

## CHAPTER 21: Esther

The story of Esther is set in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire. This is the same place where Nehemiah served. The timeframe for the events we are about to look at is 65 years after Cyrus's decree allowing God's covenant people to return home. The king of Persia is now Ahasuerus. He is also known by his Greek name Xerxes. If you recall the majority of the Israelites living in exile opted to remain in Persia following Cyrus's decree. Persia had become their home. Last time we caught a glimpse of what the 5 percent that returned to the Promised Land experienced. The book of Esther shows us what happens to the 95 percent who stayed in Persia. So how do things turn out for them? Let's take a look.

When the Israelites had been under Babylonian rule they were faced with the issue of idolatry. Now that they are under Persian rule they are forced to deal with another issue, namely, extreme prejudice against them. There is something to take note of here: In the Old Testament God's people are most often called "the people of Israel" or "Israelites." Two exceptions stand out. We have seen one of them already back in the book of Exodus. While living in Egypt, the Israelites had been referred to as "Hebrews." This term distinguished them as a separate people group, as being different. Here in the book of Esther, the Israelites living in Persia are referred to as "Jews." Once again unique terminology is used by the local populace to set God's people apart from the rest of society.

The book of Esther opens with King Ahasuerus throwing an elaborate banquet for all the nobles and officials of his empire. **[The king] displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his majestic greatness for a lengthy period of time – a hundred and eighty days, to be exact!** (Esther 1:4) On the last day of the banquet the now very drunk king commands that his wife, Queen Vashti, appear at the party to show off her beauty. When she refuses to do so, this angers the king.

He consults with his wise men about what to do. He is advised to depose Vashti and select a new queen. They propose that an empire-wide search be launched to find a new queen. Their advice to the king is... **"Let the young woman whom the king finds most attractive become queen in place of Vashti."** **This seemed like a good idea to the king, so he acted accordingly.** (Esther 2:4) The process of gathering all the attractive young women to the citadel at Susa gets underway.

It is here that we are introduced to our main characters. They are two Israelite exiles – a “Jewish man” named Mordecai and his niece, Esther. **This young woman [Esther] was very attractive and had a beautiful figure. When her father and mother died, Mordecai raised her as if she were his own daughter.** (Esther 2:7) Technically Esther is Mordecai’s cousin, the daughter of his uncle. However Mordecai is much older than Esther and has assumed a parental role in her life.

Esther is among the hundreds of beautiful women selected to be taken to the citadel for the king’s consideration. At Mordecai’s direction Esther hides her Jewish identity.

**And the king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she met with his loving approval more than all the other young women. So he placed the royal high turban on her head and appointed her queen in place of Vashti.** (Esther 2:17) And so it is that Esther, this young Jewish woman, becomes the new queen of Persia, but she continues to hide her Jewish identity.

Sometime after this it just so happens that Esther’s uncle Mordecai overhears two of the royal guards plotting to assassinate the king. He informs Queen Esther of the plot. She in turn tells the king. The matter is thoroughly investigated, the plot is foiled, and the two conspirators are hanged. Mordecai is credited with saving the king’s life that day. His heroics are recorded in the daily royal chronicles of Persia and filed into the official records. This will become important later in the story.

Now we meet the villain of the story, an arrogant, high-ranking royal official named Haman. He is referred to as “Haman the Agagite” (Esther 3:1). A historical note here from 1 Samuel 15: Do you recall when King Saul defeated the Amalekites and then disobeyed God by not putting the Amalekite king, King Agag to death? Haman the Agagite is a distant relative of Agag. Being descended from the Amalekites who were among Israel’s most hated enemies, Haman has a deep-seeded hatred for the Jewish people.

**All the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate were bowing and paying homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded. However, Mordecai did not bow, nor did he pay him homage.** (Esther 3:2) Given the long history of hostility between the people of Israel and the Amalekites, we certainly understand Mordecai’s actions.

Nonetheless, Mordecai’s refusal to bow fills Haman with rage. When Haman discovers that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman persuades the king to destroy all the Jewish people living in Persia. The justification that Haman comes up with is a malicious lie. He claims that the Jews behave differently and **“they do not observe the king’s laws.”** (Esther 3:8) Therefore, the Jews are a liability and must be done away with.

And so, the king agrees and he issues a royal decree. Eleven months from now, on the 13th day of the Persian month of Adar (mid-March on our calendar) all Jews living in Persia, from young to old, including women and children, will be killed. All of their property will be seized and divided up among the Persian people. **A copy of this edict was to be presented as law throughout every province; it was to be made known to all the inhabitants, so that they would be prepared for this day.** (Esther 3:14) One can only imagine how the Jews must have felt when they heard this.

**The messengers scurried forth with the king's order. The edict was issued in Susa the citadel. While the king and Haman sat down to drink, the city of Susa was in an uproar!** (Esther 3:15) As word of this order reaches Mordecai and the Jews, they immediately go into mourning.

At this point Esther knows nothing about the royal decree. All she knows is that her people, the Jews, are in mourning. When she asks Mordecai the reason for all the sadness, he supplies her with a copy of the king's edict. Mordecai appeals to Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. This means that Esther will now have to reveal her Jewish identity to the king. Esther is conflicted about what to do. Persian law strictly prohibits anyone, under penalty of death, from approaching the king unless they are first summoned. But she has NOT been summoned.

But Mordecai reminds Esther that whether she goes to the king or not, her own life is in danger. He tells Esther...**“Don't imagine that because you are a part of the king's household you will be the one Jew who will escape. If you keep quiet at this time, liberation and protection for the Jews will appear from another source, while you and your father's household perish. It may very well be that you have achieved royal status for such a time as this!”** (Esther 4:14)

Esther requests that all the Jews fast on her behalf for three days; then **“afterward I will go to the king, even though it violates the law. If I perish, I perish!”** (Esther 4:16)

After three days of fasting and prayer Esther puts on her royal clothes and goes to meet the king. **When the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she met with his approval. The king extended to Esther the gold scepter that was in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the end of the scepter. The king said to her, “What is on your mind, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even as much as half the kingdom will be given to you!”** (Esther 5:2-3) Esther requests that the next day the king and Haman attend a banquet that she is preparing personally for the king. He agrees to attend.

The next day, as planned, Esther hosts the king and Haman at her banquet. The wine flows freely and her two guests drink up. **While at the banquet of wine, the king**

said to Esther, **“What is your request? It shall be given to you. What is your petition? Ask for as much as half the kingdom, and it shall be done!”** Esther responded, **“My request and my petition is this: If I have found favor in the king’s sight and if the king is inclined to grant my request and perform my petition, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet that I will prepare for them. At that time I will do as the king wishes.”** (Esther 5:6-8)

When they leave the banquet, Haman is completely drunk. It is then that Haman spots Mordecai. **But when Haman saw Mordecai at the king’s gate, and he did not rise or tremble in his presence, Haman was filled with rage toward Mordecai.** (Esther 5:9) Haman goes home and openly vents to his wife and his friends. He boasts about his great wealth and position and how he alone was invited to Queen Esther’s private banquet with the king. Finally he expresses his complete disdain of Mordecai the Jew.

His wife and friends suggest that Haman order a gallows be built and then tell the king to hang Mordecai on it. **It seemed like a good idea to Haman, so he had the gallows built.** (Esther 5:14)

Suddenly, there is a twist in the story. One night a restless King Ahasuerus cannot sleep. He has the royal chronicles brought in and read to him. The king just happens to hear about the incident years before where Mordecai uncovered the assassination plot by two of the royal guards that ended up saving the king’s life. Wow! He had totally forgotten about that!

In the morning Haman comes in. Before he can request Mordecai’s execution on the gallows, the king orders Haman to honor Mordecai publicly for saving his life. You talk about a slap in the face! Haman is forced to lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse and announce that everyone is to praise Mordecai. This totally devastates Haman. He is completely shaken and humiliated!

Later that same day the king and Haman arrive at Queen Esther’s banquet. At this point Esther tells the king what is on her mind. First of all she is Jewish. Second, the royal decree that “this evil Haman” is responsible for will, in effect, kill her, the queen, and Mordecai, the man who had saved the king’s life, and all of the Jewish people.

**Then Haman became terrified in the presence of the king and queen. In rage the king arose from the banquet of wine and withdrew to the palace garden.** (Esther 7:6-7a) At this point Haman fears the worst. **Meanwhile Haman stood to beg Queen Esther for his life, for he realized that the king had now determined a catastrophic end for him.** (Esther 7:7b) Haman knows things do not look good for him.

So picture the scene. The king returns a few minutes later and what does he find? Haman is on the couch and positioned over Queen Esther! From the king's perspective it looks like Haman is sexually assaulting the queen! The king orders that Haman be hanged. And so in an ironic turn of events, Haman gets hanged on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

But Haman's death does not resolve the problem of the royal decree to kill all the Jews. We know from Daniel's experience earlier in the story that under Persian law the king cannot revoke a decree that he has already made (even if he wants to). So instead the king authorizes Mordecai to issue what amounts to a counter-decree. This document is dictated by Mordecai for circulation throughout the Persian Empire. It is the subject of the longest verse in the entire Bible. Here it is...

**The king's scribes were quickly summoned – in the third month (that is, the month of Sivan), on the twenty-third day. They wrote out everything that Mordecai instructed to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces all the way from India to Ethiopia – a hundred and twenty-seven provinces in all – to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, and to the Jews according to their own script and their own language. (Esther 8:9)**

Mordecai seals the counter-decree with the king's signet ring, making it official, and it is then sent out across the vast empire.

This counter-decree gives the Jews in every Persian city throughout the empire the right to assemble and to be able to defend themselves. They will be allowed to kill anyone who attacks them on the 13th day of Adar and to confiscate their property. Of course this is great news for the Jews. They can defend themselves! It allows them ample time to prepare for any violence that might come their way on the fateful day.

When the 13th day of Adar arrives the extreme prejudice by the Persians against the Jews is revealed. Throughout the empire the Jewish people are attacked. But the Jews are armed and ready. They stand and defend themselves against their enemies. **The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, bringing death and destruction, and they did as they pleased with their enemies. In Susa the citadel the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. (Esther 9:5-6)**

To show you the extent of the Persian's hatred for the Jews – hundreds of people throughout the empire attack them. The king permits the Jews to put to death Haman's ten sons (remember it was Haman who instigated this whole thing). But the enemies of the Jews are not finished. The next day, on the 14th day of Adar they attack the Jews again. Like before the Jews stand and defend themselves. In total, over two days of violence 75,000 enemies of the Jews end up being killed!

The Jewish people actually demonstrate mercy to their enemies. Three times in Ch 9 it says, “**But they [the Jews] did not confiscate their [enemies’] property.**” (Esther 9:10, 15, 16) When it is all said and done they do not do to their enemies what their enemies had attempted to do to them. To their credit, God’s people show great compassion and restraint.

Queen Esther and Mordecai establish by decree the annual feast of Purim to commemorate the Jews’ deliverance from annihilation. The book of Esther concludes describing how Mordecai is then elevated by the king to second in command in the entire empire.

One of the interesting things about the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned – at least not by name. However, this does not mean that God is absent. Through every twist and turn of events, we see God’s character on display. We see God’s hand of providence in every scene. The Israelites are living in a foreign land among people who do not fear their God. They are surrounded by their enemies, many of whom hate them and want to see them dead. And yet, even when God seems to be distant, He is actively working out the details to deliver His people. God is there every step of the way – even in the sleeplessness of a pagan king and the evil schemes of vile men.

For the Israelites who choose to remain in Persia and for countless others who have been scattered elsewhere, God is still their God and they are still His people. He will protect His own. As we will soon see, God has big plans for ALL His people no matter where they live. God is sovereign over everything! He is working out His divine purposes everywhere.