identify with the book of Esther, because God doesn't just swashbuckle in and do stuff; but if you look at the way God moves through individual characters...ordinary people, as it were...who are in extraordinary situations, that is where you see God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it just so happened that I met this person at that point in my life when I needed that kind of help, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is probably one of those instances too, I think most people can testify that if we have a sense of God leading us in life...if we have a sense of what we traditionally call the providence of God—God's providing for us—it is something we usually recognize later. At the time, it did seem like a coincidence, or it just seemed like, well, kind of a good idea, or I'll give this a shot; and then twenty years later when you are telling the story to your kids or grandkids, you say: But now I know, God was leading me, as it turned out. I thought it was just sort of random...just something I was going to give a whirl for a week or two; and it became my whole life, and it was wonderful. That is often how we recognize it.

CAROL BECHTEL

I often tell my students providence only shows up in the rearview mirror...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is a great point. We want to get to the story of Esther. It may be familiar to many of our listeners. It is a pretty dramatic story. It is pretty well known. As we have just been saying, it is a wonderful story of coincidences, in which God shows up through the actions of people. So, we will turn to that in just a moment.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we also are very pleased to welcome to this program, and our next program, Dr. Carol Bechtel, who is helping us understand and grapple with the story of Esther, and the book of Esther. So again, welcome, Carol.

CAROL BECHTEL

Thank you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Say a little bit...we mentioned in the first segment that the precise timing of this book is a little bit murky. It makes it look like all the action is happening in Persia around maybe 483 BC. We are going to learn about King Ahasuerus, as it is in the Hebrew, and some translations render that as Xerxes, a sort of more Greek name; but Carol, you were saying to Dave and to me as we were preparing for this program that you cannot quite follow that timeline; it doesn't quite jibe with actual history, right?

CAROL BECHTEL

There is some discussion among historians about exactly how the book of Esther could fit with the general timeline. So, I think we just need to relax a little bit and not try to be too precise about how we set the date; but, in essence, Ahasuerus is understood to be Xerxes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, the writers of the books of the Bible were very intentional in what they did, weren't they? There is a temptation to say well, that guy got his history wrong because it doesn't line up with what the Greeks wrote about the same time; but, they always had a purpose in mind. They didn't make unwitting mistakes; they were trying to convey a message of some kind.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly; and I think this author is trying to set the story in a particular time in Israel's history. It coincides roughly with what we know of world history, but to worry too much over those details sends us down a rabbit hole, and actually distracts us from some of the theological points that the author is trying to make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's get to the story; and again, keep in mind, for our listeners, that Ahasuerus is the same as Xerxes and the other way around, depending on what Bible translation you read. We are going to be referring to both names in the course of these two programs; but here is how the story begins:

This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. ²In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers—the army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors were all present...(and so forth; and then it goes on)...⁴He displayed the great wealth of his kingdom for a hundred eighty days in all...(this is a very long banquet, people)⁵And when the days were completed... (and again, there are lots and lots of descriptions here; particularly, though, of the drinking.)⁷Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸Drinking was by flagons without restraint, for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

So, an interesting little display there of extravagance in some curious moral dimensions.

CAROL BECHTEL

Indeed; in fact, one of the commentators asks: Who is minding the empire during this hundred and eighty-seven-day drinking bash, to which the entire army is invited?

DAVE BAST

Right; and all the high officials. I mean, they all kind of left their posts; and what kind of a guy is this anyway, this Ahasuerus, that he has to somehow impress his royal officials, whom he could simply cut their heads off at a word?

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes; and I think it is important that we ask that question. There is a tendency among modern readers to read this lavish description and admire Ahasuerus, as if it an episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*; and I think it is important to ask: Is the author of Esther wanting us to admire this character? And I actually don't think we are meant to admire this foreign king who is the emperor of excess, as much as anything else.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we will also see, he cannot seem to hold a thought in his head for five seconds. Twice in this book we are going to see...mostly in the next program...he forgets all about really important stuff that he did or was part of.

CAROL BECHTEL

I had noticed that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, good; so, he is the lord of the world—one hundred twenty-seven provinces—no one has this kind of power. He is the most powerful man in the world, and he basically spends his time pointing out all his expensive dishes and whatnot to people, and then drinking; and in fact, at the climax of this half-year long—six-month—one-hundred-eighty-day banquet—they drank for seven straight days...kind of drank themselves silly; and then we read this:

¹⁰On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who attended him ¹¹to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the people and the officials her beauty, for she was fair to behold. ¹²But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command, and the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

So, here is the climax.

CAROL BECHTEL

So, the beautiful irony of that is the most powerful emperor in the world cannot control his own wife. On the other hand, if you think of this story from Vashti's perspective, I mean, would you go? She is in a very bad position here. So, even though we laugh at the irony of this, when you think about the story from Vashti's perspective, you also have to recognize that this is deadly dangerous.

DAVE BAST

And brave, really.

CAROL BECHTEL

Very brave.

DAVE BAST

This is an act of integrity. I mean, this is a woman we should admire. We would like to know more about her, wouldn't we?

CAROL BECHTEL

We would; and it sets up the rest of the story in a very important way, because it illustrates the consequences of disobeying this king.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, you are right; it sets it up, because he is done with Vashti now, so he wants a new queen. So, he holds sort of an empire-wide audition. Some people call it a beauty contest. Carol, you were saying that is probably not quite the right term, but he wants to have a selection of women to choose from, right?

CAROL BECHTEL

Right; so, he wakes up the next morning and realizes he doesn't have a wife, and turns to his servants for ideas as to how to solve that problem. I really want to caution us against using that analogy of beauty contest, however, because I think it conjures up images of scholarships and parting gifts, and this isn't that. This is more akin to sex trafficking.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the winner gets a diadem on her head...

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, the winner gets to marry Ahasuerus, that is a prize.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the losers go to the harem...

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Because their audition...this is brutal, bad stuff.

CAROL BECHTEL

You go from harem A to harem B. You don't get to go home. Never mind if you have a family or a fiancé, this is what you are stuck with.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is sort of the moral morass in which the hidden hand of God has to be seen as working somehow; and indeed, in Esther Chapter 2, we meet Esther, whose Hebrew name is Hadassah, and she is brought forward by a man named Mordecai, who is going to become a key figure in this whole story. Mordecai brings Hadassah or Esther in.

⁹The girl pleased the king, and won his favor. He quickly provided her with cosmetic treatments and her portion of food...(and so forth). ¹⁰Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. ¹¹Every day, Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was, and how she fared.

So, Esther rises to the top of this mess, but hides her Jewish identity.

CAROL BECHTEL

So, Mordecai is Esther's cousin, but he is clearly kind of a father figure to her...

DAVE BAST

Right.

CAROL BECHTEL

And at this point in the story, she is taking her orders from him. So, I don't think it is fair to judge Esther too harshly for hiding her Jewish identity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Okay...

CAROL BECHTEL

She is obeying Mordecai.

DAVE BAST

But, it is also...I mean, as we hear this story in Sunday school, you know, we think: Oh, great. Our girl wins. You don't have a sense of what a horrible thing this was; and what a precarious position Esther was put in.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly; I think winning is a very relative term; and when we see Mordecai pacing outside the palace, worrying about her, especially when she "wins," I think we as readers ought to be a worried about her as he is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but here she is now, in this position, and the question becomes: Now what? And as we close out this program, we will go a little more deeply into the story, and see how Esther uses this position for the advantage, ultimately, of her people. So stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

CAROL BECHTEL

And I am Carol Bechtel.

DAVE BAST

So, we just saw Esther taken into the king's palace, and she has auditioned for the role of queen; and she actually is appointed the queen. Let's get right to what happens next. Mordecai, incidentally, we should mention, discovers a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus, and thwarts it. So, let's just file that away for our next program; but now, there is another plot, which is engineered by an official named Haman, who is the villain of the story, to kill all the Jews, he is so angry with Mordecai; and Mordecai comes and gets word to Esther about this. So, Mordecai told them to say to Esther:

4:13 Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews, ¹⁴for if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows, perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

And that is one of the key lines in the whole story, isn't it?

CAROL BECHTEL

It is, yes; it is arguably the place where God shows up the most clearly...the reference to some divine providence...

DAVE BAST

Deliverance will come.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly; but I think it is also a key moment of the story because Mordecai seems to think that Esther is holding back because of a lack of courage. I actually think if you read the story carefully, she is being careful; and she is asking him: Do you know what I am risking if I do this? So, this is the moment where she obviously does know the risk she is taking.

DAVE BAST

Yes; she even spells it out, doesn't she? I mean, if you go into the king's presence, the only way you won't be cut down is if he holds out his scepter...

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And he hasn't called for me, by the way, in a month.

CAROL BECHTEL

Which also makes us worried.

DAVE BAST

So, maybe she has been supplanted by some other young thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and there is again that character of Haman, who has cooked up this plot to wipe out all the Jews still living in Persia, and he's got the king's ear. Ahasuerus, by now, has forgotten that this man Mordecai saved his life a little bit earlier in the story; and so, Haman is pulling all the levers here, and he is a dangerous, dangerous character; and Esther risks getting caught in his crosshairs if she does anything to try to thwart this plot, which Mordecai is clearly saying: Maybe this is why you are here, to do exactly that, but it is risky.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly; we need to recognize just how dangerous and how sneaky Haman's character is; and I think our question as readers of the story at this point is: Who in the world can outwit this evil man?

DAVE BAST

Say a little something, Carol, about that famous line: Deliverance will come if you don't do it, but you will perish, and maybe this is your moment; what is going on there, and what it says about the way God works.

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, I think it puts things in perspective for us as believers, because it is not completely up to us to save the world—to save our people. God is working already, and the challenge is to work with God in something that God is already doing.

DAVE BAST

Yes, God's got this. So, on the one hand, it is not that nothing we do matters...

CAROL BECHTEL

Right; we still have to step up and be courageous in that moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we often see this...and we have already been saying this...as sort of a story of providence—of the hidden hand of God—of how God gets things done behind the scenes...and we will talk more in the next program about how God gets things done in sometimes surprising ways; but right, providence is not fatalism. It is not just sitting back and saying: Okay... So, it is neither Esther having to say well this is completely on me and I have to take one hundred percent control of the situation; but on the other hand, she cannot be passive either, saying: Well, if it happens, it happens. No; it is both/and. There might be a divine plan here, deliverance might come, and for that to happen, I am going to have to do something, and muster all the gifts I have, including my wits, which turn out to be pretty strong wits for Esther. She is politically savvy; but it is both/and.

CAROL BECHTEL

In another culture, she would have been a lawyer.

DAVE BAST

Or maybe president...eventually.

CAROL BECHTEL

Maybe; it is also significant, though, that before she goes into the king she fasts and prays. She puts on her royal robes, but that outward symbol of power is in stark contrast to her inner vulnerability, and the fact that she really needs to rely on God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; her humility...I wanted to touch on that before we end. We are almost out of time, but that wonderful line, you know, *she* starts giving orders to Mordecai.

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes, she does.

DAVE BAST

I want you to go organize all our people; tell them to fast. I will fast with my servants, and then I will go; and if I perish, I perish. Which reminds me of the great line of the Apostle Paul: If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we are also the Lord's; whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. And that is a great truth that Esther illustrates in her own way with power. So, thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and our guest today, Dr. Carol Bechtel. We hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of Esther.

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