

# The God Who Delivers

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Date: 15 September 1996

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now begins the last in the series, The God Who Delivers. We pray that you will give us eyes to see and ears to hear, that your word may take deep root in our hearts and bear much fruit for your glory.

Amen. Well, this book of Esther is a rather odd book. And this is the third and last of a series of sermons on the book of Esther.

So some of you will have had two doses already and others are here to hear some of it for the first time. But it's certainly an odd book because it doesn't mention the word God.

And it's the only book of the Bible that doesn't mention the word God. How can it be included in the Bible if the Bible is the word of God and is the story of God?

Why have a book in the Bible that doesn't even mention the name God? Well, certainly the book of Esther has had a long history of dispute. You may know that it's the only book of the Old Testament which is not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

[ 1 : 0 8 ] It's the only book of the Old Testament not quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Some scholars over the centuries have wanted to get rid of it. Martin Luther, the great reformer of the 16th century, for example, wanted to take it out of his Bible because he didn't like it and didn't think it fit.

Two weeks ago we saw that the absence of the word God in Esther is a deliberate ploy. It's deliberate in order for the writer to identify with the people who thought that God was far from them, that God was absent in their lives and in their world.

And so the book of Esther is written without the word God in it, but actually to lead people who thought that God was absent to see that he was in fact present in ways in which they may not have been able to see earlier on.

Not in miracles, not in obvious shows of strength, but that God was present through subtle and hidden ways, through coincidences and circumstances in people's lives and in the history of their people.

Last week we saw that God was in fact behind the scenes, bringing about a great reversal of what was expected. Halfway through the book, one's expectation would be that the Jews would all be killed.

[ 2 : 3 1 ] The opposite comes true. The Jews kill all those who were going to kill them. Halfway through the book, Haman, the evil one, is the Prime Minister and the one who's out to kill his enemy, Mordecai, the Jew.

The reversal is that Mordecai is lifted up and honoured as Prime Minister in Haman's place and Haman is killed on the gallows that he built in order to kill Mordecai and so on.

Many reversals go on. The complete opposite of what is expected occurs. And that, it's clear, is the hand of God at work in the world.

But the hand of God is more obvious still because the people who are under threat in the book of Esther are not just any old people or any old family clan.

They are Jews. And the Old Testament is the story of Jews. Indeed, the Jewishness in the book of Esther is stressed. So, time and again, when Mordecai, the hero, the man who becomes Prime Minister, is mentioned, it is that Jew Mordecai or Mordecai the Jew.

[ 3 : 43 ] Notice how at the very end of the book that was stressed three times. So, in 929, Queen Esther, daughter of Abihel, along with the Jew Mordecai.

It could have just said Mordecai. But it stresses the fact that he's the Jew Mordecai. And then a few lines down as well, giving orders that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons as the Jew Mordecai.

Not just Mordecai, but the Jew Mordecai. And the same also in chapter 10, verse 3, the last verse of the book. For Mordecai, the Jew, was next in rank to King Ahasuerus.

It's stressed that Mordecai is a Jew. It is stressed that the persecution of this group of people is a persecution against Jews. It's when Haman, who was then Prime Minister, sees Mordecai refuse to bow down to him, that he decided not just to take revenge on Mordecai, but to take revenge on all of Mordecai's people.

And he discovered that they were Jews, and so he was out to defeat all the Jews, not even just Mordecai, who refused to bow down. Well, who are these Jews? Of course, we know who Jews are today a bit, because they're prominent people in this world, in a way, even though there are not many of them.

[ 5 : 01 ] But the Jews in the Old Testament are really only in the later parts of the Old Testament. They are the people of God. They are descended from Abraham, who comes at the beginning of the Old Testament.

God made a number of promises to Abraham. But it's not until about 600 BC do you get the term Jew being mentioned. Because what happens to the descendants of Abraham is that most of them are defeated in about 720, and only some of them are left of the tribe of Judah.

The Jews are those who are from the tribe of Judah, hence the name Jew from Judah. And the tribe of Judah was destroyed in 587 BC, sent into exile by the Babylonians.

And it's the remnant of those who are discussed in the book of Esther. Now these Jews, or Israelites as they were earlier known, are fairly important in the Old Testament.

God had made a number of significant promises to them. He promised them the land, which is now modern-day Israel, plus a minus a bit. He promised them that the descendants of Abraham would be a mighty nation, that there would be many descendants.

[ 6 : 12 ] He promised them that they would have a king who would be king forever, who was descended from King David, the second and greatest of Israel's kings. All sorts of great promises to these people God had made.

And the Old Testament is the story of God's faithfulness to those promises. Because those promises come in the 12th chapter of the whole of the Old Testament, Genesis chapter 12.

And they are the promises that control the rest of the Old Testament. And that's the story of God keeping those promises to the descendants of Abraham. Now when we realise that that's the story of the Old Testament, we can see how the book of Esther fits.

Because Esther is about the threat to the promises of God to the descendants of Abraham, who are now called the Jews. The threat is that they're going to be exterminated by this evil man Haman, who last week we saw eventually gets hanged on the gallows.

Esther is in the Bible because it's the story of how the threat to exterminate the Jews was averted. Not because of miracles of God, but because of God, but working through subtle and hidden ways.

- [ 7 : 25 ] And God is the God of the Jews. The God of the Bible is the God of the Jews of the Old Testament. That's why it's there. Even though the name of God is not mentioned.
- But that also explains some of the significant verses in the book of Esther. If you remember back two weeks ago, I mentioned on chapter 4, verse 14. The threat is there.
- Haman has issued his edict to destroy the Jews. Now Mordecai, the Jew, tells the queen, who is his cousin, also a Jew, that she's got to go to the king in order for this threat to be averted.
- And he says to her in verse 14 of chapter 4, For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter.
- That's not blind hope that everything's going to work out in the end. You know, tomorrow we better cheer up. You know, that sort of hope that we express to each other, which is really a lot of nonsense.
- [ 8 : 26 ] This is confident hope because it's hope for Jews, for Israelites, who are the recipients of God's promise. So when Mordecai says, you've got to act because otherwise deliverance or relief will come from another quarter, it's a confidence that God will keep his people, the Jews.
- That's what Haman is expressing, even though he doesn't mention the name God. its deliverance and relief will arise from another quarter for the Jews. Not for any old people.
- It's not just cheer up, tomorrow will be better. But it's a confidence in God that is at work. Now that's even more striking when we read on into chapter 6.
- Chapter 6, verse 13, are the words of the evil man Haman's wife. Haman is the man who's plotting to kill the Jews. He's the pagan. He's the prime minister. He comes home.
- He's had a bad day and his wife says to him, If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him.
- [ 9 : 35 ] That's an extraordinary statement from a pagan lady, the wife of the prime minister, to say that if the Jews are Haman's enemy, Haman will not succeed.
- He's the prime minister. He's issued an edict to destroy them. But she is saying because it's the Jews that you're attacking, you will fail. Doesn't mention the word God, but behind it is a recognition even from this pagan lady that God is on the side of the Jews and if God is on the side of the Jews, then those who oppose them will fail and fall as Haman did.
- One of the other intriguing ways in which this Jewish theme comes out in the book of Esther is often lost to us who are so ignorant of the Old Testament.
- But for the original readers who would have known their Old Testaments very well, it would have been clear in its subtlety as well. Mordecai, we're told in chapter 2 when he's introduced, is descended from somebody called Kish.
- Who is Kish? Most of you wouldn't know, I expect. Kish was the father of King Saul, the first king of Israel. Mordecai is descended from an Israelite king.
- [ 10 : 52 ] So what? Haman, Mordecai's adversary, the pagan prime minister, we're told is an agagite. Now I doubt that you've met many agagites lately as you've walked the streets of Doncaster.
- I doubt that there are many around. Who on earth was an agagite? Who was agag? What a name for a baby. Agag was the enemy of King Saul, the son of Kish.
- Agag was an Amalekite. The Amalekites were the sworn enemies of Israel. In the book of Exodus and in the book of Deuteronomy 25, the Amalekites are to never, ever be welcome into the people of God.

Because of what they did to Israel in the wilderness. The Amalekites are the worst of Israel's enemies. So here you see when we get Mordecai introduced and then Haman introduced, the reader who knows his Old Testament will see, aha, what we have here is another version of the Amalekites and the Israelites.

And we know that the Amalekites are the worst enemies of the Israelites and we know that God will eventually put them down. So the reader who senses something of Old Testament history will know that Haman must fall because he's descended from the Amalekites and Mordecai will succeed because he's descended from an Israelite king.

[12:19] It's quite stressed in fact that Haman is an Agagite. Like it says Mordecai the Jew time and again it says Haman the Agagite making it very clear who he is and who his descendants were.

And in 1 Samuel 15 King Saul the son of Kish defeats Agag the king of the Amalekites. And so that battle lies in the background of the book of Esther because there Israel triumphed over the Amalekites.

And the implication is the same will happen here and it will be God at work. It also explains something a little later on when Israel actually go or the Jews actually go and defeat their Persian attackers.

We're told that they don't take any plunder. Three times we're told that. It doesn't need to be told three times but it's obviously important for us to realise that.

So in chapter 9 verse 10 they killed all the sons of Haman but they did not touch the plunder. Then when it moves on to talk about the fighting in Susa verse 15 the Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the 14th day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 persons in Susa but they did not touch the plunder.

[13:31] And then in the verse that follows verse 16 talking about all the king's provinces they killed 75,000 of them but they laid no hands on the plunder. Why is that important?

Because in 1 Samuel 15 when Saul killed Agag he took the plunder and he wasn't supposed to and that was the downfall of King Saul.

here Israel is being obedient. Here the Jews are doing what Saul didn't do and they are victorious and God is with them.

Now maybe that's all a bit obscure for you but it's actually there for people who knew their Old Testaments as the Jews to whom this was originally written would have done and they would have picked up these allusions back to Saul and Agag and known that what it's saying is that God is on our side.

It doesn't need to mention the name God but by all those allusions it's clear that God is with the Jews and therefore they will succeed and prevail.

[14:39] Where we left the story last week at the end of chapter 7 Haman this evil prime minister has been killed but his edict to kill the Jews still stood. The laws of the Persians and Medes could not be revoked even by the king Ahasuerus.

He'd issued this decree through his prime minister to kill all the Jews. In fact as we saw last week Ahasuerus didn't even know that it was the Jews. He just knew that he was issuing a decree in the name of Haman or in his name but Haman was implementing it.

But that decree still stood. Even though Haman was dead the edict to kill the Jews on the thirteenth day of Adar still stood. What was going to happen then?

Haman was dead the Jews could cheer that but they still lived under threat of being killed on the thirteenth day of Adar in a few months time. Esther in chapter 8 goes to the king verse 3 onwards and beseeches him to revoke the decree which he can't do but in its place he allows her to issue a decree that the Jews can defend themselves against their Persian attackers.

So now we have two decrees set up and those who read chapter 3 where Haman issues his decree to kill the Jews can see the parallels in chapter 8 where Esther issues her decree for the Jews to defend themselves against those who will attack them.

[ 16 : 07 ] Two parallel decrees and now you see the battle lines are drawn. Who will win? the Persians who follow Haman's decree to attack the Jews or the Jews who follow Esther's decree to defend themselves against their attackers.

Remember that the Jews decree is a decree of defense. It's not a decree for all the Jews to go out and just kill any old Persian that happens to be floating around the place. It's to kill only those who attack them or their women or their children.

it's clearly a reversal of Haman's decree. The question is who will win? The day comes at the beginning of chapter 9.

Now in the twelfth month which is the month of Adar on the thirteenth day when the king's command and edict were about to be executed on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them but which had been changed to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes, the Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their ruin and no one could withstand them because the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples.

No mention of God but what is there? The fear of the Jews had fallen on all peoples. That's why they were victorious. And that's language of elsewhere.

[ 17 : 38 ] in the Old Testament. It's the language of the Old Testament when Israel conquers the land. God was involved then. But when the fear of God's people comes on others, that's God at work.

So here again is God's victory for the Jews without the name of God. But it's clear that it's God at work. It's not the Jews' power and the Jews' skill and the Jews' triumph, but it's God working in a hidden way, bringing about fear on the Jews' enemies.

And the result is this massive slaughter. Verse 5, so the Jews struck down all their enemies with a sword, slaughtering and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.

In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 people. We may think that's a lot, but if you read on to verse 16, the Jews killed 75,000 others in all the provinces, the 500 was only in the capital city.

75,000 were killed. And probably we recoil and think, isn't this going a bit overboard? What is God really doing here if he's a God of love?

[ 18 : 49 ] Why kill 75,000? Is this immoral? I guess we have to remember that it's an edict of defense, and the Jews killed those who were attacking them and their wives and children.

And the Jews killed only the men, not their wives and children. And the Jews only killed as an act of self-defense. And though the numbers are large of those who are destroyed, they would have been far greater had Haman's original edict stood, but the Persians killed the Jews.

For there were many more than 10,000, maybe 100,000, many more than 75,000, maybe even three-quarters of a million living in the Persian Empire. Ultimately, it's God's commitment to his people which secures their welfare.

Though God's not mentioned by name, it's clear that it's his hand that brings the Jews their victory. The result, after this slaughter and after the triumph of the Jews, is a celebration of great joy.

There is great emphasis indeed on the celebrations and the feasts and the partying. So in verse 17, this was the 13th day of the month of Adah and on the 14th day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

[ 20 : 18 ] But the Jews were in Susa, that's verse 17 is talking about all the Jews out in the country. But the Jews were in the capital city, they gathered on the 13th day and on the 14th and rested on the 15th making that a day of feasting and gladness.

And then in the next verse it talks about feasting and holiday. In verse 22 the same, four, five or six times it talks about feasting and gladness and holidays. These are the Jews celebrating their victory.

These are the Jews giving thanks to their God even though God's name is not mentioned. The Jews are celebrating and commemorating this great victory from God. It reminds us that one of the themes in the Bible is the people of God celebrating and rejoicing with gladness the things that God has done for them.

So often we come to church and mope in and sour faces. Goodness, all the great things God has done for us, far greater even than the liberation given here to the Jews, should mean that we are over the moon in celebrating and rejoicing the greatness of God.

This celebration leads to an annual feast which they called Purim. It's quite ironic really. Purim is celebrated in February to March and the name Purim means lots.

[ 21 : 30 ] Not as in lots and lots of things but lots as in dice, rolling dice or casting lots. And it's called that because back in chapter 3 Haman, that evil man, had rolled dice to determine which day would be the day when he would destroy the Jews.

And so to call their feast Purim is a slap in the face to Haman. It's making a mockery of the dice and the destiny that it's determined. Because it wasn't the day when the Jews were defeated, it was the day when God was triumphant.

You see, dice don't control anything. Gambling is not the crown, but rather it is God. God is sovereign, not the casino mentality of looking for chance and randomness in this world.

You see, in the end we've got two worldviews going on in the book of Esther. The one of the Persians is where the dice and a fatalistic worldview, where things are governed by chance and by randomness.

But there is the hidden hand of God at work, sovereign over all of that, controlling all the events. What governs the world is God, not chance, not fatalism, but a sovereign God who is bringing about his purposes in the world.

[ 22 : 47 ] The casino mentality is folly. Don't gamble with your lives could be a slogan for the book of Esther. And of course that's a slogan for today as well, surely.

Because we live in a pagan society much like Esther did. A world that thinks that it is governed by chance, by dice, by roulette, by numbers, by lucky numbers and horses and horoscopes.

But no, God may seem to be hidden in our world like Esther's, but he's still active and he's still bringing about his purposes. And though he may not be obvious in the day-to-day affairs of your life or our lives or this world, like Esther we're called to see in his hiddenness the actual presence and power of God.

For he's there and he's working out his purposes in this world. God in Esther was keeping his promise to Abraham for the sake of the descendants of Abraham, the Jews.

He did it without fanfare, he did it without his name even being mentioned, but he was there and he was keeping his promises. And the same is true today.

[ 24 : 02 ] God is at work in our lives and in this world keeping his promises. And the greatest turning point, the greatest reversal, remember that Esther is a book of reversals, the greatest reversal was the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

for it was there that those who cast lots thought that they had won and they hadn't because God was sovereign and he raised Christ from the dead and demonstrated that even where it seems that God is absent and a cross of Calvary is a pretty good place to think that God is absent, even there God was at work sovereign and in control bringing about his purposes for this world.

and we can have that same confidence today that God is sovereign in a world which ignores him and know that he is bringing about his purposes day by day, week by week, month by month, keeping those same promises to Abraham made 4,000 years ago, the promises made to Abraham which determined that Jesus would come and die and rise from the dead.

And we look for the coming again of Jesus Christ to bring about the end of this world's history and fulfil the purposes of God for it. We don't look for dice to be rolled to determine what's going to happen this year, we look for God to be sovereign in all things and he is, even if it's not obvious.

So in the end the book of Esther is a call to faith which the writer to the Hebrews says is conviction of things that are unseen. We may not see the hand of God but we can have faith that God is at work fulfilling his promises and his purposes and is sovereign over all and is working to deliver us his people as he did for the Jews of Esther's time.

[ 25 : 55 ] Let's pray. Our sovereign God we bow before you in worship and in faith.

We recognise that in our lives we often forget that you're working. We often despair that you're present and yet Lord God we realise now that you are and that you're keeping your promises for your people, that you are delivering us from our sins and bringing us into your presence where we shall forever rejoice and celebrate and rest because of your greatness and your power.

Amen.