

The Hidden Hand of God

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is the Bible a funny book? Well, mostly we might say no to that question; it is God's holy and sacred revelation; but, did God himself sometimes use humor and irony to tell a story, and so to further reveal truths about God and God's ways with the human race? Well, the book of Esther may be one instance in which the laughter of readers is a goal of God's own Word. Today on *Groundwork*, we will finish the story of Esther, and what we can learn from this intriguing story. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is the second of just two short programs that we are doing on the book of Esther; and as was the case in our first program, so for this one we are glad to welcome a special guest, Dr. Carol Bechtel, who is a professor of Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. She is also the author...there is a wonderful series of commentaries out there called the *Interpretation* series. If you don't know about that series, you should check it out on Amazon or wherever, and Carol wrote the Esther commentary in the *Interpretation* series. So, once again, Carol, welcome to the program.

CAROL BECHTEL

Thank you.

DAVE BAST

So, in our first program we got into the familiar story of Esther—familiar to Bible readers, or even children in Sunday school. It is one of the biggies, I guess. We love this story of the beautiful young girl who is taken up and becomes the queen of Persia, and the consort of this great king, Ahasuerus; and we have also seen how a plot is introduced by the villain of the story, a man called Haman, to exterminate the Jewish people. So, Mordecai comes and challenges Esther, and that is the point at which we left the story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We could point out, too, Carol, that the book of Esther...so, sort of the big technical term is a *chiasm*, but what that means is that the book of Esther is structured in parallel parts, right? So, we have sort of part A, part B, part C, and then the second half of the book tells that sort of in reverse: C, B, A; but that means there is always a midpoint at which the story takes a turn, and for us that is in Chapter 6, right?

CAROL BECHTEL

And if you are trying to visualize that chiasm, think of an X, and Chapter 6 would be the center of that X. This is where things really begin to turn; and the turning point has to do with Haman's reversal of fortune. Up until this point, he is gaining power, and the threat is growing with every sentence of scripture; but from this point on, Esther is the one who comes into her own and outwits him.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, it is like Haman keeps increasing, increasing, increasing, and poor little Esther...then all of a sudden, whoosh, it switches, and Haman has his big comeuppance, we might say.

CAROL BECHTEL

He does, because he is out in the outer court, and he is getting ready to go into the king and make a proposition to get rid of Mordecai and the Jewish people, but what he doesn't realize is that by a divine coincidence, Ahasuerus has just been reminded of the fact that Mordecai saved his life once. That is, I think, God showing up in coincidence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; we mentioned in the first program, this is the only book of the Bible where the name of God, or even a reference to God, is absent...it is not there. So, we are looking for the hidden hand of God; and so, right; Esther has learned...and Mordecai has learned of this plot that Haman cooked up with King Ahasuerus...and by the way, remind our listeners that what we said in the first program, Xerxes and Ahasuerus is the same person, depending on what Bible translation you read. Ahasuerus is his actual name...you know, the Hebrew name...but Xerxes is sort of the Greek name; but anyway, Esther is going to start moving pieces around on the chessboard to ultimately try to save her people; and so, she begins in Esther 5, right before the pivot chapter, by having the king hold a couple of banquets, and make sure that Haman gets invited to both of them. He goes to the first one...he went out happy and in high spirits. Again, there is always drinking; but then, after Haman goes out from the first banquet, he sees Mordecai and Mordecai neither rose nor show fear in Haman's presence, and Haman was filled with rage against Mordecai. Okay, he goes home and tells his wife about this. She says: Well, why don't you go make yourself feel better. Go and set up a huge pole about sixty feet high with a spike on the top, and that is where you can impale and kill Mordecai one day soon. Haman thinks: Great. So, he goes out and does that.

CAROL BECHTEL

So, just pointing out for Haman's character, it is not enough for Haman to cook up a plot to kill the entire Jewish people. He has to get back somehow at Mordecai individually; but it gives you a real window into his ego. You might even call him a megalomaniac.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and there seems to be something going on between these two, right? They have had repeated encounters. Mordecai won't honor Haman, even though he is like the highest official. Haman has it in for Mordecai. What is the...?

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, there is a lot of debate about why Mordecai won't bow down to Haman, but I think one of the most compelling theories is a back story that goes all the way back to 1 Samuel 15, when the relatives of Haman and Mordecai have an encounter; namely, Saul is ordered to kill King Agag, and he doesn't, and that is strike three, and Saul is out as king; and in some ways, the whole book of Esther is an attempt to finish that story and have a do-over. So, I think that back story may be behind Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman.

DAVE BAST

So, Haman is actually descended from these Canaanite enemies of Israel.

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly. Haman is a descendent of Agag, and Mordecai is a descendent of Saul.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, Haman has been in the ascendant, so he is rising in the first half of this book, through the fifth chapter; and as we said, the sixth chapter is going to be where his fortunes are going to get reversed; and where it

begins is something you mentioned, Carol, a minute ago. Earlier in the book, Mordecai overheard a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, and he thwarts it. Great; and yet somehow, King Ahasuerus manages to forget; so the night after this first banquet, Xerxes cannot sleep. So he has somebody come and read him the annals of the history of the Persian Empire...I mean, that will lull you to sleep, probably, right? Except it doesn't, because all of a sudden, he gets read the part about Mordecai saving him; and Ahasuerus says: Wait a minute. That is great. What did we ever do for Mordecai? And they said: Well, we never did anything for him. And then that sets up a very, very funny part of this story in Esther 6. The next day, Haman goes to the king, and the king says to Haman:

⁶“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Now, Haman thought to himself, “Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?” ⁷So he answers the king, “For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe that the king has worn, and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹Then let the robe and the horse be entrusted to one of the king’s most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse throughout the city, proclaiming, ‘This is the one who has done great things and in whom the king delights.’” ¹⁰“Go at once,” the king commanded Haman, “Get the robe and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai, the Jew.”

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes; Haman has clearly given this a lot of thought. So, yes, it is just very galling when he is the one who has to honor his arch enemy. It is really funny; but I think, as with many instances of humor in this story, we need to remember that this is humor used to make very serious points; and we often laugh until we cry in the book of Esther.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it's not ha-ha funny; it's hmmm, isn't that funny?

CAROL BECHTEL

We are allowed a ha-ha, but, yes.

DAVE BAST

Okay; well, things are about to get even worse for Haman. He has been humiliated now in front of his enemy, Mordecai; but we are going to see exactly the point at which everything flips for him, and we will look at that next.

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 today we are also thrilled, really, to have Carol Bechtel joining our conversation about Esther. So, we have just seen how Haman has been humiliated. Maybe we should just backtrack a bit and remind everybody in the story when Esther actually enters with fear and trembling, the presence of Ahasuerus, he does extend his scepter to her, saves her life, and instead of saying right away: Hey, I am in danger here with all my people, save us. She invites him to a party, and says: Oh, by the way, make sure Haman is invited, too; which really puffs Haman up.

CAROL BECHTEL

Right; and we know how Ahasuerus likes parties.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, they have this first banquet, and at that point, instead of kind of unveiling, Esther says: Well, let's have another banquet.

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes; it is the point at which we expect Esther to beg for the life of her people, but for some reason, she doesn't. Maybe this is where she senses God saying: It's not time yet. And as it turns out, it is what allows Ahasuerus, in the interim between the two banquets, to discover Mordecai's loyalty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, they do have another banquet; and again, Haman has been humiliated. He had to honor the man he hates most...Mordecai. So, now there is another party to which Haman has been invited, and now Esther a little bit more goes for broke. So, we read this:

^{7:3}Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life. This is my petition. Spare my people. This is my request; ⁴for I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." ⁵King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he, the man who dared to do such a thing?" ⁶And Esther said, "An adversary, an enemy, this vile Haman."

DAVE BAST

Whoa! There is drama for you!

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, and I think Esther's brilliance is even more obvious here, when you are reading in Hebrew. That reference to: If we had been sold merely as slaves, doesn't make a whole lot of sense unless you are reading in Hebrew and you realize that there is some suspicion that Haman has actually tricked Ahasuerus into issuing this edict for the destruction of the Jews. The word for *destroy* sounds a lot like the word for *enslave* in Hebrew; but Esther is on to him, and is smart enough now to outwit him.

DAVE BAST

So, maybe it came across to the king as sort of an Egypt-type story...

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Where he is just going to enslave...make them workers in his empire, but Haman has a much darker purpose in mind.

CAROL BECHTEL

He does; and the difference is...this will be important later on...all the ambiguity about that word for enslave or destroy is resolved when it is put in writing, as the edict is; because when it is written down, there is no more confusion about whether he is talking about enslavement or destruction.

DAVE BAST

And when you consider Ahasuerus's penchant for drinking, when Haman verbally suggests the plot to him, he may not have quite heard him clearly, yes.

CAROL BECHTEL

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and indeed, he should have been able to remember this, or maybe he misunderstood it, but now Ahasuerus is fully in the know, and he is furious with Haman. He charges out of the room; that leaves Haman and Esther together, and now Haman begins to snivel and grovel and beg for his life; and at one point, Esther

reclines on sort of a couch or a sofa, and Haman is so overcome that he sort of trips over his own feet, lands on top of Esther...now the king comes back in, it looks like Haman is going to rape the king's own wife, and now Haman is really done, and he [the king] orders his [Haman's] immediate execution; and well, as fate would have it, there is already a big spike set up, sixty feet high. We often think that Haman was hanged, but he wasn't. He was impaled on the very spike he had set up for Mordecai. So, here is one of the major ironies and reversals of the story.

CAROL BECHTEL

One of the things to watch for in Esther is the role of the eunuchs. They are always there to say the word at just the right time; and in this case, it is the eunuch who says: Oh, look. There is this pike out in the back yard that is six stories high; and of course, the ever suggestible Ahasuerus says: Well, let's put Haman on that.

DAVE BAST

What a convenient thing. You know the phrase, hoist on his own petard...

CAROL BECHTEL

On his own petard...

DAVE BAST

Yes; he fell afoul of his own evil scheme to do in his enemy. So, there is this sort of satisfying sense of justice about what happens to Haman.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, the story isn't quite over yet because the king's prior decree, which he somewhat unwittingly signed, for the destruction of the Jews is still out there. It turns out he cannot reverse it. The rules of the Medes and the Persians say you cannot reverse a decree once it is out there; so, what do you do?

DAVE BAST

Incidentally, not a very good idea for a political order. You can never change a law you have once made.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, then Mordecai kind of comes back in and says: Well, you can issue another decree that might mitigate or water down the first one. So, Mordecai kind of writes the legislation in which Ahasuerus says: Look, if the Jews are attacked, they have the right to defend themselves, even violently, and they do; and they are saved by standing up for themselves because the king allowed for it under Mordecai's kind of hidden hand behind the decree.

CAROL BECHTEL

It is important, I think, for our reading of the characters of Esther and of Mordecai to recognize that their first thought was just reverse the first edict...

DAVE BAST

Right.

CAROL BECHTEL

But because of the rules of the Medes and the Persians, that is not a possibility. So, plan B, then is to be able to defend themselves if attacked. Of course, that doesn't say anything about their desire for violence, because if no one attacks, they don't have to commit violence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a kind of neatness about this solution; a kind of even morality about it, even though it is going to involve the use of violence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they are successful. It does take a couple of days, but they are successful, and so they have a final feast in this, which becomes, for the Jewish people, a memorial feast in one of the last twists of irony. They call it Purim, which is named after the very dice...so, earlier in the book when Haman convinces Ahasuerus to wipe out the Jews, they say: Well, when should we do it? And so, Haman grabs a dice, which is called a Pur, and throws the dice. It comes up with a date. Now, they name the festival of their deliverance after the dice—the festival of Purim, where they remember their deliverance from Haman and his forces.

CAROL BECHTEL

The irony of having to cast dice to set a propitious day for genocide...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

CAROL BECHTEL

Is overwhelming; but providence is also apparent there, because if the date had been closer, then there wouldn't have been time for Esther and Mordecai to unfold this whole plan that allows the Jews to defend themselves.

DAVE BAST

Another coincidence...

CAROL BECHTEL

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

The way that the dice role out and the date they show. So, God is just shot through this whole story from beginning to end...

CAROL BECHTEL

Yes, absolutely.

DAVE BAST

And the whole idea of God's work in the world, his governing of the world in such a way that our actions also count—our actions matter—let's explore that a little bit more as maybe one of the practical lessons this book has for us in our lives today. We will do that before we end.

Segment 3

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.

CAROL BECHTEL

And I am Carol Bechtel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, we have been seeing now as we are coming to the conclusion of Esther, the hidden hand of God. God is everywhere, but nowhere named; but we have also noted that this is an intentionally ironic, and at times an almost laugh-out-loud funny book, even though, Carol, the story itself is potentially terrible; and so, what is it about that combination of the specter of annihilation and yet telling the story in a way that evokes some laughs?

CAROL BECHTEL

It is just so unbelievable the way this book unfolds, and the way it is able to use humor to make serious points. One of the best compliments I ever got on my commentary was when someone I didn't know wrote to me and said: This is the funniest commentary I have ever read! Well...

DAVE BAST

You don't hear that very often.

CAROL BECHTEL

No; I took it as a compliment, though, because it means I was able to reflect the humor in the book; but as I say, this is a funny little book about genocide; and if you can imagine Jews reading this book in concentration camps, then you begin to understand how you laugh till you cry.

DAVE BAST

Well, Ahasuerus made me think of Hitler. He is the big dictator...

CAROL BECHTEL

For good reason. Actually, Haman is the real Hitler in this book.

DAVE BAST

Is the Hitler figure, right...and they're told as these ludicrous, ridiculous figures. I mean, you look at the great of the world...the worlds' great men and women...and they have such pretensions; and from God's...it makes you think of Psalm 2, doesn't it? He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh them to scorn.

CAROL BECHTEL

Right, exactly. It is like a dog trying to catch a car. I mean, it is just laughable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think, Carol, maybe help us reflect as we close a little bit about maybe, you know, some things that we learned that are important for our lives yet today; maybe comforting to us. I mean, one of the things we see in the first half of Esther is what many of us see when we look around our lives, and that is that some bad people seem to be getting away with murder, or almost getting away with annihilation; and we see that sometimes, too. It is like there is no justice; why do bad people keep getting away with it? Why do bad people get the ear of the king so often? And yet, there is more going on here.

CAROL BECHTEL

I mean, one of the comforting things about the book of Esther is that it deals so realistically with threat and evil; but it also underscores that God is not fooled, God is not mocked.

DAVE BAST

Carol, I want to go back to something you said in our first program, I think, a point you brought up that really struck me. The book of Esther...the story of Esther...is in some ways about how to live in the midst of a culture that is very much organized against faith and the people of God; and you think of Esther sort of with her hidden identity, and all that she has to participate in. I mean, she is eating non-kosher food, I'm guessing, at these banquets. Say a little bit more about that.

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, I think one of the most powerful themes in the book of Esther is how to be faithful in the midst of an unfaithful culture; and that is one of the things that makes this such an important book for Christians in our own time. If you have ever canoed, you know that the real position of power is in the back of the canoe. You know, you can change the direction of the canoe with a small stroke, but if you try to steer from the front of the canoe, it is exhausting. I think Esther and many of the characters in this book are forced into a position where they are trying to steer from the front of the canoe. It is exhausting; it takes everything you've got. For Christians today, there is something very real about that.

DAVE BAST

So, how is it that this book has made it into the Christian Bible? I mean, we talk about making it into the Hebrew Bible, but it is a book that Christians have embraced.

CAROL BECHTEL

Well, I think because the name *Jews* is used so much in this book, Christians can keep this book at arm's length, and I think that is really unfortunate. I think it made it into the Jewish canon because of the way it acknowledges God's power and God's providence and the way God can save in the midst of just terrible situations, but that is a message for Christians as well, and it is our loss if we miss it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think it is a story of providence and the hidden hand of God, but I think we should note, too, that an honest reading of this book sort of illustrates something I know my friend Neal Plantinga sometimes likes to say, and that is that God is really good at hitting straight shots with crooked sticks. He works through some people here, including Ahasuerus, ultimately, who are not exactly...as you said in the first program, we are not supposed to admire this guy, and yet, God got some stuff done through him anyway; and Mordecai and Esther have to make a few compromises along the way, if you want to make them strictly moral exemplars, they aren't; and yet, God gets things done. So, that is the other thing, I think, that I sometimes take away from this story is that not only is God always up to something, but he is up to something in ways and places that we might not guess.

CAROL BECHTEL

I think another theme in this book that is very important for people of faith in any age is the power of the written word. If you look for references to written texts in this book...I had a class count, I think they got sixty-eight references to written texts. Something is going on with that, and I think part of the message of this book is the power of the written word for good or ill; but for Christians reading scripture, I mean, scripture doesn't do any good if we don't read it and act on it; and that is part of the point this book is making as well.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you can extend it to the whole Bible, really.

CAROL BECHTEL

You can.

DAVE BAST

The power of God's Word written, and thus preserved for us, so that we can open these stories again and re-read them, and in some way enter into the experience of the first readers.

Well, it has been a wonderful story; thank you, Carol, so much for joining us.

CAROL BECHTEL

You're welcome.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture here on *Groundwork*. Thanks for listening. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee, Dave Bast, and of course, our special guest on these two programs, Dr. Carol Bechtel. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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