

The Book of
ESTHER



A Bible study showcasing God's providence and the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us.

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SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION – SETTING THE STAGE

The book of Esther is unique in the Bible. It never mentions God, promotes a festival not prescribed in the Law of Moses, and has an apparent vindictive nature that some have found offensive. But we cannot read Esther and not see God’s providence.

To appreciate God’s message in Esther, we must grasp the setting, the contextual history, and the main characters.

Setting

The events in Esther occur between 483 and 473 BC in Susa, one of the four capital cities of Persia. Long before this time, the people of Israel and Judah (later called Jews) had been dispersed throughout the Near East by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Eventually the Persians absorbed nearly all of these lands into their empire, which reached its greatest extent during the time of Esther.



Contextual History

Year (BC)	Event Relevant to the Book of Esther
1050	Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, crowned first king of Israel.
1010	David, of the tribe of Judah, crowned king of Israel.
970	Solomon, David's son, crowned king of Israel.
930	Israel splits into the northern kingdom (called Israel, comprising ten tribes) and the southern kingdom (Judah and Benjamin).
722	Assyria destroys the northern kingdom and exiles the people throughout Assyria.
612	Babylon defeats Assyria.
586	Babylon destroys Jerusalem, and the southern kingdom falls. Exiles were removed to areas of Babylon from 605 to 582 BC.
539	Babylon overthrown by Cyrus of Persia.
538	Cyrus allows exiles to return to Jerusalem. About 42,000 people return to rebuild the temple.
486	Ahasuerus (Xerxes) begins reign in Persia.
483	Ahasuerus's feast; Queen Vashti removed.

Year (BC)	Event Relevant to the Book of Esther
479	Esther crowned queen.
474	Haman's decree.
473	First Feast of Purim celebrated.

When Cyrus allowed exiles to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC, about 42,000 people returned. Additional exiles returned in later years, but others, like Esther and Mordecai in our story, remained where they had settled in exile.

Cast of Main Characters (in order of appearance). We will fill in more details about these characters throughout this study.

King Ahasuerus

King of Persia, began his reign about three years before the events in Esther began.

Mordecai

A Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, uncle to Esther.

Esther

An orphan being brought up by her uncle, Mordecai.

Haman

A high official of King Ahasuerus, a descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites.

As we read Esther, we will learn more about how God uses this unique setting, historical background, and characters to showcase his providence. We will also see the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us.

Read Esther 1:1-9

1. What things stand out to you about the festivities and the feast?

2. Can you think of any reasons such extravagant festivities would be held?

Read Esther 1:10-22

3. Everyone understood that the Persian queen was expected to obey the king. List below three possible explanations from your perspective as to why Vashti might have refused the king's order.

4. What was King Ahasuerus's physical state at this time (v. 10) and his reaction to Vashti's refusal (v. 12)?

5. When we are physically impaired by alcohol, pain, hunger (etc.), and suddenly overcome by anger, disappointment, grief (etc.), what are some smart things to do, and what actions are better postponed?

6. What exactly does the king ask his advisers versed in Persian law (v. 15)?

7. Do the advisors find anything in the current law? Why do they think a new law is needed, and what is it?

8. Verse 19 states a fact that will be important to the rest of the story: Let a _____ go out from him (the king), and let it be _____ among the _____ of the Persians and the Medes so that it may _____, that...

9. Add the characteristics we learned about King Ahasuerus from this chapter to the character table.

10. What event in this passage set the stage for events to follow, and how does this show God's providence?

SESSION TWO: ENTER THE PROTAGONISTS

As chapter one comes to a close, the stage is set. We have met the most powerful man in the Mesopotamian world, King Ahasuerus, who has banished the beautiful Queen Vashti from ever coming before him again (ironically, she didn't want to come before him in the first place) and removed her as queen. The king is an angry, lonely guy.

Read Esther 2:1-4

1. Compare and contrast who the king took counsel from in 1:13 and 2:2. Why do you think he did not go to the same counselors for advice?
2. Hundreds of years before this, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, began his reign with a united kingdom. The northern tribes appealed to Rehoboam to lighten the heavy tax burden imposed on them by King Solomon. Read 1 Kings 12:6-11. Why do you think Rehoboam asked two separate groups of counselors how to handle the discontent?
3. What happened in 930 BC as a result of who Rehoboam listened to (see Contextual History table), and what is the lesson for us?

Read Esther 2:5-11

4. Mordecai and Esther were Jews from the tribe of _____. Their ancestors were exiled around _____ BC (see Contextual History table), which means they had been living in a foreign culture for about _____ years.
5. Why do you think Esther advanced above all the other beautiful young women?
6. In verse 10, what did Mordecai command to Esther, and why do you think he did that?

Read Esther 2:12-18

7. This section closes with Esther crowned queen. List below what you think made the king choose her over all the other women.
8. What can we apply in our lives from this?

Read Esther 2:19-24

You may have heard the saying, “Don’t hang a gun on the wall unless someone is going to use it.” This saying means that details are important in a story or a play and should relate to the ongoing plot or something that will occur later. These verses seem to digress from the story but tell us details that will become important later.

9. What does Mordecai discover?

10. How did the king learn about this, and where was the event documented?

11. Add the characteristics we learned about Mordecai and Esther from this chapter to the character table.

12. List below the events that point to God’s providence from this chapter.

13. From this chapter, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?

SESSION THREE: ENTER THE ANTAGONIST

The Book of Esther has introduced us to a king swayed by his emotions and counselors of choice, a beautiful heroine who has risen from obscurity to the highest position in the Persian empire, and her uncle, who guides her wisely from the background and promotes justice. But every good story has an antagonist, and in Chapter 3, he enters the picture. But before we meet him, we need to remember some events in Israel's history.

As far back as Exodus, Israel had wars with the Amalekites (see Exodus 17:8-16). Fast forward to when Saul, who was from the tribe of Benjamin, was the first king of Israel.

1. Read 1 Samuel 15:1-3. What did The LORD command Saul to do?

2. Read 1 Samuel 15:7-9. What did Saul do?

Samuel killed Agag, but Saul must not have killed all his descendants. We will see how Saul's disobedience had perilous consequences hundreds of years later.

Read Esther 3:1-6

3. Verse one tells us King Ahasuerus promoted _____ the _____ above all of the other officials.

4. What did Mordecai refuse to do, and why do you think he refused?

5. Why do you think Mordecai chose this time to reveal he was a Jew?

6. What was Haman's reaction, and what did he want to do?

Read Esther 3:7-15

7. Verse seven tells us that Haman begins plotting his destruction of the Jews in the first month. According to Leviticus 23:4-6, what would the Jews have been preparing for or celebrating? What is the significance of this "coincidence?"

8. Haman uses pur (lots), which is like throwing the dice, to help make his decision. This seems like a happenstance way of picking a date to destroy the Jews. What does Proverbs 16:33 say about casting lots?

9. Should we cast lots to make decisions? Why or why not?

10. What tactics does Haman use to convince the king to agree to his plan to destroy the Jews?

11. If Haman succeeds in his plan to destroy, kill, and annihilate all Jews, what is at stake? (See Isaiah 9:6-7 and Daniel 7:13-14.)

12. What happened in the last sentence of verse 15, and what are your thoughts about that?

13. Add the characteristics we learned about Haman and King Ahasuerus from this chapter to the character table.

14. List below the events that point to God's providence from this chapter.

15. From this chapter, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?

SESSION FOUR: FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

If the Jews are obliterated, not only will our protagonists Mordecai and Esther perish, but the whole Jewish population across the vast Persian empire – which, from our map, we see includes Jerusalem. No Jews, no fulfillment of the prophecies for a Messiah. No Messiah, no hope for humanity.

Read Esther 4:1-11

1. Mordecai's and the Jew's reaction to the decree was to weep, fast, and put on sackcloth and ashes. Why did they do this, and what else would they have done? (See Daniel 9:3.)
2. When we receive devastating news, what are some common reactions? What should be our first action to deal with the situation?
3. Esther could not run out to see Mordecai, so she sent one of her attendants, Hathach. What all did Mordecai tell Hathach?
4. What was Esther's problem with Mordecai's request, and what did she tell Hathach to say to Mordecai?
5. Have you ever been asked to do something important that you knew may not end well? What happened?

Read Esther 4:12-17

Remember, Mordecai has revealed his heritage at this point in the story, but Esther has not.

6. Does Mordecai think Esther will escape the destruction because she is the queen? Why?
7. What is Mordecai sure of, and why do you think he has this confidence? (See Psalm 2.)
8. What is Mordecai's challenge to Esther?

9. What is Esther's response and instructions? What does this reveal about her?

Read Esther 5:1-8

After three days of fasting and planning (and praying, no doubt), Esther presents herself before the king. She knows this could be her death sentence. But she wins the king's favor and is invited to approach and present her request. Esther invites the king and Haman to a feast she has prepared, where she will presumably voice her request.

10. At what point in the feast does verse six pick up, and what does the king say to Esther?

11. Esther, however, does not voice her request. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to come to another feast tomorrow when she will reveal her request. Why do you think Esther postponed voicing her request?

12. Add the characteristics we learned about Mordecai, Esther, and King Ahasuerus from this session to the character table.

13. List below the events that point to God's providence from this session.

14. From this session, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?

SESSION FIVE: THE PLOT THICKENS

Haman has just been honored by the Queen and leaves the feast joyful and glad of heart. However, arrogant people generally do not stay happy for long.

Read Esther 5: 9-14

1. What happened when Haman left the feast, and why did this upset him so much?
2. Why do you think Haman invited a bunch of friends over?
3. What did his wife and friends tell him to do, and what was Haman's reaction?

Read Esther 6: 1-9

4. That night, the king could not sleep. Instead of counting sheep, he asks that the book of memorable deeds be read to him. What was read to him, and what does the king then ask?
5. Who just happens to be in the court, and why is he there?
6. Who does Haman think the king wants to honor? Look at the list of things Haman suggests be done to the man the king wants to honor. What stands out about these things, and what does this tell us about Haman?

Read Esther 6: 10-13

7. What reaction did you have when you read verses 10 and 11? What do these verses reveal about God's character?
8. What did Haman do after he paraded Mordecai around the city square?

9. What was the counsel of his wife and friends? Why would they have counseled this, and why do you think this was not their original counsel back in 5:14?

10. Add the characteristics we learned about Haman and King Ahasuerus from this session to the character table.

11. List below the events that point to God's providence from this session. (See also Proverbs 21:12 and 21:30.)

12. From this session, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?

SESSION SIX: JUSTICE IS SERVED

The tables have started to turn. Mordecai has been honored instead of executed, and Haman has a bad feeling about all this. At least he can still look forward to the feast with the king and queen...

Read Esther 6:14 - 7:4

1. At what point in the feast does verse two pick up, and what does the king say to Esther?
2. What is Esther's wish, and what is her request?
3. How does Esther make her requests appealing to the king? What can we learn from this?

Read Esther 7:5-10

4. Esther reveals that Haman is behind the plot to annihilate her people. Why do you think the king left to go into the palace garden?
5. What happens just as the king returns? How does this seal Haman's fate?
6. What does Harbona suggest? How do you think he knew about the gallows?

Read Esther 8:1-17

7. Haman has been executed, and the king puts Mordecai in Haman's position. The king is probably thinking, "Problem solved!" But the decree still stands to annihilate the Jews. What does Esther ask the king to do in 8:5, and what is the problem with that? (See Esther 1:19.)
8. The king tells Esther and Mordecai to write another edict. What was that edict?

9. The couriers on swift horses go to all 127 provinces to issue the decree. What was the reaction in Susa, among the Jews, and from many of the people in the country?

10. Read Psalm 141:9-10 and Proverbs 21:15. How do these verses relate to this session?

11. Add the characteristics we learned about King Ahasuerus, Esther, and Mordecai from this session to the character table.

12. List below the events that point to God's providence from this session.

13. From this session, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?

SESSION SEVEN: THE FEAST OF PURIM

The king has now given the Jews in Susa and all 127 provinces allowance to defend themselves against anyone who follows the first edict to kill, annihilate, and destroy them.

Read Esther 9:1-19

1. Two edicts are carried out on the same day. What happened?
2. Who helped the Jews, and why did they do that?
3. In verse 8:11, the edict states that the Jews can defend themselves and also plunder their enemies. What does verse 9:10 say, and why do you think that was the case?
4. The king observes that Esther's edict has been successful and asks her what else she would like. What all does she ask, and why do you think she asks for these things?
5. Why was it profoundly necessary for the Jews to succeed in defending themselves and have victory over their enemies?
6. When and how do the Jews celebrate?

Read Esther 9:20 – 10:3

7. What did Mordecai and Esther oblige the Jews to do, and why is this important?
8. What were the Jew's reactions to the letters?

9. The Persian king advanced Mordecai, the Jew, to second in rank to himself. What do you think he saw in Mordecai? Does this remind you of anyone else in the Old Testament?

10. Why was Mordecai popular with the people?

11. Add the characteristics we learned about King Ahasuerus, Esther, and Mordecai from this session to the character table.

12. List below the events that point to God's providence from this session.

13. From this session, where have we seen the importance of human responsibility and obedience to what God asks of us?