

Esther

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? A Jewish girl and her older cousin save their people from a massacre in ancient Persia.

WHO WROTE IT? We don't know for sure, but it must have been a Jew living in Persia, perhaps in the fifth century B.C.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? Around 480 B.C.

WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? The story of Esther takes place during the period after the Exile, when some Jews had returned to Jerusalem but others remained in Persia.

- THE BREAKDOWN**
- Chapter 1: Queen Vashti gets fired
 - Chapter 2: Esther replaces her
 - Chapter 3: Haman plots to wipe out the Jews
 - Chapters 4-8: Esther and Mordecai save their people
 - Chapter 9: Jews celebrate the Festival of Purim
 - Chapter 10: Honor is bestowed on Mordecai

- KEY CONCEPTS**
- Banquets
 - Jews
 - Law

SCORECARD

Esther: Crowned queen of Persia
Mordecai: Her cousin and guardian
Xerxes: The king of Persia
Haman: The villain

READING TIME 45

III HOURS	3:01	1:00	1:30	2:00	2:30
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474 +
 HAMAN'S DECREE TO
 DESTROY THE JEWS
 473 +
 FIRST FESTIVAL OF PURIM

WORTH MEMORIZING

- 4:14 "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?"

THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **MORDECAI'S IMPRESSIVE EXAMPLE.** He took responsibility for his cousin after her parents died. He did his work with integrity. He didn't try to suck up to the powerful. He stood up for his people. He thought before he acted.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF Esther?

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God enjoys setting up dramatic results.

1:16-22 The advisers evaluated the situation regarding Vashti's disobedience and, realizing the far-reaching effects that such an act could have, suggested that quick and final action be taken at once. Anxious to please his allies, the king had made an unwise request of Vashti and now had to live with the consequences. We need to carefully evaluate the requests we make of others, realizing that we may be compromising their rights or desires.

More Than Good Looks

Book of Esther

ESTHER WAS A beautiful young woman whose good looks caught the eye of King Xerxes of Persia. After Xerxes deposed his queen, he chose Esther to be her successor.

Later, Esther's older cousin Mordecai learned of a palace plot to kill all the Jews living in Persia. Esther stepped across a protocol line to ask the king for mercy, risking her life. Her bravery during a time of crisis demonstrated that in addition to outer beauty, Esther possessed considerable inner strength.

The book of Esther reads like a movie script: Young woman taken into the king's harem wins his favor because of her beauty and is transformed from innocent, powerless sex object into strategizing, powerful savior of her people.

But Esther's transformation didn't happen overnight or without internal change. When she felt weak, her cousin Mordecai challenged her: "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

This comment must have moved her to action. In the end, her initiative and bravery made all the difference.

Change and growth are necessary parts of life. In our own day, a wife can change for seemingly unknown reasons. Husbands may be surprised, as Xerxes no doubt was, or even suspicious. They may wonder what happened to the sweet young thing they married.

When you see changes in your wife, it's a good idea to find out what is really happening. Rather than dismissing the differences, make an effort to discover how this "new woman" may in fact have something very important to contribute.



he words of an old hymn say: "Build your hopes on things eternal, hold to God's unchanging hand." Another song speaks of being guided by God's "unseen hand." Well, with the book of Esther we have the only book of the Bible containing no reference to God's name; yet His unchanging, unseen hand cannot be missed.

Esther, the last of the historical books of the Old Testament, tells a dramatic story of a woman caught up in a battle for the survival of the Jewish people. During the days of the Persian Empire, an egomaniacal, high-ranking official named Haman hatched a plan to exterminate all the Jews on earth. What followed was one of history's most intrigue-filled accounts of political maneuverings, death threats, shocking plot-twists, and dramatic rescues. At the center of the action was Queen Esther, who had risen to the throne "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Guided by her relative Mordecai, Esther turned the tables on Haman, and the villain was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

The book of Esther shows how God's unseen hand orchestrated the affairs of humanity by providential arrangement. Esther teaches that God purposely guides our steps even when we're not aware of it and even when things don't make sense. Every thread woven into the fabric of the Christian life is part of the ultimate tapestry that someday we'll view in glory. We really can build our hopes on things eternal as we hold to God's unchanging hand.

KEY VERSE:

"Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for *such* a time as this?"

Esther 4:14



KEY ACTION:

Trust the hidden resolutions of God's providence when you can't see visible solutions to life's dilemmas.



KEY PRAYER:

Lord, may I be sold out to Your cause! May I be found worthy to be used by You in a special and unique way.



KEY THOUGHT:

With His hidden hand of providence, God purposely guides and protects His people, even when they're unaware of it and even when, as in the days of Mordecai and Esther, disaster looms.



BASIC SURVEY

ESTHER

AUTHOR: Not stated, but perhaps Ezra or Nehemiah.

DATE: Approximately 486–465 BC, during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes) of Persia. Esther became queen around 479 BC.

TEN WORDS OR LESS

Beautiful Jewish girl becomes queen, saves fellow Jews from slaughter.

DETAILS, PLEASE

In a nationwide beauty contest, young Esther becomes queen of Persia without revealing her Jewish heritage. When a royal official plots to kill every Jew in the country, Esther risks her own life to request the king's protection. The king, pleased with Esther, is shocked by his official's plan and has the man hanged—while decreeing that the Jews should defend themselves against the planned slaughter. Esther's people prevail and commemorate the event with a holiday called Purim.

QUOTABLE

- > Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her (2:15 NKJV).
- > “Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (4:14 NKJV).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

God's name is never mentioned in the book of Esther. Neither is prayer, though Esther asks her fellow Jews to fast for her before she approaches the king (4:16).

SO WHAT?

When we find ourselves in bad situations, it may be for the same reason Esther did—to accomplish something good.

READ ESTHER 1-2.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 93. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 93. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 91. →

CLOSER LOOK

ESTHER AND MORDECAI

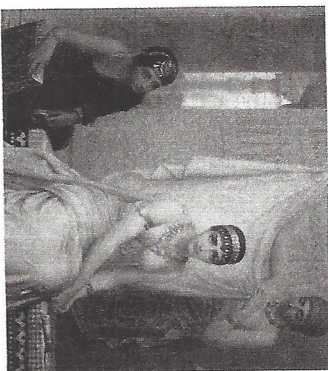
One evening King Xerxes of Persia commanded Queen Vashti to appear before his guests to display her beauty, but Vashti refused. As a result, she was deposed and Xerxes sought a new queen. Now, in the capital lived a Jew named Mordecai. He had a beautiful young cousin named Hadassah (Esther), and when her parents died, he'd taken her in as his own daughter. Esther was brought to Xerxes's palace and “the king was attracted to Esther” and “made her queen” (Esther 2:17 NIV).

After some time, Xerxes appointed Haman the Agagite as his right-hand man, and Haman became angry at Mordecai because he refused to bow to him. Haman plotted not only to kill Mordecai, but to exterminate all Jews in the Persian Empire. He persuaded King Xerxes to agree to this. When Mordecai found out, he asked Esther to intercede for her people. Esther replied that anyone who went into the inner court to the king uninvited was put to death. The person's life was spared only if the king held out his golden scepter.

Nevertheless, Esther went in, and Xerxes held out the golden scepter. Esther then pled for her life and the lives of her people. When the king demanded to know what man had dared plot such a massacre, Esther revealed that it was evil Haman. The king commanded Haman to be executed and gave Haman's position and ring of authority to Mordecai. And this day of the Jews' deliverance was established as a new feast day called Purim.

READ ESTHER 3-4.

- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 93. →



Esther was made queen and saved the Jews from being massacred. She is depicted here in the painting *Esther* by Edwin Long (1829–1891).

HIDDEN TREASURES

HAMAN THE AGAGITE



Haman plotted to kill the Jews, but he was stopped by Esther. They are seen in this painting titled *Esther, Absentminded, and Haman* by Jan Steen (c. 1626–1679).

Persian officials had plotted against Daniel (Daniel 6:1–9), so wary of anti-Semitism, Mordecai had advised Esther not to reveal her nationality (Esther 2:10). Mordecai's fears were well founded. Xerxes appointed Haman, an Agagite, as his right-hand man. The Agagites were descendants of Agag, the Amalekite king, and were age-old, bitter enemies of God's people (Exodus 17:8–14; 1 Samuel 15:7–8). Saul had been ordered to wipe out the Amalekites, but had failed, as they still existed in David's day and situation turned dangerous, however, when Haman learned that Mordecai was Jewish. But God protected the Jews from Haman's plot.

READ ESTHER 5–7.

HIDDEN TREASURES

PERSIA'S IRREVERSIBLE LAWS

When Esther asked Xerxes to countermand Haman's edict (to destroy the Jews), he stated that no Persian law could be changed (Esther 8:3–8). But he sent out a *new* edict, allowing the Jews to defend themselves and to attack their enemies. This strange feature of Persian law caused much trouble for God's people. For example, Darius had appointed Daniel as a top governor. This made many Persian officials jealous, so they persuaded Darius to decree that for thirty days no one must pray to any god—only to Darius. All offenders were to be thrown to the lions. Darius agreed. When he learned that Daniel had prayed to God, he tried to rescue him, but was also reminded that no law of the Medes and Persians could be annulled (Daniel 6:14–15).

READ ESTHER 8–10.

Mordecai

As Shrewd as a Snake

SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE HIS DEATH in 1988, radio Bible teacher J. Vernon McGee spoke with a man who held some extreme views on the sovereignty of God. The man declared that he trusted so deeply in God's control over all things that he believed he could walk out at rush hour in the middle of one of California's busiest roads, and if it wasn't his time to go, he'd remain completely safe. McGee immediately replied, "If you walk out into the middle of that street at rush hour, it will be your time to go!" McGee and an Old Testament hero named Mordecai would have gotten along very well.

Mordecai is a key figure in the book of Esther, one of only two books in the Bible that doesn't explicitly mention God (the other is the Song of Songs). Yet while God's name never appears in Esther, his providential control of events permeates every chapter in the book. Mordecai clearly believed in God's sovereignty, but he just as clearly believed in taking wise and appropriate action.

This fifth-century B.C. Jew lived in exile in Persia. He reared his cousin Esther as his own daughter when her parents died. As a beautiful young woman, Esther won an empire-wide beauty contest and eventually became the queen of King Xerxes—but

Mordecai wisely instructed her not to reveal her nationality. In time, Mordecai (who didn't try to conceal his own heritage)

learned of a plot to assassinate the king and reported it, thus preventing the murder.

Despite his loyalty, however, Mordecai soon gained a powerful enemy when he refused to bow down to the prime minister, a wicked man named Haman. As a pious Jew, Mordecai could not show a mere man such worshipful

deference. But Mordecai's religious prohibitions made no difference to Haman. He plotted to exterminate not only Mordecai but all Jews everywhere. He tricked the king into signing an order for genocide and then set the date, almost a year in the future.

What would you do if you were Mordecai? Would you just put the matter into God's gracious hands and do nothing but pray? Mordecai no doubt prayed, but he also used the tools in his own hands. He contacted Esther about intervening with the king, and when she expressed some reservations, he told her, "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13–14).

Mordecai's words moved Esther to action, and eventually the tables were violently turned, resulting not only in the deliverance of the Jews but also in the destruction of their enemies—including Haman.

So is God sovereign? You bet. But he also expects us to "be as shrewd as snakes" (Matthew 10:16).

THE POINT: God's sovereignty doesn't excuse us from acting wisely.

AN INTRODUCTION TO

ESTHER

Esther was a beautiful young Jewish woman who became queen of Persia. When an evil enemy plotted to kill all the Jews, Esther persuaded the king to save her people. The enemy was put to death. Esther's story shows that God can use people to bring about his plans.

Headlines

QUEEN DISOBEYS KING

Esther 1, page 615

ESTHER'S PLAN SAVES MILLIONS

Esther 5, page 651

HAMAN HANGS ON

XERXES' WORDS

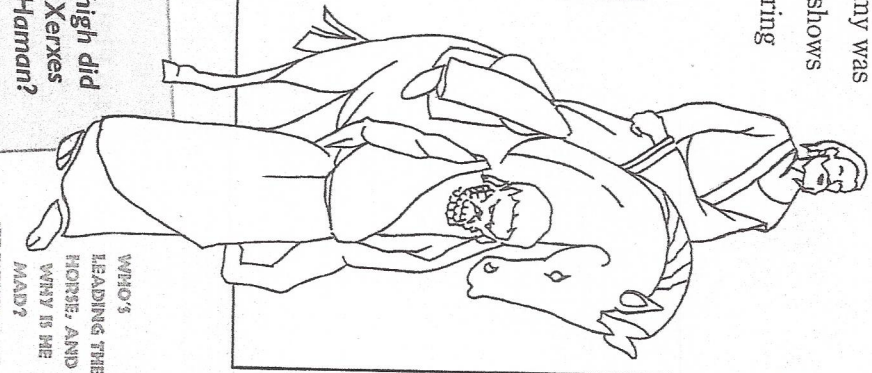
Esther 7, page 652

TURNABOUT'S FAIR PLAY

Esther 8, page 653

ESTHER STARTS A HOLIDAY!

Esther 9, page 654



WHO'S LEADING THE HORSE, AND WHY IS HE MAD?
SEE ESTHER 6.

WHY DID ESTHER INVITE HAMAN TO DINNER?
She thought he might hang around!
(See Esther 7.)

How high did King Xerxes raise Haman?
About 75 feet. (See Esther 7:9.)

GOD'S HAND OF PROVIDENCE AND protection on behalf of His people is evident throughout the Book of Esther, though His name does not appear once. Haman's plot brings grave danger to the Jews and is countered by the courage of beautiful Esther and the counsel of her wise cousin Mordecai, resulting in a great deliverance. The Feast of Purim becomes an annual reminder of God's faithfulness on behalf of His people.

Esther's Hebrew name was *Hadasah*, "Myrtle" (2:7), but her Persian name *Esther* was derived from the Persian word for "Star" (*Stara*). The Greek title for this book is *Esther*, and the Latin title is *Hester*.

WATCH WORDS

- law (a mandate or edict given by a king)—1:8 (also 1:19)
- disdain (despise or hold something in contempt)—3:6
- honor (display dignity magnificence, value)—6:6 (also 1:20; 8:16)
- devise (think or contrive a plan)—8:5
- Pur (lot or fate; lot-casting, similar to rolling dice, a common way to make a random selection)—9:24 (also 3:7; 9:26)

3:12-13 Displaying God's Justice and Mercy

Esther is one of only two books in the Bible in which God is not mentioned directly (the other is Song of Songs). Though He is not identified by name in this small book, He reveals an important spiritual truth in its few pages. The story of Haman and King Xerxes is a redemption story displaying both God's justice and His mercy.

Haman is a picture of Satan, and he is called "the enemy of the Jews" (3:10; cf. Matthew 10:39). His aim is "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate" (3:13; cf. John 10:10), and he is "the adversary and the enemy" of God's people (7:6; cf. 1 Peter 5:8). Pridelful Haman was infuriated when Mordecai refused to bow to him, just as Satan desires to show himself equal to God and receive man's worship (Matt. 4:9).

Through Haman's influence, the king has issued a death warrant against the Jews because "they do not keep the king's laws" (3:8). Once a decree is signed by the king, it is irrevocable. Because he is a righteous and just king, he cannot go back on his declared word. His law is immutable and His death decree must remain in place.

However, the king has a plan to render the effects of this death sentence null and void, to save the citizens in his kingdom. He issues a second decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves—giving them a way to counter the enemy's intent and preserve their lives.

In the same way, due to Satan's influence in leading Adam and Eve to sin, God has issued the

death penalty against all mankind—because we do not keep the King's Laws. This decree is irrevocable. Because He is righteous and just, He cannot overlook it and just change His mind. Lawbreakers must be punished, and the sentence of death must remain in place. However, God has also made a way for us to avoid the death penalty. He Himself has provided our only defense against death—Christ's blood shed on the cross for our sins.

Note that although the king provided the way of escape, the people had to choose to take that way, or they would perish. He did not just automatically spare them all; they had to respond. If they had decided not to act on the opportunity they were given, they would have died. We too must choose to accept the way of deliverance that God has provided. If we do not, we will perish. As with the gospel message, the king's decree was "published for all people" (8:13) and as a result many Gentiles were converted (8:17).

It's also interesting that the people didn't react by blaming the king for issuing the death decree in the first place, and then refuse to accept the solution. Instead, they took the solution that was offered, and rejoiced at the life they gained with the second decree. How many unbelievers complain about God taking human life and especially about His decreeing eternal death and hell. Yet they stubbornly refuse to accept the solution. He graciously offers to save them from destruction!

What's in a Name?

It is traditionally believed that the name Esther means "star" in Persian.

ESTHER

REMEMBERING

The Jewish holiday
Purim began in the
time of Esther as
an annual
celebration of
God's
deliverance of the
Jews from their
enemies
(9:20-32).

In the Word

Although the book of Nehemiah records the return of many Jews to Judah, the story of Esther takes place among those who chose to remain exiled in Persia. It is the only Biblical record of that portion of the Israelites.

DID YOU KNOW?

▶ The pole Haman built (on which he was impaled) would stand about the same height as an eight- or nine-story building by today's standards (7:9-10).
▶ The story of Esther takes place in the middle of the time of the book of Ezra, after the first group of people returned from exile in Babylon, but before Ezra led the second group of people back to Jerusalem.

BY THE NUMBERS

10 CHAPTERS
167 VERSES
5,147 WORDS

LIFE LESSONS: Use the power and influence God has given you to help people in need (4:16).

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW ESTHER?

ESTHER IN REVIEW

- "?" CRYPTIC PHRASES**
1. What are Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas?
 2. Of the men Xerxes consulted when Vashti wouldn't come, which one spoke to the king?
 3. Who was the father of Haman?
 4. Although my nephew Mordecai later adopted her, I am Esther's biological father. Who am I?
 5. What were the names of the two guys who conspired to assassinate King Xerxes?
 6. Oops! Your husband, Haman, is second in rank to the king. You and some of his friends suggested he set up the tall pole where he eventually died. What is your name?
- MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY**
7. How many years passed between the time when Esther was made queen and when Haman decided to kill the Jews?
 8. In exchange for Xerxes making the decree that the Jews would be destroyed, Haman agreed to put 10,000 talents of silver in the royal treasury. How many pounds is that in today's measurements?
 9. Who led the king's horse carrying Mordecai, dressed in royal robes, through the city while saying, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!"?
 10. Who told Xerxes about the pole Haman had erected for Mordecai's impaling?
 11. King Xerxes ruled over how many provinces from India to Cush?
 12. What did it mean to "cast the pur"?
- THEN VS. NOW**
- A. Memukan
 - B. Admatha
 - C. Karshena
 - D. Marsena
- WHO DUNNIT?**
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- HOT SEAT**
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ANSWERS:

1. Memukan, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas.
2. Memukan.
3. Haman.
4. Mordecai.
5. Bigtha and Teresh.
6. Bigtha and Teresh.
7. About eight years.
8. 200,000 talents.
9. 127 provinces.
10. Vashti.
11. King Xerxes.
12. "Cast the pur" means to throw a decree into the water.