


Old Testament Core Seminar

Class 25
“Ezra, Nehemiah & Ester”
Old Testament Overview



Starting Next Week
April 9th
We will meet in
the Chapel

Introduction

- Three more historical books, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.
- The first two tell us of the Jews' return from exile, as promised through Jeremiah ... yet something was still missing.
- It wasn't glorious as was predicted by the prophets.
- Where are the New Heavens and New Earth that Isaiah spoke of?
- Why don't the people have the new hearts of Jeremiah?
- Where's the glorious and magnificent temple that Ezekiel saw?
- And ... why hasn't everyone come back?
- That is a question that looms in the book of Esther (she's still in a foreign land!).
- So, after the exile some things are just as predicted/promised.
- But many of God's promises have yet to be fulfilled.

Ezra & Nehemiah

Context:

- The books of Ezra and Nehemiah originally constituted one book.
- Both were most likely assembled by Ezra.
- The history spans from the time the Jews began to return to Jerusalem, in 538 BC to over 100 years after that first return.
- Ezra sets the context in Ezra 1:1-4, “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia...” The end of 70 years of exile.
- They are coming home! A time of excitement, hope, optimism.
- Psalm 126 was mostly likely written at this time. Read it.
- The redemptive-historical context is clear.
- After the trauma of the exile, the people are reminded that God is still faithful to His promises of old.
- This is the resurrection of the nation, and the reestablishment of the old Mosaic Covenant.
- But it is not the final coming of the Kingdom of God.

Ezra & Nehemiah

Theme:

God is renewing the covenant by restoring His people, the temple, true worship, and Jerusalem. But it's not the end, and it doesn't fulfill all the great prophecies. Thus His people look still to the future.

- The return was exciting and joyous ... but not all as expected.
- We're back in the land, but not in the New Heavens and the New Earth?
- Some people have new hearts, but not everyone.
- We have a new temple, but it is no picture of glory.
- From Daniel, the 70 years are over – the physical exile is done.
- But the seventy sevens until the Messiah arrives have only just begun, and so the spiritual exile continues.

A. God Initiates and the People Respond: Ezra 1:5-6:

- The beginning of the book focuses on God's faithfulness to His word, His promises to David, and to His plan of redemption.
- Ezra 1:1 - Jeremiah prophesied the exile would last 70 years.
- As promised, God moved Cyrus' heart to allow the Jews to return.
- In verse 5 that God moved the hearts of the people to go as well.
- "Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem."
- God initiated the chain of events to restore His people, and they responded.

B. The People Return and Rebuild: Ezra 1:7 – 6:22:

- God then begins to provide all the people need to rebuild their community and their way of life in the land under God's leaders.
- 1:7 "Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods" and gave them back to the Jews.
- It probably included the golden alter, golden table, golden lampstands, golden basins, and massive bronze pillars, stands, and basins, so large they could not be weighed
- This was an enormous amount of wealth, irreplaceable, and miraculously restored by God!
- In 2:2 we find a man named Zerubbabel ... remember him?
- He represents God's faithfulness to the Davidic line.
- At the end of 2 Kings we saw the last Davidic king off to Babylon.
- Zerubbabel is a royal descendant of David and is now leading God's people back to the land of promise!

- Notice Jeshua (or Joshua) in v 2:2.
- He is a Levite! Along with the line of kings, the line of priests is also being restored.
- It is the Levitical priests who make atoning sacrifices and lead the people into worship of God.
- This is equally important for restoring the people to the land and to a right relationship with God.
- For worship they also need an altar and a temple.
- Chapters 3-6 detail the construction of the temple - completed in 516 BC, 20 years after the people's return.
- “And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria [Darius, king of Persia which had conquered Babylon] unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.” (6:22)
- The Feast of the Unleavened Bread is the Passover – and is fitting at this time of return from Babylon and Gentile oppression.

- Not all are joyous! is right. Read 3:12-13.
- Many were excited about the new Temple.
- But there were some present, who were old enough that they could remember what the first temple looked like.
- And it didn't compare in glory of the old temple.
- God is not done yet, and there must be greater things to come!

[The story behind God of this City](#)

[God of this City - Chris Tomlin](#)

C. The People Sin and Repent: Ezra 7-10:

- In chapter 7 the story takes a big leap forward in time to 458 BC, nearly 60 years after the completion of the temple.
- Ezra is leading a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem.
- Ezra in 7:9b-10 says “the good hand of his God upon him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”
- He was both studying and doing God’s word.
- When Ezra arrives back he finds many Jews have intermarried with the surrounding pagan nations, a grievous sin. (9:1-3)
- Here he mentions “the holy race [seed]” recalling God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 to raise up a “seed” to crush the serpent’s head.
- Israel was the carrier of the seed-promise. If they diluted their identity they risked losing the promise!
- Satan tried to kill off God’s people through exile, now he’ll try to corrupt them by polluting their families.

- What happens? Ezra prays, acknowledging the people's sin and God's holiness. Read 9:6-15.
- Note the gravity of Ezra's confession and how well he understands the consequences of sin.
- "Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence," (v15).
- Sin separates us from God making us unable to stand in his presence.
- In chapter 10 the people repent. Not a acknowledgment of sin or a feeling of remorse. They take action to undo their sin.
- They re-separate themselves from the surrounding nations and send away the pagans from their midst.
- Repentance is not just a feeling: it is action to restore right behavior before God.
- The remnant has returned, but it is only a "little relief" from bondage.

D. Nehemiah Returns and the People Rebuild the Walls: Neh 1-7:

- In Nehemiah, we see another phase of reestablishing the people.
- It's 100 years after the first exiles returned and the walls were still broken down leaving them vulnerable to Israel's enemies.
- When Nehemiah, a government official still serving the Persians in Susa, hears about this, he weeps and sets himself to prayer.
- Like so many other prayers in the Bible, he begins with confession.
- of sins in v6-7. "... confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses."
- The basis of his prayer is a request for God's glory (1:10-22).
- This should be our ultimate goal in our asking anything of the LORD – that He might be glorified.

- In ch 2, he heads to Jerusalem a decade after Ezra's return.
- He is able to convince the people to work on rebuilding the walls.
- V2:20. "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding."

Notice that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are there, right next to each other. Neither is compromised nor ignored.

- Again the Jews experience opposition from their neighbors.
 - The enemies first mock the Jews for undertaking such a large, difficult, and expensive task of engineering (4:1-3).
 - When the people are faithful and steadily make progress on the wall, the mockery turns to alarm and anger.
 - Finally they plot to attack the builders.
- Nehemiah by arming the builders, which deterred their enemies.
- They then try and fail to undermine Nehemiah personally by slandering his reputation (ch 6).
- Satan will try to attack God's people, and especially their leaders, with a frontal assault or just by subtle means—but God is faithful.¹³

- Nehemiah also experiences opposition from within Israel (chapter 5).
- Some of the builders began to complain that the work was too expensive and they were too poor.
- Nehemiah convinces the nobles and officials to stop charging interest and allow the work to continue.
- Read Deuteronomy 23:19-20
- In less than a year the wall was completed.
- This section of the text ends with these encouraging words in 7:73a. “So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinims, and all Israel, dwelt in their cities.” Sounds very similar to those key passages in Joshua when the Israelites first took that land. It truly is a re-beginning.

NETHINIM

neth'-i-nim (nethinim, "given"; Natheineim; the King James Version Nethinims):

Meaning:

A group of temple-servants (1 Chronicles 9:2 and 16 times in Ezra and Nehemiah). The word has always the article, and does not occur in the singular. The Septuagint translators usually transliterate, but in one passage (1 Chronicles 9:2) they render, "the given ones" (hoi dedomenoi). The Syriac (Peshitta) also, in Ezra, Nehemiah, transliterates the word, but in 1 Chronicles 9:2 renders it by a word meaning "sojourners." The meaning "given" is suggestive of a state of servitude, and Josephus seems to confirm the suggestion by calling the Nethinim "temple-slaves" (hierodouloi) (Ant., XI, v, 1). It should, however, be noted that another form of this word is employed in the directions regarding the Levites: "Thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him on behalf of the children of Israel" (Numbers 3:9; compare also Numbers 8:16, 19).

E. The People Rejoice—and Relapse: Nehemiah 8-13:

- In chapter 8 we have the reestablishment of the covenant.
- When Ezra began to read the law to the people they shouted Amen! Amen!
- “They [the Levites] read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”
8:8
- In verse 9 it says that they wept after hearing the law.
- Because they realized that they’ve greatly broken that law.
- The priests told them not to mourn but to celebrate at the reading of God’s word.
- They were rightly mourning their sin and then rightly celebrating the receipt of God’s grace in their lives.

- Do we have deep emotional reactions to the reading and teaching of the word of God?
- Do we weep, as every sinner ought when they are confronted with the voice of an infinitely holy God?
- At the same time does it cause us to rejoice that this infinitely holy God would consider us, unworthy sinners, worthy of grace and mercy and salvation?
- The long rebuilding and renewal process is complete when the people bind themselves again into covenant with God, in 10:29
These [people] joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes
- The people are in the land, the line of David lives on (seed of the woman), priests are making sacrifices on the altar, the temple and the walls around Jerusalem are rebuilt, the law is publicly read and explained, and the people formally renew their commitment to God's covenant.

- But that is not the end of the story.
- The covenant is no sooner renewed than they break it again.
 - In chapter 13 the people violate the Sabbath – working on God’s holy day.
 - And they intermarry with the surrounding nations again.
- The age-old problem continues : the law is not yet written on their hearts.
- The people had returned and renewed the covenant, but it was nothing like the kingdom they were expecting and hoping for.
- It’s clear that this is not the full arrival of the kingdom of God.
- This is not the new covenant with new hearts in the new heaven and the new earth.
- There is still sin and death in the world.
- This is the end of the Old Testament’s historical record, and the heart is still wickedly deceitful above all things, and beyond cure.
- A greater salvation, greater than the exodus, than the return from exile must yet be coming. A greater kingdom, still awaits! 18

Ester

Context:

- Records the events of the same time but in a different place.
- Between 483 and 473 BC, over 50 years after the first wave of exiles returned but a few decades before Ezra's wave.
- The events take place in Susa, Persia's capital, where there are still Jews living in exile.
- What's really strange about the book of Esther is that God is nowhere mentioned in the story.
- The only religious note is some fasting (4:3, 16).
- No talk of God, the covenants, the land, the temple, or David.
- The purpose and application of the book is not immediately obvious.
- It displays the plan of redemption that God cares for his people, that he will rescue his people from his enemies.
- That God's people can trust that God will protect them.



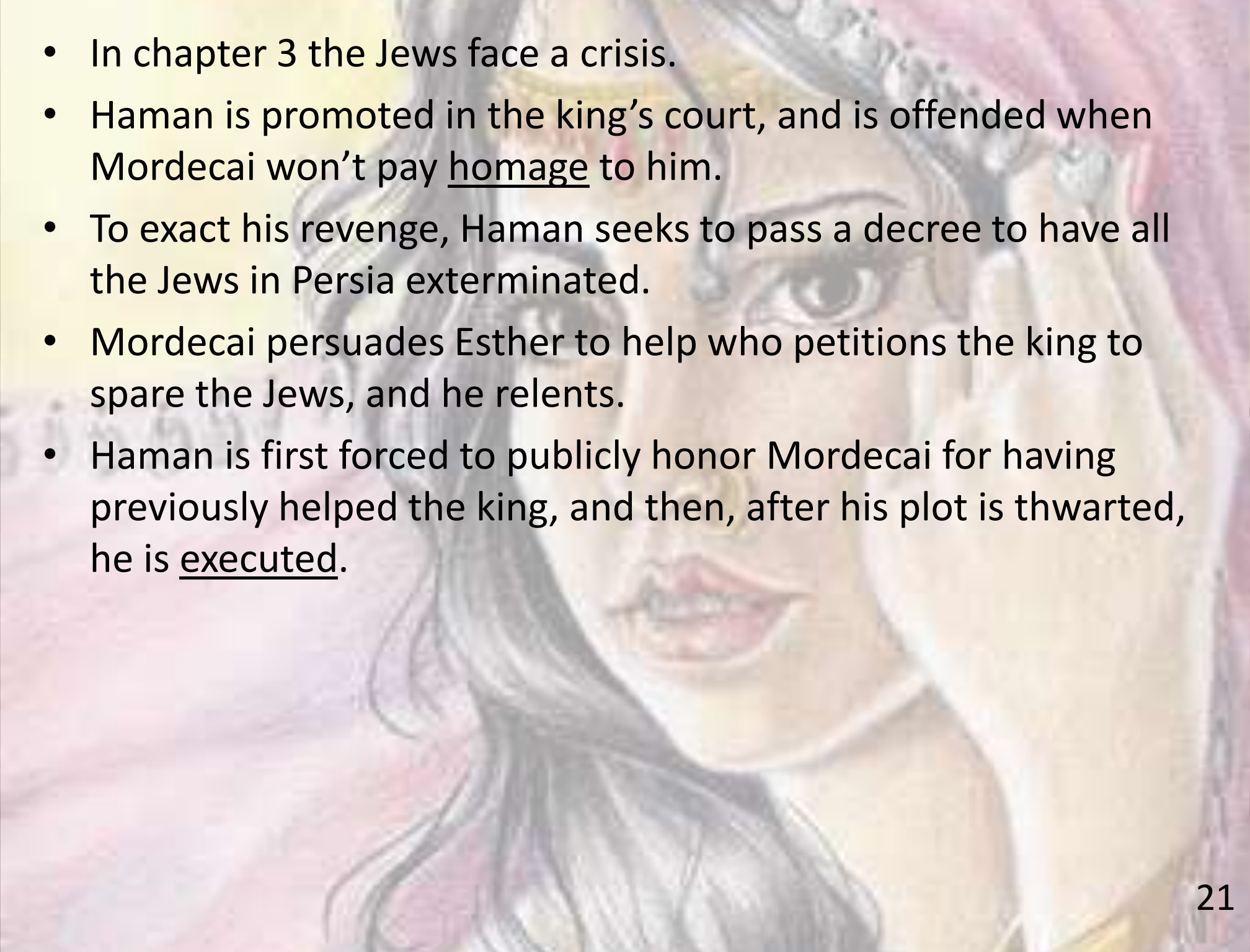
Theme:

God protects his people, even if we can't see how he is working.

- In a world where God is invisible, the faithful can often wonder if God is doing anything at all among us.
- God's acts of providence in our world are most commonly done with a hidden hand, and quite easily overlooked in normal life.
- Sometimes it's that subtlety that makes His deliverance all the more powerful.

Summary:

- In the first two chapters a young Jewish girl named Esther rises in King Xerxes' favor, such that he makes her his queen.
- Her cousin, Mordecai overhears a plot to kill Xerxes, and so he informs Esther of this to alert the king and stops the plot.

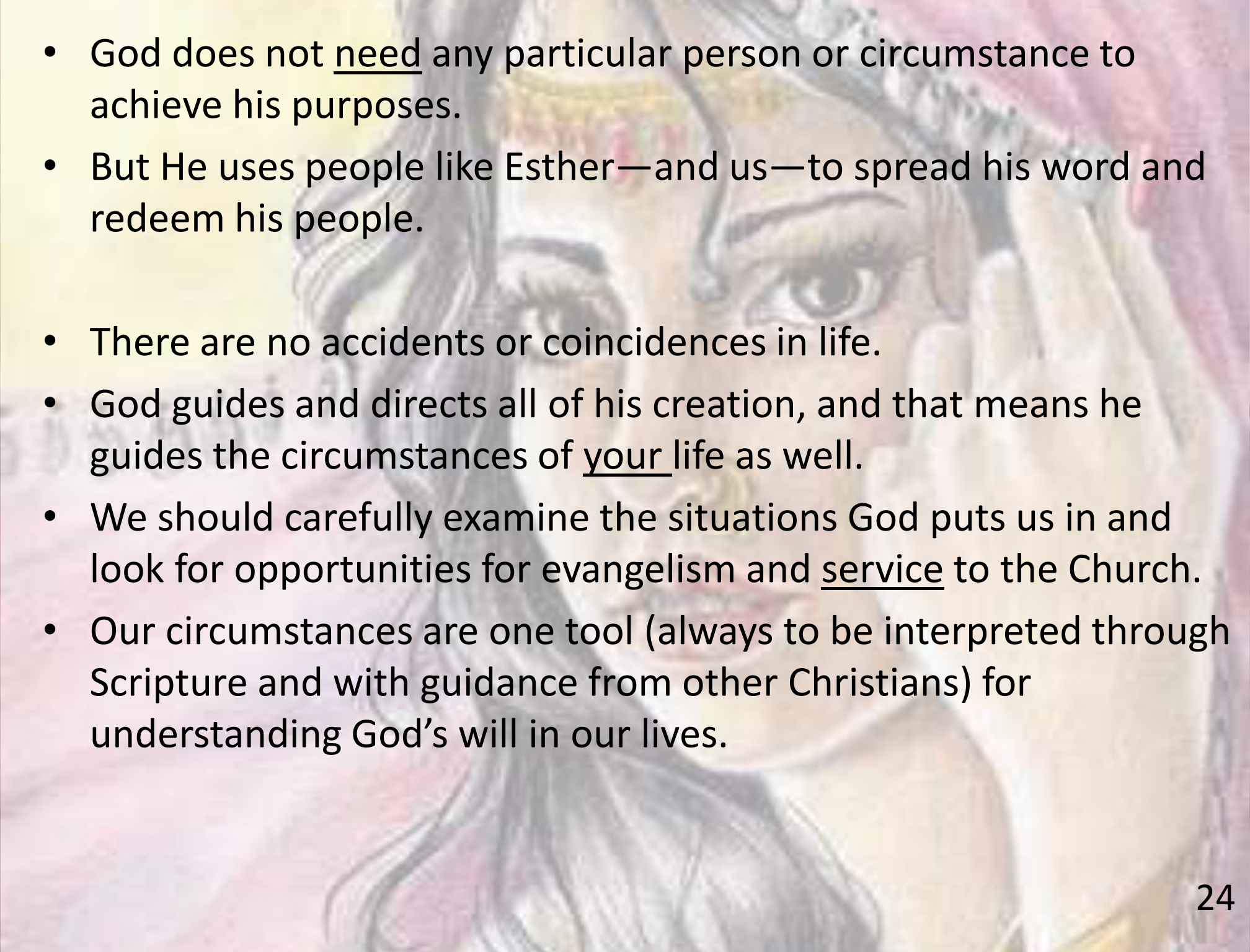
- 
- In chapter 3 the Jews face a crisis.
 - Haman is promoted in the king's court, and is offended when Mordecai won't pay homage to him.
 - To exact his revenge, Haman seeks to pass a decree to have all the Jews in Persia exterminated.
 - Mordecai persuades Esther to help who petitions the king to spare the Jews, and he relents.
 - Haman is first forced to publicly honor Mordecai for having previously helped the king, and then, after his plot is thwarted, he is executed.

A. God will judge.

- First, God will bring judgment on the wicked.
- The villain here is Haman. Guilty of pride, arrogance, attempted murder, and attempted genocide.
- Worst of all, his sin specifically and directly against God's people, which is to say, against God himself.
- His evil is willfully and intentionally directed against the people and purposes of God.
- In God's providence, all Haman's plans backfire on him.
- Haman wants to humiliate Mordecai, but the king forces Haman to honor Mordecai publicly.
- Haman wants to murder Mordecai by impaling him on a pole; but the king executes Haman on that very same pole.
- Haman wants to eliminate the Jews in a mass. Instead, God uses the occasion to allow the Jews not only to defend themselves, but to triumph over their enemies. Read 9:2. God does judge! 22

B. God works through circumstances.

- Note how Mordecai persuades Esther what she can do.
For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"
- Mordecai believed there is a purpose to Esther's becoming queen ... the opportunity to help save God's people.
- God uses earthly instruments, like people's actions, in his plans.
- In fact, its rare that God's miracles take the form of the abrupt disruption of history such as the Exodus.
- Rather, he uses people, situations, and events (naturally and inconspicuously) for His purpose.
- Mordecai is telling Esther that she should understand herself and her queenship to be the instrument by which God.

- 
- God does not need any particular person or circumstance to achieve his purposes.
 - But He uses people like Esther—and us—to spread his word and redeem his people.
 - There are no accidents or coincidences in life.
 - God guides and directs all of his creation, and that means he guides the circumstances of your life as well.
 - We should carefully examine the situations God puts us in and look for opportunities for evangelism and service to the Church.
 - Our circumstances are one tool (always to be interpreted through Scripture and with guidance from other Christians) for understanding God's will in our lives.

C. God will save His people.

- The theological point here is: God zealously protects His people.
- This is one major theme of the entire Bible and of Esther.
- It's not always clear at the time how God is working or how things will turn out, but God delivers His people and His plan.
- Note that God achieved Israel's deliverance while maximizing His own glory and prevented Mordecai or Esther from taking credit.
- In fact, God's purposes and salvation in this book are even deeper and more meaningful than events on the surface might suggest.
- Recall when Saul's kingship failed - when he refused to carry out God to totally destroy the Amalekites and king Agag. (1 Sam. 15).
- In 2:5 that Mordecai is a distant descendent of king Saul and, 9:24, Haman of king Agag.
- In God's kindness, His rescue of his people results in redemption for the line of Saul, centuries after that disobeyed command.

- It is no accident that these genealogical details are reported.
- We today should rest content knowing that God's deliverance is a sure thing, and that He may choose to use us as instruments at times, to His glory.

