



The Historical Books

Session 8 – Tobit & Esther

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St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church

Autumn 2021

www.DeaconsView.com

So What do you Think?

- Read the Book of Tobit
 - What would it be like to live away from home like Tobit?
 - What kind of person is Anna?
 - Have you felt like Tobit when he prays to be set free of his problems?
 - Does God's response to Tobit's prayer show how God works in our lives?
 - Chapter 6 mentions a "fish" story – what others are in the Bible?
 - The prayer of Tobiah and Sarah is often used at weddings – why is this so appealing at that Sacrament?

Tobit

- Tobit is a story about a good man that gets even better
- His book teaches great lessons about what a relationship with God should be all about
- The setting for Tobit's story is Nineveh
- Nineveh is the same city that Jonah is sent to and where he preached

Tobit

- Tobit was taken into captivity after the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel
- Tobit managed to remain successful in his new surroundings...
- All the while Tobit remained faithful to God and was a good and decent Israelite
- He spends a lot of his time just doing very good deeds

Tobit

- He buries those that die and are killed
- This brings him suffering and persecution but he persists
- He is focused on charity, almsgiving and taking care of others as commanded
- He leaves the dinner table to go and bury the body of a fellow Israelite
- That same night he is blinded by bird droppings

Tobit

- Tobit seems like he is too good to be true
- It doesn't take long but eventually we probably start to wonder what motivates him to do all of the good things that he does
- It turns out that he is incredibly patient, just like Job
- He benefits from being less anxious about life and just trusting in God and the mystery of life and life's happenings

Tobit

- When Tobit feels that he can no longer bear life – he is blind and is reproached by his wife – he prays for death (Tobit 3)
- He prepares for his death by sending his son Tobiah to a friend in Media to collect his fortune
- Tobit's plans are not God's plans
- God sets a plan in place that does the opposite, it extends Tobit's life and blesses him

Tobit

- The blessings that Tobit receives are far beyond anything that he could have imagined
- One way God blesses him is by sending the angel Raphael to guide Tobiah on his journey to Media
- Raphael helps Tobiah find Sarah and then even arranges for their wedding
- The angel also prepares a healing remedy for Tobit's blindness

Tobit

- The money is recovered in Media
- Tobiah and Sarah eventually have seven sons
- The family is blessed with greater fortune than could have been imagined
- In the end, Tobit finally realizes that God's plans (God's will) for him is much better than the plans that Tobit had for himself

Tobit

- One unique feature of the book of Tobit is its use of overlapping scenes
 - Tobit prays for death at the same time Sarah does
 - While Tobiah and Sarah are praising God for the gift of each other in their marriage, Sarah's father is secretly digging a grave beside the house
 - While Tobiah and Sarah are enjoying the wedding celebration Tobit and Anna are worried about him, fearing the worst (his death) – they are concerned he will never return

Tobit

- The story of Tobit seems preoccupied with fear and death
- Within that theme God tells a beautiful story of life – it is much more about life than death
- Before his death, it is clear that Tobit realizes God's work in his life and that his most blessed and happiest years were produced by God after the year he prayed for death

Tobit

- Tobit has 14 chapters
 - 1 – 3 Tobit's suffering and prays for death
 - 4 – 14 God responds with life instead

Tobit

- When does it take place
 - Fall of Samaria 721 BC
 - Reign of Esarhaddon 681 BC to 668 BC
 - Fall of Nineveh 612 BC
 - The names Shalmeneser, Sennacherib or Esarhaddon might seem familiar from history classes - they were rulers of the Assyrian Empire during the height of its strength and influence - that was about 700 years before Jesus
 - Tobit's story comes from their time

Tobit

- When does it take place
 - The book begins with Assyria's conquest of Tobit's homeland
 - At the end of Tobit, Assyria is a power that is doomed with the fall of the great city of Nineveh
- When was the book written
 - Scholars generally agree that it was written about 400 years after the events that it describes – somewhere between 300 BC and 200 BC

Tobit

- Interesting points
 - **Nineveh** – The ruins of this great city lie just across the Tigris river from the modern day city of Mosul, Iraq
 - **Anna** – Anna is Tobit's resourceful and loving wife. She supports the family by weaving after Tobit is blinded. When she receives a goat as a sign of gratitude, Tobit insists that she return it. She reproaches Tobit – showing that he has a lot left to learn about righteousness



Tobit

- Interesting points
 - **Raphael** – Is the angel that God places in Tobit's life. Raphael introduces himself as Azariah and doesn't tell who he really is until the end of the story. Raphael's task is to heal Tobit, of his spiritual blindness as well as his physical blindness. Through this angel, Tobit learns to abandon his plans and go with God's plans.
 - **Man's Best Friend** – This is the only book that has a dog as a pet. The dog is Tobiah's companion to Media. St. Jerome must have been touched by the inclusion of the dog, in his translation he adds a verse about the dog wagging its tail

Tobit

- Interesting points
 - **Sarah** – Her story parallels Tobit's. Like Tobit, Sarah thinks there is no reason to go on living. Also like Tobit, God's plans are different from Sarah's. His plan is for her to be married, have a lot of children and live a long, happy life with Tobiah
 - **Ahikar** – His name means "my brother is honorable" He is a nephew of Tobit and has good connections with the royal house. He helps get his uncle back into favor with the King. Records show there was an Ahikar that served in the court and his biography is contained in writings that pre-dated the book of Tobit

Lessons from Tobit

- It is important that we consider and understand our actual motives for doing good works
- Suffering does not mean that we have been abandoned by God
- Our plans are not God's plans – we should be open to hearing his plans and living them – we have a better outcome with his plans

So, What do you Think?

- Read the Book of Esther
 - What does Mordecai's dream mean?
 - What are your impressions of Mordecai and Haman?
 - What motivates Haman to issue a decree against the Jews?
 - What do the prayers of Mordecai and Esther show about their relationship with God?
 - Some rabbis wondered if Esther should be in the Bible since God was so hidden. Do you agree with them?

Esther

- Each and every one of us has within us the potential to do great and wonderful things
- Queen Esther's story is proof of that
- She begins her life in obscurity but will become a favorite in the royal household of Persia
- That alone would make the book of Esther a great success story; but for Esther, that is only the beginning

Esther

- The real story goes beyond Esther's apparent success – like all stories in the Bible the real message is not about the virtue of success but about the virtue of serving God
- On the surface, the story is simple
- A nice Jewish girl become the favorite wife of the King of Persia
- Haman a member of the court plots to kill all Jews on a certain date

Esther

- Haman is motivated by jealousy
- He is jealous of Esther's uncle Mordecai who is also Jewish and was promoted
- Mordecai convinces Esther that she must use her influence to stop Haman's evil scheme
- Esther hesitates because she had not been in the King's company for a while – approaching him while not invited could bring a sentence of death for her

Esther

- Esther finally decides to seek a royal audience no matter what consequences it held for her personally
- It turns out the King welcomes her visit
- She invites the King and Haman to a series of feasts
- When the moment is right, she reveals Haman's dastardly plot to have her people annihilated

Esther

- In a fit of rage, the King orders Haman to be hanged on the same gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai
- So, on the surface it is a simple story but like all books of the Bible there is a much deeper, spiritual story for us
- All of the action in the story takes place as a part of God's design.

Esther

- God's direct involvement in the story is apparent in Mordecai's dream
- In that dream God will see to it that the humble will prevail against the proud
- Another indication is found in Mordecai's words to Esther that her royal status isn't an accident
- He tells her "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this (4:14)"

Esther

- The protective hand of God is also seen in the circumstances that lead to Mordecai's recognition by the King just when Haman was going to ask for a death sentence against him (6:1-11)
- Most significantly of all, Mordecai and Esther explicitly turn to God to help them
 - Mordecai prays for the people (13:1-7)
 - Esther prays for success when she makes her appeal to the King (14:1-9)

Esther

- To appreciate the story we have to recall that Esther and Mordecai live in a world controlled by people with great power and ambition
 - The King of Persia hosts a banquet that lasts for 7 days
 - The King dismisses his Queen when she refuses to be an ornament at his feast
 - Haman decides to destroy all of the Jews because one of them refused to show him the honor and respect that he demanded of subjects of the empire
 - Haman builds a gallows 75 feet high for Mordecai (5:14)

Esther

- In this world of great extremes Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people enjoy the protection of God
- Mordecai escapes the trap that was prepared for him by one of the most powerful men in the empire
- Esther succeeds in her appeal to a King who is unpredictable in his responses to things
- All of this is due to God's protective hand

Esther

- Esther has 10 chapters
 - 1 – 5 Threats from mortal men
 - 6 – 10 Protection from God

Esther

- When does it take place
 - Xerxes I – 485 – 465 BC
 - Maccabean Revolt – 681 BC
 - Ptolemy XII – 80 – 51 BC
 - The Persian backdrop takes it back to the 5th century before Jesus
 - King Ahasuerus is also known as Xerxes I
 - The final verses refer to Ptolemy and Cleopatra – most likely Ptolemy XII and Cleopatra V – about 77 BC
 - Ptolemy XII is father of Cleopatra VII

Esther

- Interesting points
 - **Problem Book** – According to tradition, Rabbis debated whether Esther should be included in the Bible. One reason is that in the Hebrew version the name of God never appears in the book. Another reason was the lack of a reference to Israel.
 - **Greek Esther** - The version of Esther in our Bible comes from the Greek version. It includes over 100 verses more than the Hebrew version – including the prayers of Mordecai and Esther.

Esther

- Interesting points
 - **Feasts** – Esther is read on the feast of Purim – celebrated in early spring. The name comes from the word lots (purim in Hebrew) cast by Haman to determine the best day to carry out his plan to exterminate the people of Israel. Purim celebrates the day that God set in motion the events to save his people.
 - **Susa** – The royal city is the setting for Esther and is one of the oldest cities in the world. It was a favorite of King Darius the Great and Xerxes of Esther.

Lessons from Esther

- Prayer can be the first step toward great achievements
- Mortal schemes are no match for the plan of God
- God can do great things with those that the world overlooks

For Next Week

- Read the 1 & 2 Maccabees
 - What leads to the rebellion of Mattathias and his sons?
 - What lesson does Judas give his followers in 1 Mac 3?
 - Why do you think that Judas and his brother celebrated the restoration of the Temple every year?
 - What does King Antiochus IV learn at his death?
 - Where do the brothers of Judas finally find security?
 - What events lead to the desecration of the Temple?
 - What does the author want us to know by the end of 2 Maccabees?