

MU SYDNEY BIBLE STUDIES
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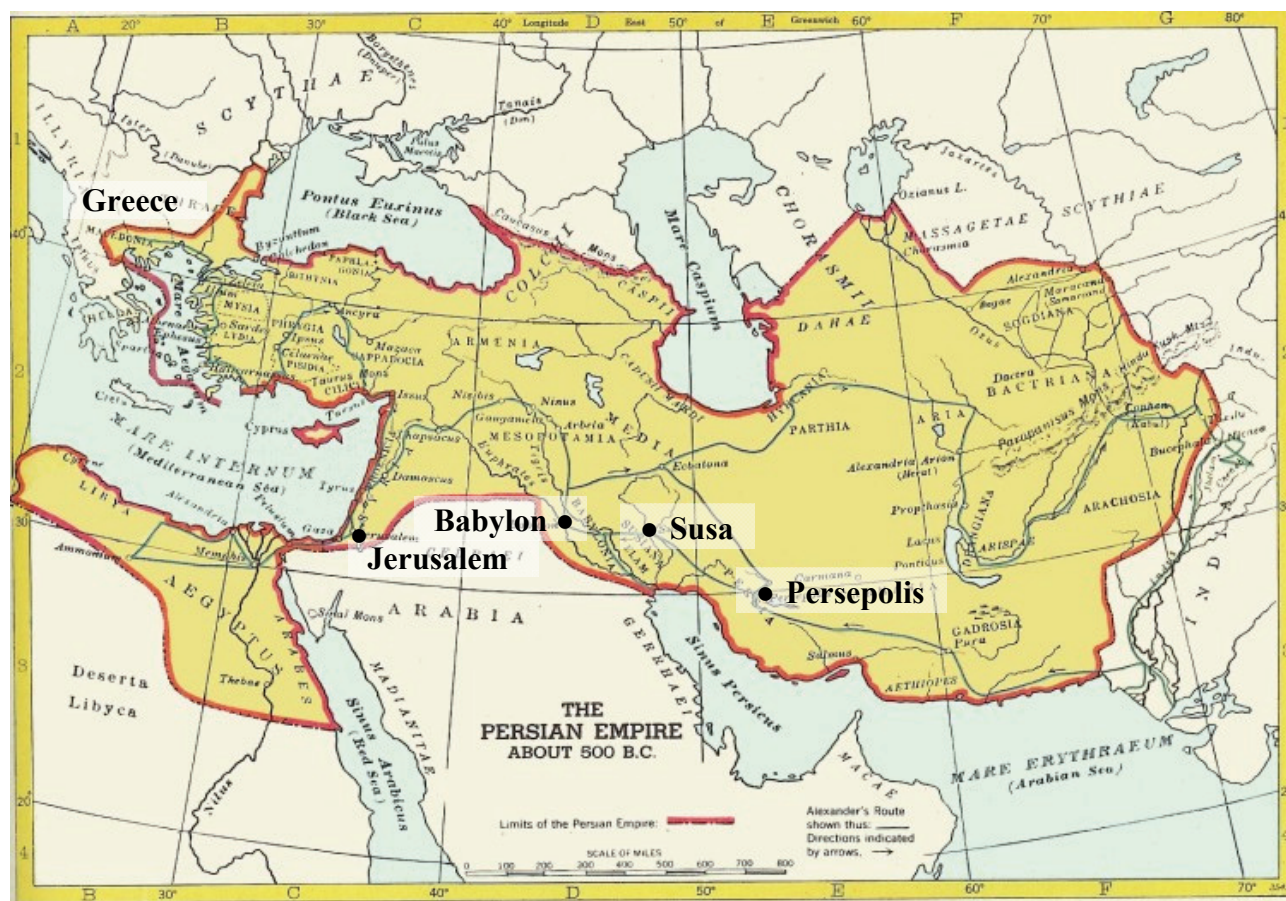
ESTHER
For Such A Time As This

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Main Characters

- Xerxes** King of Persia, also called **Ahasuerus**, ruled from 486 BC to 465 BC.
- Vashti** Queen of Persia, who was deposed by her husband, Xerxes, when she refused to display her beauty at Xerxes' banquet. Her removal allowed Esther to become queen.
- Esther** Her Jewish name was **Hadassah**. An orphan and ward of Mordecai, living in Susa. Esther became queen of Persia.
- Mordecai** Esther's cousin and guardian. He refused to bow down to Haman.
- Haman** Appointed as Prime Minister by Xerxes. He is infuriated by Mordecai's refusal to show him honour and plots to destroy not just Mordecai, but the entire race of the Jews.
- Memucan** an advisor to the king

The Persian Empire at the time of Xerxes



Esther – a step in God's plan of Salvation for the world

Secular history books are full of stories of the great civilising events of the past. We know about armies and battles and how nations were destroyed and whole populations moved from one end of the known world to the other. We know about the rise and fall of the great empires of Babylon, Assyria and Persia. We know that Alexander the Great overthrew the Persians and spread the Greek language and culture across the east, from Egypt to India, and that when the Greek empire faltered Rome came to power and expanded its dominion across North Africa and up into Europe. But none of these great events are recorded in the pages of the Bible. Some are hinted at, and our knowledge of them helps us to understand the background of much of the Bible narrative.

The Bible is unique; it is a salvation history. It picks out only those events, often seemingly insignificant ones, that were major advances in God's plan for the salvation of the world, and it ignores the spectacular events that the secular books tell us about.

The Book of Esther is a good example. Esther, the person, is not mentioned anywhere in secular history. We can guess that she was a pretty, teenage girl, among hundreds taken into the harem of Xerxes, king of Persia. For a brief period of time she became the king's favourite. But that was the critical time when the Jewish race was on the brink of annihilation. God had given great promises to Abraham and David. He promised Abraham that all the world would be blessed through his family (Genesis 12: 1-3), and David was promised a kingdom that would last forever (2 Samuel 7:13). The threat to the Jews in the time of Esther was a threat to the fulfilment of those promises which were completed in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Esther's rise to prominence was God's unique means of saving the Jewish race and keeping his promises. He was setting the stage for their return to Judea and for Jesus' eventual birth in Bethlehem. We do not know how long Esther remained in favour. What we do know is that God used her at that critical moment to move his plan of salvation one step closer to fulfilment. The book of Esther shows that God used, and still uses, all kinds of people and events, some celebrated and some insignificant, some good and some bad, to bring about the final salvation of the world through Jesus, the one he had chosen as saviour even before the world's creation.

Plot Summary

The Persian king Xerxes held a feast in his capital Susa, and ordered his wife Queen Vashti to display her beauty before the guests. She refused, so encouraged by his advisors Xerxes removed her as queen and ordered beautiful young girls from throughout his kingdom to be presented to him so he could choose a new queen. One of these was Hadassah, a Jewish orphan, fostered by her cousin Mordecai. She found favour in the king's eyes, and was made queen under the name 'Esther', but she didn't reveal that she was Jewish. Shortly afterwards, Mordecai discovered a plot by two courtiers to assassinate Xerxes. They were apprehended and executed, and Mordecai's service to the king was recorded.



King Xerxes
(519 BC – 465 BC)

Xerxes appointed a new prime minister, Haman, but Mordecai incurred Haman's hatred by refusing to bow down to him. Having found out that Mordecai was Jewish, Haman planned to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jews in the empire. He obtained Xerxes' permission and cast lots to choose the date. When Mordecai found out he put on sackcloth and ashes and sat at the king's gate wailing

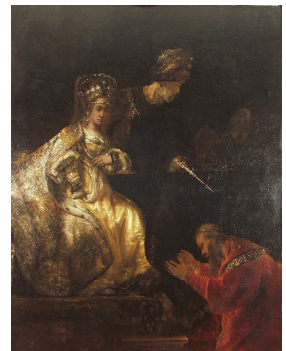


Esther and Mordecai (Aerte de Gelder 1685)

loudly. Esther heard and Mordecai challenged her to approach the king and plead her people's cause. However the king hadn't called her recently and the penalty for approaching the king without being summoned was death. She requested that all Jews fast for three days with her, and on the third day she sought an audience with Xerxes. He acknowledged her and she invited him to a feast in the company of Haman. During the feast, she asked them to attend another feast the next evening.

Meanwhile, Haman was again offended by Mordecai and built a gallows planning to ask the king for permission to hang him. That night Xerxes suffered from insomnia and had the court's records read to him to help him sleep. He learnt that Mordecai had not been rewarded for saving his life. Just then Haman appeared and Xerxes instructed Haman to honour Mordecai on his behalf.

Haman had just returned home from carrying out this distasteful duty when it was time to attend Esther's second feast. At this feast Esther revealed that she was Jewish and that Haman was planning to exterminate her and her people. Overcome by rage Xerxes left the room, but Haman stayed behind and begged Esther for his life. The king came back in and thought Haman was assaulting the queen. This sealed Haman's fate and he was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.



Haman begs Esther for mercy
(Rembrandt 1655)

The previous decree against the Jews could not be annulled, but the king allowed the Jews to defend themselves during the attacks. As a result, on the specified day 500 attackers and Haman's ten sons were killed in Susa and 75,000 Jewish enemies were killed in the provinces. Mordecai assumed a prominent position in Xerxes' court and instituted the feast of Purim, an annual commemoration of the delivery of the Jewish people from annihilation which the Jews still celebrate today.

Esther Introduction

The most noticeable feature of the book of Esther is that the name of God is not mentioned at all. However that doesn't mean he is absent. The big questions that faced the Jews living in Susa were:

- When you live in a society that doesn't acknowledge God, are you still his people, under his care?
- Do his promises of protection still apply, or is that only for the Jews who have gone back to Jerusalem?

These questions became urgent for the Jews in Susa when they, and all the Jews in the Persian Empire, were threatened with annihilation.

The answer that comes out of the book of Esther is that God's people are always his people, regardless of where they live, and he keeps his promises to those who believe in him. God places people where he chooses, both those who believe in him and those who do not, and both will ultimately serve to bring about God's plans; either willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly.

Today we live in a society that pays scant attention to God's will. Most people plan their lives without considering God's plans for them, but that doesn't mean they are outside God's plans. Each of us was born at the time God designated for us and we will play our part as God moves history forward to complete all that must happen before Jesus Christ returns as Lord of lords and the true King of kings. However, we do have a choice. We can choose to look to God and follow his guidance as we live our lives, or we can ignore him.

The truth of Mordecai's words to Esther applies to us today in our own situations:

'For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance (for the Jews) will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to (royal) position for such a time as this?' (Esther 4:14)

God has placed us in the time and place he ordained for us. He knew us before we were born and knew how long we would live:

'My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.' (Psalm 139:15-16)

He has promised us that he will never leave us or forsake us:

'God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."' (Hebrews 13:5)

so whatever the future holds we can be sure that our future is in God's hands and that he will keep us in his care until we join him in heaven or Jesus returns again.

Note: all Bible passages used in this study are from the *New International Version (NIV)*, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica.

Esther Study 1 – The Power and the Glory

Esther makes a delayed entry into the book that carries her name. The first chapter introduces us to Xerxes I who was king of Persia between 486 and 465 BC. He was resident in Susa, one of three capital cities, and that is where the story of Esther takes place.

The nation of Judah had been taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. In 539 BC Cyrus the Great of Persia defeated the Babylonians and set the Jews free to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-4). At the time of Xerxes I the first group of Jews had returned to restore the temple in Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (a prince from David's line). That meant that the Jews in Susa had remained where they were.

Xerxes held absolute power over his court and his empire. He and anyone he authorised held the power of life and death, not just over single individuals, but over entire populations. At the time of the banquet described in Esther 1 he was planning a military campaign against Greece, and probably held the banquet to impress the leaders of his far-flung provinces with the strength and glory of his power with the aim of gaining their loyalty to his cause.

Timeline

Date	Event	Bible Reference
586 BC	Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, sacks Jerusalem, destroys the temple, and takes the Jews into exile.	2 Kings 25:1-12 2 Chronicles 36:16-20
539 BC	Cyrus, king of Persia, captures Babylon and issues a decree allowing Jews to return to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem.	2 Chronicles 36:22-23 Ezra 1:1-4
522 BC 520 BC	Darius becomes king of Persia and authorises work on rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem.	Ezra 5:2, Haggai 1:14
486 BC	Xerxes succeeds his father, Darius, as king of Persia.	Esther 1:1-2
483 BC	Xerxes holds a banquet.	Esther 1:3
480 BC	Xerxes attacked Greece and after initial successes was finally defeated.	
479 BC	Esther is taken to the king and, pleasing him, becomes queen.	Esther 2:17-18
474 BC	Haman's plan to annihilate the Jews is developed and defeated	Esther 3:7-12
465 BC	Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes, becomes king of Persia	Nehemiah 1:1 (20 th year of his reign)

Reading: Esther 1:1-12 – Queen Vashti Deposed

¹ This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: ² At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty. ⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶ The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. ⁷ Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. ⁸ By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

¹⁰ On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him – Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas – ¹¹ to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. ¹² But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Questions – Esther 1:1-12

1. What impression do you get of Xerxes from the setting of his banquet?

2. What impression do you think he wanted to give his guests?

3. What would be the likely effect of the Queen's refusal to obey an order the King gave?

a) In his harem?

b) Amongst the guests at his banquet?

4.

a) Do you think he overreacted to Vashti's refusal?

b) Could she have anticipated how he would react?

c) What do you think Vashti was putting her confidence in?

Reading: Esther 1:13-22 – Queen Vashti Deposed

¹³ Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times ¹⁴ and were closest to the king – Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

¹⁵ “According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. “She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.”

¹⁶ Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. ¹⁷ For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.’ ¹⁸ This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen’s conduct will respond to all the king’s nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

¹⁹ “Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.

²⁰ Then when the king’s edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.”

²¹ The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed.

²² He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people’s tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.

5. How does Memucan capitalise on Xerxes temperament and what does Memucan seem to be most concerned about?

6. As his advice will result in spreading the story of Vashti's rebellion throughout the kingdom, why do you think the king and his nobles were pleased with it?

7. Is Xerxes' decree really likely to change the relationships between men and women in their homes? Why or why not?

8. How do the men want the women to react? How would you expect the women to react?

It can be a relief when we have a clear choice between good and bad, but many of our choices are, like Vashti's, between two (or more) things which may all have bad consequences. Then there are other situations when all consequences appear equally good.

9. What guidelines can we use to make choices when there is no clear way forward?

We can see the corrupting effect Xerxes' absolute power had on him, and we know of many cases in our own times when people were corrupted by power and did incalculable harm through its misuse. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, and Robert Mugabe are just a few names that spring to mind. However just because we do not have the opportunity to wield that sort of power does not mean we will not abuse the power we do have. It may not be for ourselves, we may want to gain power for family members or others we care about.

Remember the problem amongst Jesus' disciples caused by the mother of James and John, described in Matthew 20:

²⁰ *Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him.*

²¹ *"What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."*

²² *"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered.*

²³ *Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."*

²⁴ *When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

10. How does Jesus turn the way the world uses power upside down?

11. What difference would it make to our society if our leaders led by serving?

12. How can we apply this in our own lives?

a. Where do we need to choose to serve rather than be served?

b. Where do we need to graciously accept someone else's service rather than insisting we can do it ourselves?

13. How do we choose to serve without becoming a doormat?

Xerxes and Vashti's decisions appear arbitrary. At his banquet, under the influence of alcohol, Xerxes happened to decide that he would 'show off' his ultimate jewel, his wife. Vashti happened to decide she wouldn't be displayed like a trophy, and her refusal set the stage for events that brought Esther to the position of Queen, the place God intended her to be.

We make decisions every day and we can't always anticipate the consequences, but God is in control of his world and nothing is a surprise to him. Everything that happens is ultimately included in his redemption of the world he created and of the people he has called to be his own. Unlike Xerxes' decrees, God's plans will come to be. Our choice is: will we obey God and willingly be part of his plans, or will we ignore him and still find that we are used by God, but used despite our own plans?

Summary: Study 1 – The Power and the Glory

At first glance the story of Esther does not have a lot to say to us in today's society, as it is set in the court of an absolute monarch, where events and people are controlled by his whims, or so he thinks. The events at the start of the book of Esther set the stage for all that follows. God uses Xerxes' choices, such as holding a banquet for a prolonged time, liberally serving wine and then deciding to call on his wife to display her beauty. When Vashti declines to follow Xerxes' command, she is also making a choice that God will use to put the people he has chosen into the places he wants them to be.

Although the majority of people in our society do not acknowledge the one true God, he is still acting to bring about his purposes. That is as true today as it was in Esther's day, and the fact that his name is not mentioned in the book of Esther also runs parallel to the lives of many people we know. They ignore God, but that does not mean he is ignoring them. He is not, and one day they will see that they have played their part in God's plan. The tragedy will be that they have not personally known the one they served, even though God loves them and wants to bring them to himself.

Xerxes is infuriated by Vashti's refusal because it causes him to lose face in front of his guests. If the queen will not obey him, who else will refuse to follow his commands, especially if they are living far away in their own land or territory?

The king's (male) officials are similarly outraged. If the queen will not obey the king, what hope do they have of their wives obeying them in their homes once this story gets around? They decide action is required immediately – banish the queen forever from the king's presence and that will give their wives a clear message as well.

It is very difficult to legislate people's attitudes. We try these days by having all sorts of anti-discrimination and anti-racial policies, but laws do not change people's hearts. They may impact the way people express their inner feelings, but despite new laws aimed at restricting terrorism opportunities, the rise in terrorist activities shows how ineffective laws are as a means of controlling emotions. Instead of avoiding the king's example of commanding his wife to do something she felt inappropriate, the so called 'wise men' tried to use the same technique with their own wives.

We learn from Jesus that the best way to lead people is to serve them. That was not Xerxes' way, and it is not the way of many of our leaders today. In Matthew 20:27-28 Jesus said "*whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" As we consider these words we should also remember that serving someone does not necessarily mean doing everything they tell us to do. Sometimes we serve them best by telling them their idea or order is wrong, or that they need to learn to do the thing themselves. However our reason for refusing to do it for them must be because that is better for them, not because it is better for us! Jesus expressed this when he told his disciples that his service would lead him to lay down his life as a ransom for many. How do our attitudes to serving others compare to Jesus'?

Esther Study 2 – In an Unbelieving World

Four years pass between chapters 1 and 2 of Esther. During that time Xerxes waged war against Greece and despite initial success was finally defeated. The loss of the war also depleted the Persian Empire's treasures and discredited Xerxes in the eyes of his subjects and his allies. After this defeat he returned to his court and spent the rest of his reign completing the many construction projects left unfinished by his father at Susa and Persepolis and, from the description of his banquet, engaging in sensual overindulgence.

It is in this environment that we now meet the main characters of our story, Esther and Mordecai. Because Esther was the right age and 'lovely in form and features', she found herself conscripted to become part of King Xerxes' harem. Esther had two names: Hadassah, the Jewish name given at her birth, and Esther, which was a Babylonian name and appears to be the one she used in Susa. We also see this in our own society, where many people who move into a different culture adopt a name from that culture. The fact that Esther had already done that made it easy for her to hide her Jewish roots.

Reading: Esther 2:5-18 – Esther Made Queen

⁵ Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, ⁶ who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. ⁷ Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

⁸ When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. ⁹ The girl pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

¹⁰ Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. ¹¹ Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

¹² Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. ¹³ And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. ¹⁴ In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

¹⁵ When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. ¹⁶ She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

¹⁷ Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

Questions – Esther 2:5-18

1. Esther did not have any choice about whether she became part of the king's harem, but she did have a choice in how she acted once she was there. What are some different ways she could have acted?

2. From the passage, how does it appear that she did act?

3. Like Esther, we have all found ourselves in situations we did not choose. How do we make sure we honour God when we are unhappy with our life situation?

4. What stopped Esther revealing her Jewish heritage? What do you think about what she did?

Rightly or wrongly, Esther chose to hide her Jewish background in the Persian Court and later God used that fact in his plan to deliver his people from annihilation.

In Matthew 5:13-15, Jesus makes some statements about the role his followers should play in their societies. ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."* ¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."* ¹⁵ *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."*

5. What are the characteristics of salt and light that made Jesus compare his followers to them?

6. What do these verses say to Christians who expect to be able to totally blend into the society around them?

7. What are some of the things in our society that cause disagreement amongst Christians about whether they should or should not do them?

8. What are some principles we can apply to decide if we should participate in a particular activity?

9. What added insight do we get from Galatians 5:13-14, *‘You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”’*?

1 Peter 3:15 says *‘But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’*

10.
a. What practical steps can we take to be prepared to answer questions about our faith?

- b. How do we avoid making people feel we are ‘ramming our faith down their throats’?

11. How did Esther show wisdom when it was her turn to go to the king?

12.
a. In what sort of situations are we wise to take advice from people who are not Christians?

- b. What may be a problem when we accept advice from non-Christians?

- c. Is it always best to choose a Christian advisor, even in secular situations? If so, why; if not, why not?

In his prayer for his own people, Jesus explains why we will never be totally accepted by the world which rejects him as Saviour and Lord. Once we have accepted him, we are no longer part of that society, so we should not expect to feel as though we are.

“¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” (John 17:14-16)

However, we see that Jesus’ response to this is not to suggest his followers leave the world, it is to ask God to protect them while they continue to work in the world, acting as salt and light to those who are corrupted by sin and walking in the darkness of not knowing Jesus. Are we prepared to experience rejection for Jesus’ sake?

Summary Study 2 – In an Unbelieving World

How relevant is life in an ancient harem to us today? The culture of focussing on outward appearance should not be too foreign to us. We have so many ‘appearance enhancing aids’ available today, and our young girls and boys are being encouraged by the media to model themselves on ‘celebrities’. Is it the loving and helpful personalities of these celebrities that are promoted to our children? No, it is their appearance and apparently unrestricted lifestyle that they aim to copy. Today seems to be the ‘it’s all about me’ culture, and that must have been the case in the harem, where so many women competed for the attention of one man.

We are mostly not caught up in the ‘celebrity cult’ ourselves, but there are other situations we find ourselves in, that were not of our making or choosing. How do we act when our children or grandchildren make life choices we do not think are wise? What is our response when we are passed over for a particular job or promotion because they ‘want someone younger’? What do we do when choices are taken away from us and we are told we should no longer drive a car or that we need to move into assisted care living? In Esther 2:15 we are told that ‘... *Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her.*’ Do you think it was her appearance that caused that, or was it her behaviour?

Our behaviour is important. Jesus has told us he wants us to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-15). Salt preserves food from decay and light reveals the true state of a situation. Jesus is calling us to act in ways that reveal wrong behaviour and stop it spreading, he does not want us to blend in and behave just like the rest of the world does, putting their own wishes in first place. The way we live our lives should have people asking us why we are different.

Why are you helping? Why are you not complaining? Why are you so peaceful when you have problems to deal with?

Our lives need to show we are different, but we also need to be prepared to answer those questions. 1 Peter 3:15 says ‘*always be prepared to answer anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have*’, but he says we need to be sure we answer with ‘*gentleness and respect*’. It is important that we prepare ourselves to explain our faith simply and clearly, and there are many booklets and courses around to help us do this. No one system is going to suit everyone, so look around until you find one you are comfortable using, or make up your own if you prefer. Just keep it short and simple, and of course based on the Bible.

It is also important that we treat other people with gentleness and respect. Trying to make someone else listen to what I believe if they do not want to listen is not going to achieve anything, other than making them want to stay away from me specifically, and from Christianity in general. We often need to show our faith through our behaviour before we talk about it with our mouths.

Esther stood out because she was different from the rest. The way we act in difficult situations is important. Do we stand out as different from the way the people of the world act, or are we just like everyone else?

Esther Study 3 – For Such a Time as This

Chapter 3 introduces us to the villain of the story, Haman the Agagite, who is installed by Xerxes as his Prime Minister. To Jewish readers, the fact that Haman is an Agagite would immediately signal a warning. Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time Saul was king of Israel, and God told Saul to totally destroy them because they had waylaid the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Saul did wipe out many of the Amalekites, but captured their king and kept the best of their flocks and herds, contrary to God's instructions. It was because of this disobedience that God took the kingdom away from Saul and his sons. (See 1 Samuel 15)

Mordecai has been introduced as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, Saul's tribe, so he and Haman are descended from long time enemies. The Jews would expect to find conflict arising between these two men – and it does!

Reading: Esther 2:19-23 – Mordecai Uncovers a Conspiracy

¹⁹ When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. ²⁰ But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

²¹ During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. ²² But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. ²³ And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Reading: Esther 3:1-15 – Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews

¹ After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. ² All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour.

³ Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" ⁴ Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged. ⁶ Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

¹³ Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and little children – on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴ A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.

¹⁵ Spurred on by the king's command, the couriers went out, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.

Questions – Esther 2:19-23 and 3:1-15

1. Usually when someone helped the king in some way they would be handsomely rewarded.

a. What service does Mordecai do for Xerxes?

b. How is Mordecai rewarded at that time?

2. Immediately after the record of Mordecai's service, who is rewarded and in what way?

3. What does Mordecai do to arouse Haman's anger and what is Haman's response?

4. What part does Xerxes play in this and what does this say about his concern for the welfare of the people he is ruling?

5. How would you describe Xerxes' character and why do you think God allowed him to come to the position he holds?

Reading: Esther 4:1-17 – Mordecai Persuades Esther to Help

¹ When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

⁴ When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. ⁵ Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

⁶ So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. ⁷ Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

⁹ Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold sceptre to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

Reading: Esther 5:1-8 – Esther's Request to the King

¹ On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. ² When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the sceptre.

³ Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

⁴ "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

⁵ "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."

So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. ⁶ As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

⁷ Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: ⁸ If the king regards me with favour and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

6. Why do you think Mordecai provoked Haman?

7. How much do you think Mordecai is personally responsible for the Jew's predicament, or do you think Haman was going to use his power to annihilate the Jews anyway?

8.

- a. What was Esther's first response to hearing Mordecai was in distress?

- b. What did it take to make her understand that what was wrong could not be fixed by physical or material aid?

- c. Can you think of situations where our responses may be like Esther's? How can we avoid responding this way?

9. With the explanation of the situation, Esther is also given a personal challenge. What is that, and what initially stops her from agreeing?

10. When Esther tells Mordecai that to do what he says will put her life at risk, what is his response? Do you think he is threatening her? What can we learn from his words?

11. Do you think Esther is wise in the way she prepares to carry out her dangerous task? What can we learn from her approach?

12.

- a. What happens when Esther puts her life at risk and goes to the king?

- b. What do you think about her strategy, do you think her days of preparation have paid off?

Our society has a culture of asking people to give money so ‘specialists’ can ‘do something’ about injustices or wrongs that exist, and this is important because we need those with the right skills to handle the problems and they need to be funded.

Similarly our churches fund missionaries who are specially trained to spread the gospel in places where religious freedom is denied. Churches also fund people to work locally to bring welfare and the gospel to those who need assistance in our own society, so our financial support is important in these areas too.

However there are times and places where you or I are the best people to witness for God. We are the ones who live in our neighbourhood, and are members of our own family. We have our particular set of friends and we talk to them about many different things. They are used to us. God has placed us in our neighbourhood at this particular time in history for a purpose, just as he did Esther.

We know that telling those close to us they are not living their lives as God wants them to will usually cause them to put up walls and stop listening to us on that topic.

13. What ways can we use to reach them with the gospel?

14. (*For personal reflection*) God has placed us where we are with a purpose. Are you prepared to take a risk and speak about your own faith to someone you know who is not a Christian? Who can you get to pray for you and support you when you do this?

Sometimes we do not talk about our Christian faith because we do not think we can explain clearly what we believe. The brochure *Two Roads* is a brief and simple summary of what we believe God did through Jesus and why we needed him to save us. It is based on *Two Ways to Live* and is quite easy to use and to memorise. Copies are available from the MU Sydney Office or from Matthias Media at a cost of around 50 cents.

Summary Study 3 – For Such a Time as This

The threat to the entire Jewish race was triggered by the behaviour of just two men. Esther 3:2 tells us that *'All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour.'* It is tempting to say that Mordecai would not bow down to him for religious reasons, because he would only bow to God, but we have no evidence to support this view. Perhaps it was personal, perhaps it was racial, whatever the reason was, the result promised to be disastrous for the Jews and for God's chosen line of descendants from David leading through to Jesus.

When we are in conflict with someone, we need to stop and check if we are disagreeing because it is a matter of principle or because it is a matter of pride. Jesus' command to us is to *'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Luke 10:27), that may mean sometimes doing things their way, not ours.

Being in the harem isolated Esther from things happening in the town, but when she finally heard that Mordecai was sitting at the King's gate wearing sackcloth and ashes and wailing loudly she reacted the way many of us do when we see someone in distress, she tried to fix his material needs. It is important to do that, as James says *'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.'* (James 2:15-17)

However we also need to care for the person's spiritual state, so Esther had to ask and listen to Mordecai's response before she could do anything to really help him. The trouble was, when she heard what help he wanted from her she was afraid to do it. Do we sometimes fail to ask what help a person really needs, because we are afraid we will not like their reply, that they will ask more from us than we want to give?

Her fears turned out to be justified because Mordecai's request put her life at risk. It was now five years since she had been chosen to be queen, and it appeared the king's passion for her had waned as it was now 30 days since he had called her to come to him. If she approached him unbidden, as Mordecai asked, she would die unless he held out his golden sceptre to her. Although Mordecai cared for the cousin he had adopted, he realised much more than their lives was at stake, and he sent her back the message saying that deliverance for the Jews would happen, with or without her help, but that if she chose not to help, she and her father's house would perish. He added that she may have come to her royal position for exactly this purpose.

We do not live in a palace and we do not have to risk our lives facing a pagan king, but our choice is the same as Esther's. God has put us where we are *'for such at time as this'*. Ephesians 2:10 says *'we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do'*. So wherever we are and whatever life situation we are in, God has prepared good works for us to do. Our choice is whether we will do them and be a willing, co-operative part of his plan, or whether we will choose to ignore him, in which case his plans will still be carried out, but we will miss out and so will those close to us because we are being disobedient.

Esther Study 4 – God Rules Over All

At the beginning of Chapter 5 of Esther, Haman appeared to be victorious. His plot to destroy the Jews was in place and even King Xerxes could not repeal the law. He had a favoured position in the king's court, and he must also be a favourite with Queen Esther, as she had entertained him at a banquet at which the king was the only other guest, and she had invited him back again.

But he couldn't leave well enough alone. He wanted to take revenge on Mordecai personally and was confident he could get the king's permission to do whatever he wanted. He didn't realise that he was doomed because his opponent was the sovereign God of the universe whom he ignored, but who knew all Haman's actions and intentions.

Reading: Esther 5:9-14 – Haman's Rage Against Mordecai

⁹ Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. ¹⁰ Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home.

Calling together his friends and Zeresh, his wife, ¹¹ Haman boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honoured him and how he had elevated him above the other nobles and officials. ¹² "And that's not all," Haman added. "I'm the only person Queen Esther invited to accompany the king to the banquet she gave. And she has invited me along with the king tomorrow. ¹³ But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate."

¹⁴ His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built.

Reading: Esther 6:1-14 – Mordecai Honoured

¹ That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. ² It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.

³ "What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked.

"Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered.

⁴ The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him.

⁵ His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court."

"Bring him in," the king ordered.

⁶ When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?" ⁷ So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honour, ⁸ have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹ Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honour, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!' "

¹⁰ “Go at once,” the king commanded Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended.”

¹¹ So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, “This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!”

¹² Afterward Mordecai returned to the king’s gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, ¹³ and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, “Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him – you will surely come to ruin!” ¹⁴ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared.

1. Why does Haman go to the palace?

2. What happened to the king during the night and how does Haman come to be involved in what happens next?

3. How does Haman’s pride result in Mordecai being very visibly honoured?

4. Haman’s wife, Zeresh, encourages him to take personal action against Mordecai when times are good. As soon as the situation changes what does she remember about Mordecai which she ignored earlier? How does this affect her ‘advice’?

5. It is easy to give advice, but not all advice is worth having. What steps can we take to try to give wise advice to which it is worth listening?

Reading: Esther 7:1-10 – Haman Hanged

¹ So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, ² and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, “Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted.”

³ Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. ⁴ For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. 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.”

⁵ King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, “Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?”

⁶ Esther said, “The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.”

Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. ⁷ The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life.

⁸ Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.

The king exclaimed, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?”

As soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face. ⁹ Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, “A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman’s house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.”

The king said, “Hang him on it!” ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king’s fury subsided.

6. What did Haman put confidence in when he spoke to his family and friends?

7. How did those particular grounds of confidence prove false?

8. What sort of things do people put confidence in today in our society?

9. What is the only thing we can have confidence in that can never be taken away from us?

10.

- a. What apparent co-incidences combined to cause Haman's downfall?

- b. Can you recall anything that you thought was a co-incidence at the time, but you now see was caused by God?

Reading: Esther 8:1-4,7,8,11-13,15-17 – The King's Edict in Behalf of the Jews

¹ That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. ² The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.

³ Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. ⁴ Then the king extended the gold sceptre to Esther and she arose and stood before him.

⁷ King Xerxes replied to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows. ⁸ Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring – for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked."

¹¹ The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies. ¹² The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. ¹³ A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

¹⁵ Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. ¹⁶ For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. ¹⁷ In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

Reading: Esther 9:1-4,20-22,29-32 – Triumph of the Jews / Purim Celebrated

¹ On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. ² The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No one could stand against them, because the people of all the other nationalities were afraid of them. ³ And all the nobles of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and the king's administrators helped the Jews, because fear of Mordecai had seized them. ⁴ Mordecai was prominent in the palace; his reputation spread throughout the provinces, and he became more and more powerful.

²⁰ Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, ²¹ to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar ²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

²⁹ So Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority to confirm this second letter concerning Purim. ³⁰ And Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Xerxes – words of goodwill and assurance – ³¹ to establish these days of Purim at their designated times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had decreed for them, and as they had established for themselves and their descendants in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation. ³² Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records.

Reading: Esther 10:1-3 – The Greatness of Mordecai

¹ King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its distant shores. ² And all his acts of power and might, together with a full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Media and Persia? ³ Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, pre-eminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

11. In what ways has Esther grown since she was first taken into the king's harem?

12. What part has Esther played in Mordecai's rise to power?

Romans 8:28 says ‘*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*’

13. What good things resulted from the terrible threat to the existence of the Jews?

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14. Can you share any examples of ways in your own life, or in the lives of others, where you have seen God using suffering to strengthen your faithfulness and help you be more like Jesus?

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By her wisdom and courage Esther was able to save her people from annihilation, but it was only a temporary salvation. History has shown us that the Jews have been threatened time and again. All earthly saviours are limited by time, just as Esther was. The Jews in Esther’s day, just like the people of our time, need a saviour to rescue them from the consequences of their sin.

Romans 3:23 reminds us that ‘*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*’ and Romans 6:23 tells us ‘*that the wages of sin is death*’. We are in the same situation as Esther’s Jews, we all need a Saviour.

But the situation has changed since Esther’s time, God came himself in the person of Jesus and provided the perfect saviour for all people who accept him for all time.

Looking at Romans 3 again, but this time including verse 24, we are given a hope: ²³*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴*and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

And Romans 6 gives us the same hope in the second part of verse 23: *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is the hope that will never let us down because it is based on God’s faithfulness, not on the strength of our own faith. It is the hope that we are called to pass on to those around us. So wherever we are, and whatever situation we face in the future, we are not there by accident. God has placed us there ‘*for such a time as this*’ and he will be with us and give us the strength to do his will, that is his promise and God always keeps his promises.

Summary Study 4 – God Rules Over All

There are some people who cannot leave well enough alone and Haman appears to be one of those people. In Esther 5:9 he was happy because he had just been to the queen's banquet along with the king, and he was going back again the next day. His plans for the destruction of the Jews were in place, and everything seemed right with his world until he saw Mordecai and his fury bubbled up again. How dare that man refuse to give him the honour he was due! At home his family and friends agreed with him. Why should he wait until the last month of the year to get rid of Mordecai, why not do it now? So in anticipation of getting the king's agreement, he built a gallows and hurried off to the palace to get the king's approval. His situation is reminiscent of many self-made men and women whose security depended on their stock market investments just before the stock market collapse. They thought they were secure, but they were actually balanced on the edge of a precipice and were about to fall.

Forces unknown to Haman had been at work and it just so happened that king Xerxes could not sleep that night. To treat his insomnia, he had the book of the record of his reign read to him, and in that book was the account of the plot to assassinate him that Mordecai had uncovered. He enquired what had been done as a reward and was told nothing had been done. So the reward happened there and then, right at the time Mordecai's service to the king needed to be fresh in his mind. There are times when our prayers to God seem to go unanswered for many years and we wonder if anything is ever going to happen, but as 2 Peter 3:8-9 says *'With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'* God's time is not our time, but his plans will be achieved, it is a matter of waiting for God's time and not trying to impose our own.

Now we see Haman plunging down the slippery slope of his own pride and ambition. First, because he assumes he is the only person the king loves to honour, he finds himself leading Mordecai in a triumphal procession around the city. When he tells what has happened to the same friends and family members who encouraged him to build the gallows for Mordecai, they change their tune and predict his ruin, but before he can answer them the eunuchs arrive to take him to Esther's banquet. That is where his real destruction takes place. This time Esther does explain to the king what her request is, and Haman hears, to his horror, that Esther is a Jew and that she is pleading for her life and the life of her people. When she names Haman as the one who has brought this fate on them, the king storms out of the room. Haman knows him well enough to realise Xerxes has already decided his fate, but tries to persuade the queen to ask the king to save his life. This also backfires as the king returns as Haman is pleading with the queen and accuses him of molesting her. Instant death is the penalty, and Haman is hurried out of the room and hung on his own gallows.

In his pride, Haman thought he was invincible, but his opponent was the sovereign God of the universe, who Haman had ignored, but who had judged Haman's actions and intentions from the beginning and Haman was doomed. People in our society put confidence in many different things: material prosperity, job security, physical appearance or ability, and mental acuity are just some, but all these things can be taken away without a moment's notice. The only true security is found in God. Like the Jews in Esther's time we all face death, but unlike them, we have a hope beyond death based on the completed work of Jesus Christ. Romans 6:23 says *'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* This is our hope and our security and nothing can take it away.

Resources

Two Roads

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The NIV Application Commentary – Esther

by Karen H Jobes published by Zondervan

This series carries a subheading '*from biblical text...to contemporary life*' and aims at not just explaining the world and context that the books of the Bible were originally written in, but aims at helping readers move from the original significance of the passage to its contemporary significance. In other words, what is it saying to us today? I found the Esther volume very thought provoking and recommend it to anyone who would like to delve deeper.